The Sisters Rosensweig Study Guide

The Sisters Rosensweig by Wendy Wasserstein

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Introduction

The Sisters Rosensweig, Wendy Wasserstein's play about the transformative power of love, of sisterhood, and of life, was directed by Daniel Sullivan at Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater in New York City, opening in October 1992. Currently available in print, it was published in 1992 by the Dramatists Play Service in New York. The play is held together by the richly woven dialogue of three Jewish-American sisters pushing against the boundaries of their own lives in order to define themselves. Consequently, they do come to a point of resolution in their struggles, sometimes raising their voices in protest to be heard, at other times speaking softly in an attempt to hear themselves. Despite the absence of any action, the sisters manage to transform both themselves and their lives in the course of one evening. Another significant feature of the work is its ability to capture and make real several social and political issues that gave shape to the late part of the 1980s—the fall of the Soviet Union, Reaganomics, and the plight of the homeless, to name a few. In fact, the events discussed in the work are merely a reflection of what Wasserstein experienced in her own travels, first in eastern Europe, before the fall of the Soviet Union, and in Poland, in a town where she could see no evidence of her Jewish ancestry. It was her goal not only to raise certain political and social questions but also to illuminate her Jewish heritage, using her work as her vehicle. The play was admired by critics for its humor and insight, and it managed to earn the playwright both an Outer Critics Circle Award and an Antoinette Perry (Tony) Award nomination for best play in 1993.

Author Biography

Wendy Wasserstein is recognized not only for the celebration of women in her feminist plays but also for the celebration of her Jewish heritage. She was born on October 8, 1950, in Brooklyn, New York. Wasserstein initially attended the Calhoun School to study dance with Judy Taylor and spent considerable time at Broadway matinees. Her playwriting began in the years she attended Mt. Holyoke College, where she earned a bachelor of arts in history in 1971. During this time, a friend managed to convince Wasserstein to take a playwriting course at Smith College. She was so taken with the genre that, upon graduation from Holyoke, she studied creative writing at City College of the City University of New York, where she received her master of arts.

In an interview with Esther Cohen in *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal,* she shares her recollections on when she really began writing. Wasserstein remembers writing something called the Mother-Daughter Fashion Show in high school, to get out of gym: "I know very little about fashion, but they used to have this Mother-Daughter Fashion Show . . . and you got to leave school to go." According to Wasserstein, "if you wrote it you didn't have to go to gym class for like two or three weeks. It was fantastic. So I started writing those."

Wasserstein developed an intense love for playwriting, her love for the genre eventually taking her to Yale. She developed a passion for Russian literature and immersed herself in it. In consequence, a certain Russian style is evident in her writing, particularly reflecting the works of Anton Chekov, whose influence appears in many of her works. The rumblings of Chekov's *Three Sisters* in the background, for example, subtly influence *The Sisters Rosensweig*.

The situational comedies she writes maintain a certain reserve, in keeping with her former studies. The action of her plays is limited, yet the characters go through tremendous life changes. In *Tender Offer*, for example, a family reaches a new level of mutual understanding through communication. Wasserstein's greatest achievement was *The Heidi Chronicles*, a work that earned her a Pulitzer in 1989. It is a feminist documentary, of sorts, tracing the life of one woman for over twenty-five years as she moves through the 1960s to the 1990s in her search for identity. Further awards include the Tony Award for best play, League of American Theaters and Producers, Drama Desk Award, Outer Critics Circle Award, Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, and New York Drama Critics Circle Award, all in 1989 for *The Heidi Chronicles*; and an Outer Critics Circle Award and Tony Award nomination for best play, 1993, for *The Sisters Rosensweig*.

Plot Summary

Act 1

Act 1 marks the beginning of the Rosensweig sisters' family reunion in London. "Blame it on Jesse, Jesse the Sikh," explains Pfeni, the forty-something, eccentric world traveler, of her tardiness. Tess shares with Pfeni that she is listening to her mother's college singing group as part of a school summer project. The project requires Tess to write a biography on her mother's "early years." Says Tess of the project, "It's pretentious. I can't wait to leave London and go back home to school."

When Pfeni asks her niece why she has not asked her mother if she can return to the United States, Tess replies that her mother is "the only American who is convinced that Harvard and Yale are second-rate institutions," stating that "she [Sara] won't even discuss it." Tess confides that Sara worries she will become like Pfeni, an emotionally defensive woman, who compulsively travels to avoid her fear of commitment.

"I just don't know what you have in common with someone who dreams of selling radio parts," declares Sara to Tess. Tess argues that "Tom comes from a perfectly balanced and normal family," something her mother has "never managed to maintain," and that Tom is desirable company compared to Sara's dinner guest, "the socially acceptable, racist, sexist, and more than likely anti-Semitic Nicholas Pym." Dismayed by the sense of determination Tess demonstrates to create a life in opposition to hers, Sara concedes by quietly extending an invitation to her daughter's boyfriend. Pfeni points out that Tess is no different from either Sara or herself, in that, as justified as Sara was in her act of rebellion, "so maybe is Tessie."

Both Merv and Geoffrey plan to meet up with a "homeless delegation" to discuss the possibility of putting on a homeless benefit at the National as "a sort of story theatre." When Geoffrey leaves Merv behind to meet up with the group at the Savoy Hotel, Pfeni also exits to find Tom and Tessie, and Merv settles into a conversation with Sara. They exchange personal histories, Merv pointing out to Sara that she's "the first Jewish woman I've met to work in a Hong Kong bank." Sara corrects Merv's assertion, stating that she is "the first woman to run a Hong Kong bank, Mr. Kant." Merv acknowledges her intention to avoid any reference to ethnicity by pointing out that his name "used to be Kantlowitz" and asks her if she would prefer him to leave.

Despite initial attempts to hide her discomfort, Sara challenges Merv's increasing interest in her, particularly when he announces that Geoffrey has invited him to Sara's birthday/dinner party. When she asks Merv just how intimate he is with Geoffrey, Merv coolly responds that he met Geoffrey when he was a show biz and novelty furrier and has maintained a friendship with him since. In an attempt to exclude Merv and "scare [him] away," Sara takes yet another tack, mentioning the intimacy of the occasion and the less-than-kosher dish she is serving. Merv continues to talk, even after Sara has

moved into the kitchen, commenting on her book collection and her musical tastes, impervious to her subtle manipulations.

"It's just like my mother to have a dinner party on the night the Soviet Union is falling apart," remarks Tess. This statement becomes a pivotal point of the dinner conversation, as Tess attempts to goad Nicholas Pym, Sara's dinner guest, into a discussion of the Lithuanian resistance. Whereas Nick is apt to dismiss the convictions of both Tess and Tom, Merv is quick to point out that the Lithuanian city was home to sixty-five thousand Jews. When Merv asserts that anti-Semitism has formed the core component for European nationalism, Nick responds in protest, but Sara surprisingly has no opinion. "I thought Tessie was Jewish," interjects Tom. Sara again sidesteps the issue by replying, "She is. But Mr. Kant is really talking about families in Russia and Eastern Europe who are unable to practice their religion."

Merv continues to press the topic of ethnicity on Sara after the guests have departed that evening. A discussion of cooking provides the perfect segue for Merv, who asks her if her mother is Jewish. Sara responds coolly, "for a supposedly intelligent man you have a persistently narrow perspective." Merv has unwittingly pressed several buttons as a result of his inquiries. The interest he shows in Sara triggers her, and she begins to cry suddenly after asking him to "just go home." Vulnerable once more, Sara once again recoils from Merv's advances by telling him she is not his type. "You weren't a nice Jewish girl," says Merv, and again Sara notes that Merv "always comes back to that," that is, her heritage.

Act 2

It's 6:12 a.m., and Pfeni, who has just emerged from her apartment, takes a moment to dance playfully with Geoffrey. Geoffrey then informs her that he is taking his former male lover to the country. This sparks jealousy in Pfeni. Geoffrey exclaims, "What is it you want angel, that you're not getting? Do you want to get married?" Pfeni sidesteps ideas of children and matrimony by telling Geoffrey to get dressed. Geoffrey then takes his lover to task on a book project she has failed to complete. He calls the friends he's lost "too many lights that never had their chance to glow and burn out overnight." Taking a different tack, he concludes that children, country homes, and domestic bliss are better left to others. Geoffrey informs her that, as artists, "Pfeni, you and I can't idle time."

Both he and Pfeni are intercepted by Gorgeous just before Geoffrey excuses himself to dress for his breakfast meeting with Gorgeous's group of ladies. He is subjected to a grilling from Gorgeous, who is interested in his intentions with Pfeni, before making his exit. Pfeni criticizes her sister for the obvious intrusion into her personal life. Gorgeous hints at possible infidelities in her sister's relationship. She inquires if Pfeni's lover is still interested in men, before making some observations of her own. She tells her sister that "eccentric women in their forties" aren't interesting to men and that, in "wandering around the world at forty," Pfeni is wandering herself "right out of the marketplace." Of

Geoffrey, she remarks, "I know you can't judge a book by its cover, sweetsie, you're at the wrong library altogether."

Sara cannot escape a prying Gorgeous. As the family surfaces for breakfast, she is the only member willing to mention Sara's amorous night with Merv. Sara again dances around any questions until Tess speaks up, saying, "Mother you slept with that furrier last night. Everyone here knows that." Gorgeous seizes the opportunity to sway Sara into settling down with a nice man. Sara then attacks Gorgeous, claiming she is in no need of mothering. Further, Sara goes as far as to say the mind of her sister is cluttered with nonsense; Gorgeous responds and, clearly hurt and defensive, decides to exit. Tess indicates to Tom that it is also time for them to leave: "Let's go, Tom. Just because it's not important to her [Sara] to have any passion in her life doesn't mean we can't."

Sara turns to Pfeni to remark that "maybe Gorgeous is the smartest one of us all." She pleads with her sister to speak with Tessie. She further shares that it frightens her how much Tess is like Pfeni. "How can I tell Tessie not to go to Vilnius," replies Pfeni. "In some crazy way I wished I could be there." Sara expresses how sad she is to see Pfeni avoid her true calling as a journalist. Pfeni takes her sister's hand and tells Sara she relies on her input the most, expressing her deep gratitude for her sister's insights. "Pfeni, don't and I won't," answers Sara, pulling away from a moment of intimacy between siblings.

She pulls away from Merv as well. "I've never met anyone like you, Sara. You're warm and cold all at the same time," says Merv, perplexed by her reaction after their night together. He pours his heart out to Sara, telling her she is a beautiful, remarkable woman. Merv tells her he wishes to know her better and would like to spend more time with her in the company of his own children. A war with words ensues between the two, Sara sidestepping Merv's intimations that they enter into a relationship. Defeated, Merv concedes to Sara's argument and leaves.

Later in the day, Pfeni's attempts at work are interrupted by Geoffrey's return. He appears to Pfeni to be highly agitated in their conversation, and she questions his "manic" mood. Despite claiming to love and care for Pfeni deeply, he admits to missing men. Geoffrey then attempts to smooth over the sudden break with Pfeni. He defends his actions based on his instinctive personality, stating simply, "Today this is who I am. I have another choice. I miss men," to which Pfeni tartly replies, "it's alright Geoffrey. I do too."

Geoffrey has just left with his lover when a rain-soaked Gorgeous arrives. When Sara stops Gorgeous to ask her what has happened to her shoe, Gorgeous explodes in anger. "Thanks to both of you," Gorgeous says to her sisters, "this has not been an especially enjoyable trip for me. I've spent two days schlepping around London with the sisterhood and two nights having my own sisters tell me everything I do is wrong." Sara finally hits a nerve with Gorgeous by suggesting she call her husband to buy a replacement pair of shoes. Consequently, both Sara and Pfeni are shocked to find out that their Harvard-educated brother-in-law has not worked as an attorney in two years.

As their emotional walls begin to come down, tensions dissolve amongst the sisters. Gorgeous learns that Geoffrey has left Pfeni for his former male lover and that Sara was "big and mean and nasty" enough to chase Merv away and any chances for a relationship. "Aren't you supposed to be on the road to Vilnius?" asks Pfeni of her niece early Sunday morning. Tess says that after a night of handholding and singing Lithuanian folk songs she realized the resistance movement had no personal meaning for her and asks, "Aunt Pfeni, are we people who will always be watching and never belong?"

Pfeni says that waking up at forty in her big sister's house cleared her own head; she now knows she must return to Tajikistan to continue her work. Moments later, when the doorbell rings, both Gorgeous and Pfeni are delighted to discover Merv, responding to a call from Sara instructing him to pick up his shirt. He presents Gorgeous with a box, left on the doorstep by one of her "ladies." Gorgeous exclaims, "It's the real thing! A genuine Chanel suit! And a purse! And earrings! And even shoes! They got me the shoes!"

Pfeni also makes her departure, and Tess excuses herself with a wink to Sara, telling Merv she will get his shirt. Sara confides to Merv that she called him because she "can't seem to come up with a good answer for what's wrong with [him]." Merv points out the difficulty both he and Sara have had consummating a relationship and then remarks, "but difficult can be engaging. Even surprising." Accepting the Shiva from Sara, Merv leaves, but not before reminding Sara that she has his shirt, evidence of his future return.

Tess shares with Sara that she has decided, independent of Sara's wishes, to tell Tom to go to Vilnius without her. She also tells Sara that she must find a life independent of Sara's life, saying, "I don't even know what mine is." Sara tells Tess how much her daughter resembles her own mother, Rita, in spirit, assuring Tess, "you are smart enough, and brave enough, and certainly beautiful enough to find your place in the world." The scene then closes as Tess interviews her mother for her paper.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

Seventeen-year-old Tess listens to a recording of a women's chorus that her mother used to belong to and comments into a tape recorder on the choir's technique.

Tess's aunt Pfeni arrives, juggling handfuls of shopping bags, apologizing for being late and blaming a taxi driver in India. Just then the choir begins to sing another song, and Pfeni asks why Tess is listening to that particular recording. Tess explains she's doing a biography of her mother's early life for a summer school project. She goes on to say that she hates living in England and wants to go to university in the States but her mother won't let her because she thinks American universities are declining.

Tess's mother Sara comes in and greets Pfeni happily. After a bit of small talk about Pfeni's writing career and how it's not as successful as Sara thinks it should be, Sara leaves. She takes a phone call from a man called Nick whom Tess can't stand. When she's gone, Tess asks why Pfeni travels with shopping bags instead of suitcases. Pfeni explains that Rita, her mother and Tess's grandmother, said that only crazy people travel with shopping bags, adding that she's made it a point to prove her right. She gives Tess a statuette of Shiva, the Indian god of destruction and renewal. Tess asks whether she can give it to Sara, saying that her mother is more in need of renewal than she is.

Sara returns and announces that Nick will be coming to dinner that night. Tess complains that it's wrong to have a capitalist like Nick coming for a meal when there are homeless people living under the tracks at the train station. Sara comments on how beautifully her daughter has grown up and tells Pfeni that some day she has to have a child so she can experience the joys of raising children. Pfeni responds with a slangy expression, Sara comments that Pfeni is sounding very "New York," and Tess wonders what New York has to do with anything. Pfeni tells a story about her childhood in New York, which Sara says is romanticized. She then tells Tess to tell Pfeni about her boyfriend Tom. Tess tells Pfeni that Tom works in his father's radio equipment supply store and that they're working together to support social revolution in Eastern Europe. Pfeni quickly lists some good restaurants and cultural centers for them to visit, and Tess invites her to join them for tea. Sara wonders aloud how a nice Jewish girl from Connecticut like her daughter became a revolutionary, but Tess says she's not a nice Jewish girl from Connecticut at all. She then manipulates Sara into inviting Tom for dinner, kisses her, and goes out.

Sara complains to Pfeni that Tess seems to be doing everything she can to be exactly the opposite of her mother. Pfeni reminds Sara that that's exactly what they did. Sara responds that they were right, and Pfeni answers that Tess might be right, too. She then offers Sara the statuette of Shiva, but Sara says she's too old for rebirth. She says she's glad Pfeni is there, and Pfeni comments that she wasn't about to let their other sister, Gorgeous, be the only sister to show up for Sara's birthday. They also talk about Pfeni's

close friend Geoffrey, whom they both hope will also be at dinner that night, but may not be able to make it because he's so busy. Finally, they talk about Tess's project, and Sara says she can't imagine that anything about her early years has any bearing on who she is now. They play a childhood clapping game, and as they're playing Geoffrey comes in and joins them. At the end of the game he picks Pfeni up and carries her downstairs, leaving Sara alone and thoughtful.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

This scene clearly establishes that Sara, the play's central character, is at a turning point in her life. Her discomfort with Tess's project and Pfeni's reminiscences about New York clearly indicate that she is rejecting her past. However, her rejection of both Tess's boyfriend and the promise for renewal represented by the Shiva statue indicate just as clearly that she's uncomfortable about facing the future. This sets up the play's central conflict, in which Sara is forced to confront both her past, embodied by Gorgeous and Merv, and her future, embodied by Merv and Tess.

These confrontations make up the main action of Sara's journey of transformation from a woman that many people in the play describe as hard or cold into someone warmer, more loving, and more open. The fact that the play takes place on and around Sara's birthday suggests that this journey is a kind of rebirth. The point of this first scene is to portray who Sara is, what she thinks and how she feels at the journey's beginning. That is, someone who has rejected her past and is reluctant to face her future. The clapping game she plays with Pfeni, however, represents the fact that even now, there's still a little of the girl she once was inside of her, which offers hope that her journey will be successful.

As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the journeys of some of the other main characters mirror Sara's. Tess, Pfeni, and Geoffrey are in many ways just as uncertain about their futures, and are faced with having to reconnect with their pasts in similar ways so that the future can be faced confidently. One particular aspect of the past that plays an important role in the present and future of this family is the remembered presence of Rita, the mother of the sisters Rosensweig (Sara, Pfeni, and Gorgeous). There is not much detailed information about her, but the hints offered in this scene and throughout the play suggest that Rita was a powerful personality. All three of the sisters have made real efforts to become as unlike her as they can. This means that another aspect of Sara's journey is to free herself from her mother's influence once and for all.

Act 1, Scene 2, Part 1

Act 1, Scene 2, Part 1 Summary

Later that same afternoon, Pfeni and Geoffrey come in from the downstairs apartment in the middle of a relatively light-hearted argument about their future. Pfeni tells Geoffrey that Sara thinks they should break up, but Geoffrey tells her that she always says that whenever she talks to her sister. When Pfeni quotes from the Chekhov play *Three Sisters*, Geoffrey, who's a theater director, reminds her that if it wasn't for him she wouldn't know anything about the theater or art at all. He tries to convince her that he's happy with her. Their argument reveals that Geoffrey is bisexual, that just before he met Pfeni he broke up with his live-in boyfriend, and that he and Pfeni spend a lot of time apart. This, according to Geoffrey, is the main reason their relationship is perfect. He calls her gorgeous, but she says her sister Gorgeous is the gorgeous one. He tells her he's had enough of her negative self-image and gets ready to go out, adding that he's arranged to have a meeting with a delegation of the homeless people Tess referred to earlier. He wants to talk to them about incorporating some of their stories into a benefit at the National Theatre. Just then the doorbell rings. Half jokingly, Pfeni suggests they invite the delegation to Sara's birthday party, but Geoffrey says that's a very bad idea. As the doorbell continues to ring Pfeni tells him to go downstairs and she'll tell the delegation to meet him there. Geoffrey runs out as Pfeni opens the door.

Merv comes in with a large box. At first Pfeni thinks he's a member of the homeless delegation but he tells her he's come with a delivery for Geoffrey. When Pfeni calls Geoffrey, he comes up. He and Merv do a silly song and dance, and Geoffrey suddenly remembers where and when he was supposed to really meet the delegation and runs out. Sara appears, wondering who's come. Merv introduces himself, and stays to talk to Sara when Pfeni goes out to meet Tess, even though Sara hints strongly that he should go.

Sara gets Merv a glass of water as he tells her that he was just at an international meeting of a Jewish congress. They make small talk about their respective children, Sara's job as the manager of the regional branch of the Hong Kong Bank, and whether Merv is involved with Geoffrey in a capacity other than a purely professional one. Merv reveals that he's a manufacturer and dealer of faux fur, and has supplied furs for Geoffrey's productions on several occasions. They then talk about the dinner that Sara's preparing and Merv invites himself to stay with the hope that it's the kind of proper roast beef dinner he always treats himself to when he's in England. Sara tells him it's something more exotic, suggests that he should find a restaurant to have the kind of meal that he wants, and says that he can always tell Geoffrey she scared him away since men tend to find her threatening. Merv says that his wife wasn't at all threatening, and asks about Sara's husband. She says her second husband is on his fifth wife, adds that she has no intention of finding another husband, and goes off to check her dinner.

Act 1, Scene 2, Part 1 Analysis

The first part of this scene introduces the play's principal subplot, which explores the relationship between Pfeni and Geoffrey. Pfeni's situation parallels Sara's in that she's forced to confront her future and her past, which in her case are both represented by Geoffrey. The principal difference between Pfeni's and Sara's situations is that at this point in their lives Pfeni doesn't have a clear idea of what she wants her life to be, whereas Sara does. In other words, Pfeni is lost while Sara knows exactly where she is. The play clearly makes the point, however, that Sara's life is in the wrong place, while Pfeni doesn't have any idea what the right place for her truly is.

The play that Pfeni and Geoffrey refer to, *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov, is the story of three sophisticated, well educated women in Russia in the early 1900's. They find themselves trapped in a small, unsophisticated rural community where there is a military base. The reference suggests that the sisters in this play are trapped in the same way as the sisters in the other play, which is true in the case of Sara and Pfeni. Gorgeous is another matter, as will be discussed later.

Also in reference to *Three Sisters,* the line quoted by Pfeni,the youngest and most idealistic of the Rosensweig sisters, is spoken by the youngest and most vulnerable of Chekhov's three sisters. She speaks the line at the point of her greatest crisis of faith, in herself and in what she's always believed. This indicates that Pfeni is the most vulnerable of the three sisters in *Sisters Rosensweig*, and is at a similar point in her life as her counterpart in Chekhov's play.

The second part of the scene focuses on Merv and Sara, and it is here that Sara's confrontation with both her past and her future begins. Merv is uninhibited, energetic, and very direct-characteristics that Sara doesn't share and which challenge her secure but limited view of the world and relationships. It is clear throughout their conversation that she wants him to leave her alone, but it is just as clear that he's attracted to her from the moment he sees her. This aspect of their conflict, in this scene and throughout the play, dramatizes the tension between her present, in which she sees no future in relationships, and her future, in which there is suddenly the possibility for love, connection, and a happy emotional life.

Merv is also two other things that Sara is not, which isproudly Jewish and proudly American. Sara's un-American outlook is revealed by her attitude towards American schools, as referred to by Tess in Scene 1. Her Jewishness is an aspect of her past that she has repressed to an extent that will be revealed in her confrontation with Gorgeous in the next part of this scene. This means that both Merv and Gorgeous represent the part of Sara's past that she seems to resent the most.

Act 1, Scene 2, Part 2

Act 1, Scene 2, Part 2 Summary

As Merv pours himself a scotch and looks at Sara's collection of musical soundtracks, Gorgeous comes in and mistakes him for a friend of Geoffrey's, saying that all of Geoffrey's friends like musicals. Merv recognizes her as Gorgeous, and she talks about how she hosts a radio call-in show back home in Newton, Massachusetts. She chatters at length about how she got her job, how well known she is, and how she's guiding a bus tour of women through London. She calls Sara, and when Sara comes in explains that her husband was too busy to come along. Sara introduces Merv, and Gorgeous chatters about all the faux furriers she knows back home. Sara speaks sharply to her and Gorgeous turns to go, but Merv and Sara convince her to stay. Merv goes to change his shirt.

Gorgeous comments that Sara has become "a hard woman." She talks about how she realizes that having surgery like hers can make a woman upset, adding that having been unable to be with their mother on her deathbed because of that surgery must have been difficult. She encourages Sara to talk about her feelings, but Sara says that she doesn't want to talk about any of it and ends the conversation. Gorgeous talks about how fatiguing it is guiding a tour of older women through the shops and sights and sounds of London. She says that they're always asking why she doesn't stop wearing imitation Chanel clothes and start wearing the real ones now that she's a celebrity, then complains that their father never told them anything about money. This leads to a conversation about their mother, which reveals that she put a lot of pressure on all of the girls.

Gorgeous suddenly realizes it's late and the sun is going down. She runs about finding candles and covering her head in preparation for the Jewish Sabbath ceremony. As she's lighting candles Tom and Tess come in, soon followed by Pfeni. Sara makes sarcastic comments about the ceremony. When Gorgeous finishes she again calls Sara a hard woman and runs upstairs. Sara curses, tells Pfeni to blow out the candles, and announces that she'll be serving drinks in half an hour.

Act 1, Scene 2, Part 2 Analysis

The second part of this scene introduces Gorgeous, the second character to directly challenge Sara's current state of being. Gorgeous, in spite of her apparent silliness, simply is who she is, which is Jewish, chatty, big hearted, and "funsy," to use her own term. Sara, on the other hand, seems to be putting a great deal of energy into being something she's not: not Jewish, not emotional, and above all not lonely. Also, in spite of Gorgeous's eccentric way of looking at the world and communicating, she offers useful, albeit quirky perspectives on Sara's life, and on Pfeni's later in the play. She confronts them both with the truth behind the illusions they each have about their lives, and

confronts Sara specifically about the way she has rejected her past. A vivid example of this is the way that Gorgeous insists upon performing the Jewish Sabbath prayer in the traditional way. Sara's sarcastic comments and angry outburst at the end of the ceremony suggest that Gorgeous has touched a sensitive nerve, and that Sara is in fact afraid of accepting that part of herself. As a result of this confrontation, it becomes clear that Gorgeous, more so than Merv, causes Sara to reconsider her views of her past.

Sara's conversation with Gorgeous also reveals more about the relationship the sisters Rosensweig had with their mother Rita, and offers the clear sense that at least for Sara, anything they did was never enough for her. The revelations that Rita has recently died and that Sara wasn't there suggests that Sara is dealing with unresolved guilt. This, when combined with the hysterectomy that kept her from Rita's bedside, make Sara feel not only like a bad daughter, but as though she is also a less than complete woman. This adds a layer of meaning to the journey of the play, suggesting that Sara is on the road to acceptance of not only her past and future, but also her womanliness.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

Sara serves appetizers as Tom and Tess argue politely with Nick, the man that Tess said earlier she couldn't stand. -The discuss the social and economic repercussions of the fall of the Soviet Union, which is taking place that very night. Nick takes the whole discussion very casually, even when Merv comes downstairs in a borrowed shirt and joins the argument, siding with Tess and Tom, and whom Sara clearly dislikes.

Merv and Tess start talking about the Concert of Europe, a plan that emerged in the early 1800's to unite large portions of Europe. Sara and Nick start talking about the economic repercussions of the plan. Merv insists on talking about the social consequences, which he insists included considerable anti-Semitism, and that continues in Europe and England to the present day. He tries to get Sara to see the point of the argument but Sara refuses, making sarcastic comments about the joys of Jewish food to Tom. Tess threatens to leave if she doesn't stop.

Gorgeous comes in, and Nick tells her they've been talking about the Concert of Europe. Gorgeous thinks he's talking about a musical concert, chatters on about music, then talks about how beautiful Tess is. She realizes the rest of the party has gone silent, and wonders if she's said something wrong. Geoffrey and Pfeni come in, wearing borrowed costumes and performing a song from Geoffrey's latest production, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, the lyrics of which have been rewritten to celebrate Sara's birthday. Sara expresses her gratitude for the presence of her family. As everybody goes in to dinner singing, Merv refers to her as the Scarlet Pimpernel and comments that she sure knows how to throw a good Sabbath meal.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

The conflict between Sara's past and present is dramatized in this scene through the argument between Merv, who represents the ethnic and cultural history that she has repressed, and Nick, who represents her current economic-based perspective. In the middle of their conflict, Sara's sarcastic comments to Tom illustrate how much she resists accepting that Jewish culture and history have anything to do with her life.

The Scarlet Pimpernel was a novel written at the time of the French Revolution, a period in which France began the process of becoming a people-oriented republic instead of a monarchy ruled by pampered aristocrats. The Scarlet Pimpernel was an aristocrat who made everyone believe he was quiet and frightened. In fact, he regularly disguised himself and conducted daring rescues of lords and ladies who were about to be executed by guillotine. The reference here works on two levels. Firstly, since the confrontation between Nick, Tom, Tess, and Merv has just established that this dinner party is taking place on the night that a similar revolution is happening in the Soviet

Union. The Pimpernel reference suggests that economic aristocrats like Sara and Nick are about to lose their influence.

The second reference, however, which is more relevant to the overall theme of the play, suggests that Sara, like the Pimpernel, is in disguise, wearing a mask, and hiding her true identity. In directly referring to her as the Pimpernel, Merv is saying that Sara is hiding her genuine self in order to do what she believes she has to. Yet it is an ironic reference. As the later action of the play reveals, Merv's influence causes Sara to realize that she doesn't have to be what she thinks needs to be, and can embrace other aspects of herself than she has in the past. This relates to the play's theme, since the action of the play makes the point that a true and honest life can only become accepted and truly lived once masks like Sara's have been removed.

Act 1, Scene 4

Act 1, Scene 4 Summary

Gorgeous clears the table as the other dinner guests come into the sitting room, laughing as Geoffrey tells an innuendo-filled story about two popular actors who were having a secret affair with each other. As the other guests laugh, he and Pfeni leave, saying they have a meeting to go to. Soon afterwards Gorgeous goes up to bed, and Nick gives Sara her birthday gift and leaves as well. After arguing briefly with Sara about Nick, Tom and Tess go off to make plans for a candlelight vigil in support of Eastern Europe that's scheduled for the next night. This leaves Sara and Merv alone.

Sara starts tidying the room, accidentally knocks over a candlestick, and suddenly starts to cry. As Merv comforts her he calls her Sadie, which Sara says was the name her grandfather called her. As she talks about how she knew she was different from all the other girls, she and Merv realize they've got a friend in common named Sonia. Merv confesses that he had a one-night affair with her when they were much younger. Sara abruptly confesses that she's lonely, but not lonely enough to sleep with him. He suggests that she needs to connect with someone, and tells her that he loved his wife, who supported him, but who died just as she was coming close to living her own life; he asks whether she thinks that's fair. She tells him that she can't and won't love him, but adds that just for one night she can pretend to be as young as Sonia was when she and Merv had their night together. Merv says he hopes he can be as energetic as he was then.

As Sara leads Merv upstairs, he asks her to sing for him. She refuses, even when he starts singing and asks her to join him. As Merv continues to sing, they disappear upstairs.

Act 1, Scene 4 Analysis

The speed with which the dinner guests leave suggests that at some point in the unseen dinner party, they've all become aware of the attraction Sara and Merv feel for each other. It turns out that they were right, since as soon as they're all gone Sara almost immediately talks about how she can't, and won't, be with him. Merv's stories and attention quickly wear down her resistance. His calling her Sadie gives her a feeling of safety and being loved, while his story about his wife and the unfairness of her death suggests that he thinks Sara's living a life unfair to herself. Her responses suggest that she is as lonely as he thinks she is, and her decision to make love suggests that her emotional coldness is starting to warm. In other words, the masks that Sara wears, as symbolized by the reference to *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, are starting to fall away.

This scene is key in terms of Sara's overall journey of transformation towards acceptance of herself. Because Merv represents aspects of both her past and future,

particularly her Jewishness and long-concealed hope for love, their coming together symbolizes how Sara is beginning to be more open about these two areas of her life. Another important thing to keep in mind is that she decides to sleep with him only a few hours after meeting him. This is uncharacteristic of her, and quite probably something of which her mother would not approve. Thus her decision frees her from her conceptions of herself in several ways. The fact that she refuses to sing, however, suggests that she still has a way to go towards becoming fully accepting of all the aspects of herself that she has held in check for so long. The rest of her emotional and spiritual journey, paralleled by similar journeys taken by Pfeni, Geoffrey, and Tess, is the main dramatic action of the second act.

Act 2, Scene 1, Part 1

Act 2, Scene 1, Part 1 Summary

Early the following morning, Geoffrey (in his underwear) and Pfeni (in a flannel night-gown) dance around Sara's sitting room singing old American pop songs. Geoffrey talks about how he loves American pop music and prefers it to Shakespeare, saying it's much less exclusive. He tells Pfeni how much he loves her, how much he believes in her and her work, and how much he looks forward to the few occasions when they can actually spend time together. He then refers to having had so many friends die unfulfilled. He says this made him realize how important it is for artists like the two of them to do the best work they can in order to bring light and life and understanding into the world. Pfeni tells him she loves him and wants to settle down with him.

Gorgeous comes downstairs, compares her legs with Geoffrey's, and makes not-so-discreet inquires about his and Pfeni's plans for the future, adding that she's made a date for him to deliver a breakfast lecture to her busload of ladies. He runs off to change, and when he's gone Gorgeous tells Pfeni that it's time she faced the truth that she and Geoffrey are ultimately not a good match. Pfeni protests that she loves Geoffrey, saying that even though he is not a mother's ideal a son-in-law, she's not an ideal daughter, either. Gorgeous tells her that it's time to live her own life and realize that Geoffrey is never going to love her in the way that she needs to be loved.

Just then Tess and Tom come downstairs, and comment that they saw Sara dancing with Merv to music by Frank Sinatra. As Gorgeous comments that a good man is hard to find, Sara appears. Tess and Gorgeous tease her about having spent the night with Merv, and hint that just maybe this might be something lasting. Sara refuses to talk about what happened, saying that there's no future in it. She accuses Gorgeous of behaving like their mother, and Gorgeous angrily retorts that she can't allow Sara to hurt her feelings anymore because she's jealous of her happiness. Sara responds by saying that the comment is ridiculous. Gorgeous says that Sara and Pfeni are both jealous of the fact that she's successfully married, has a good career, and has settled down. She starts to leave, trips, swears, and promises that someday soon she's going to have a real pair of fancy shoes.

Act 2, Scene 1, Part 1 Analysis

Gorgeous confronts both Pfeni and Sara in this scene with truths that neither is ready to face. This reinforces the idea that in spite of her quirkiness, Gorgeous is the only one of the three sisters to have any kind of clear perspective on all their lives. She clearly sees that Pfeni is wasting her time with Geoffrey, Sara is fooling herself into believing she's not lonely, and it's time that Pfeni and Sara got over their problems with their mother. Her speech in which she talks about their jealousy may seem, at first glance, to be

egotistical, but the action of the play to this point and afterwards suggests that she's absolutely right, even though neither Pfeni nor Sara is prepared to admit it.

Geoffrey's reference to having lost so many friends is a reference to AIDS, and the way that so many young gay theater artists like him died before they could reach their full potential. The reference adds yet another layer of meaning to the play's theme, suggesting that since life can so easily be cut short, it's important to live it fully and truthfully while it is possible. It is a lesson that Gorgeous and Merv have clearly already learned, but that he, Pfeni, and Sara have yet to fully embrace.

Act 2, Scene 1, Part 2

Act 2, Scene 1, Part 2 Summary

Tess asks Sara where her passport is, since she and Tom are leaving the next day. Sara suggests talking about it later, which Tess takes her to mean that she wants to talk without Tom there. She leaves angrily, saying that even though it's important to Sara to live without passion it's something she can't do. Tom follows Tess out.

Pfeni asks Sara how her night with Merv was, and Sara coyly hints that it was great. Pfeni talks about how she spent the night watching interviews with Kurdish refugees. She says she felt excited about telling their stories but guilty, at the same time, about the idea of exploiting the refugees' situation for her own fulfillment. Sara tells her that she's got a real calling and passion, unlike her, and suggests that she's foolish to not pursue it fully. Pfeni gratefully takes her hand but Sara pulls it away.

Merv comes in, and Pfeni quickly leaves him and Sara alone. They discuss each one's plans for the day, and Merv describes her as somehow managing to be cold and warm at the same time. He compares her looks, and particularly her eyes, to those of women that he's seen in pictures of hard working, small town Jewish women in pre-war Europe. He says she's just as beautiful, just as strong, and just as courageous as they were. Sara tells him that she thinks he'd be better suited with Gorgeous, describing them both as "lively." Merv responds by saying that means she thinks they're better suited because they're both quite Jewish, quite American, and quite outspoken. Sara asks why he's trying so hard to connect with her, saying that she's "a cold bitter woman who's turned her back on her family, her religion and her country ... [and who] harbored so much guilt that it all made [her] ill and capsized her ovaries." She goes on to suggest that even though Merv says they both come from the same world- (the Jewish community in New York), that world doesn't actually exist. Merv asks pointedly why, if that world doesn't exist, Sara's trying so hard to make it go away. Sara tells him he's very nice and Merv asks whether she likes it when a man says she's very nice. When she says she doesn't, he leaves.

Sara listens to the choir recording that Tess was listening to earlier. As she sings the Yiddish words to an Irish song, she opens Nick's birthday present to her, a plain teakettle, and starts to cry.

Act 2, Scene 1, Part 2 Analysis

This section of the scene reveals several truths about Sara that she has been denying, but has finally realized she must face. Tess's point about Sara's living life without passion is right on the money, and Sara's comments about Pfeni's calling indicate that she knows just how on the money it was. Her conversation with Merv reveals how self-aware she's become. This suggests that, once she opened the door to vulnerability and

feeling with Merv, all the pain, frustration, and loneliness she's kept inside herself for so many years is able to come out. This is an important stage on her journey of transformation, but there is still a way to go. Her sharpness towards Merv suggests that even though she has become aware of all the things she's kept hidden, she is still unable to accept them. Her process of acceptance is the dramatic context of the rest of the play.

The final moments of this scene illustrate the contrast between Sara's life as she has made it, and her life as she has denied it. The gift of the kettle represents the shallowness of the present, or the life she's made. On the other hand, the recording of the choir represents the life she's denied, such as her youthful joy, in terms of the music and singing, and her youthful pain, in terms of her Jewishness (i.e., the Yiddish words) being different from what everybody else was living.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

Pfeni is working on a new idea for a book when Geoffrey comes in, excited after his conversation with Gorgeous's tour bus of women. He dances around, singing another American pop song, then suddenly sits, and tells Pfeni that after his conversation with the women he drove around London for hours, thinking about her, his future, and his passion, he realized two things. Firstly, that he's truly the happiest working in the theater. Secondly, that he's more interested in men than he is in women, specifically her. They reminisce about how passionate they were when they first met and how they instantly decided they were right for each other. Geoffrey comments that at the time he was frightened, and when Pfeni asks whether he's frightened now he tells her that she has no idea what it's like to not know who she is. He reminds her that she's got her family, her books, and even occasionally her faith, while all he's got is the theater. He's realized that now he wants a life outside of the theater, and that that life includes men. They say tender goodbyes. At that moment Sara comes in, saying that Geoffrey's ex-boyfriend is out front in a red convertible. She jokes about how the ex-boyfriend's money and career could support them all. Geoffrey calls her sweet and runs out.

Pfeni tells Sara what Geoffrey just told her, and as Sara comforts her she reminisces about how she once asked their mother how to get over heartbreak. She says that their mother thought she meant heartburn and told her to take an antacid. Pfeni then starts to cry, saying she doesn't want to lose both her boyfriend and her mother in the same day. Sara comforts her.

Gorgeous comes in, soaking wet from the rain and wearing only one shoe. She angrily explains that she's leaving, having gotten tired of both the tourist women and of her sisters judging her. When Sara asks what happened to her shoe, Gorgeous tells a long story of how she treated herself to a nice, expensive pair of shoes only to have the heel of one of them get caught in an escalator. Sara says that Gorgeous's husband can always buy her a new pair. Gorgeous reveals that her husband has not only lost his job with his former law firm, but also that he's started writing murder mysteries and staying out very late. She tells Pfeni to stick with Geoffrey, but Pfeni tells her that Geoffrey's left. Sara then reveals how she mishandled the relationship with Merv, and Gorgeous wonders how their mother could have done such an awful job with all three of them.

This makes Pfeni get some wine. As she opens it, she tells Sara and Gorgeous how she handled Geoffrey's departure and they congratulate her. They then make a toast to their mother, saying that maybe she didn't do such a bad job after all. They sip wine, Gorgeous and Pfeni tease Sara into calling Merv, and Sara embraces them. Gorgeous suggests that it's time for Sara to start taking care of them the way their mother did. Pfeni makes another reference to *Three Sisters*, saying she looks forward to the time when they can all just sit around, drink tea, and talk about life. They tease Gorgeous

about a patch of dry skin on her neck and suddenly start tickling her. Pfeni chases Gorgeous upstairs, but Sara just sits, deep in thought.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

The resolution of the Pfeni/Geoffrey subplot foreshadows the eventual resolution of the main Sara/Merv plot. In some aspects the two resolutions are quite different, particularly since Pfeni and Geoffrey split while Sara and Merv end up together. Ultimately, however, the resolution for both women is exactly the same. As a result of these final confrontations with the men in their lives, both Pfeni and Sara feel free to be more fully who they are and embrace their pasts and their futures. This is represented by the way they metaphorically embrace their mother and literally embrace each other and Gorgeous at the conclusion of this scene.

The sisters' acceptance of their pasts and themselves is illustrated by Gorgeous's speeches about her shoes and her husband, which is essentially a metaphor for how important it is to live according to one's own true self. The misadventure with the expensive shoe represents the dangers of putting on a personality or a mask that doesn't reflect the true personality. In other words, those shoes aren't really who Gorgeous is in the same way that the expensive clothes she receives as a gift in the next scene aren't really who she is. This means that when the shoe unexpectedly breaks, it symbolizes how fragile and unreliable masks can be. Meanwhile, the story about her husband writing detective stories seems to be saying that he's discovered a new truth about himself, something that brings him joy. It's frustrating for Gorgeous, but she's nonetheless okay with him living this new truth. This reinforces the idea that it's time for the sisters Rosensweig to be okay with living their truths. They seem resolved to do this in the second section of the scene as they celebrate an important aspect of themselves that they all, to varying degrees, had denied, which isthe influence of their mother. Their toasts represent how they're accepting the parts of her that they've inherited, in particular strength of character and family devotion. This is the play's climax, the point at which the central conflict between Sara, her past and her future, is resolved and she is finally able to move on.

Act 2, Scene 3

Act 2, Scene 3 Summary

The recording of Sara's choir plays as Tom and Tess come downstairs. Tom carries his bag, Tess doesn't. She hugs him, he leaves, and Tess makes a comment on the choir into her tape recorder.

Gorgeous comes in, fresh from a workout. Tess interviews her, and Gorgeous says that she taught Sara everything she knows about how to dress. She comments that the key to dressing well is accessories; saying that even inexpensive clothes can be made to look more expensive with them. Pfeni comes in from the downstairs apartment, loaded with her shopping bags and ready to travel. She asks why Tess didn't go with Tom, and Tess explains that at the peace rally the night before she felt more and more disconnected from the whole movement. Pfeni indicates she understands, and then explains she's heading to the Far East to work on a book. Gorgeous reminds her to take sunblock. Pfeni tells Tess that she's gotten good advice on life from Sara and good advice on moisturizer from Gorgeous, which means she's got all her spiritual and physical bases covered.

Merv comes in with a large box. He says that he's only there because Sara called to tell him that he left his shirt, and then tells Gorgeous that the box is for her. She opens it and finds a Chanel ensemble consisting of a suit, scarf, shoes, and earrings. The card with the box says that the clothes are a gift from the women's tour, and that it's time Gorgeous had the real thing. Gorgeous practically faints from excitement. She tries the clothes on, and says she's going down to show the women right away and then return the whole ensemble, pointing out that she's got to pay her children's tuition in the fall. She rushes out, saying that the next time she comes in for a visit she wants to find Merv living there.

Sara comes in and says goodbye to Pfeni, who leaves. Tess runs upstairs to get Merv's shirt, and Merv and Sara are alone again. She tells him that the entire night before she waited for him to call, that she likes him, and doesn't necessarily want to marry him or even meet his children, but does want to know him better. She offers him the Shiva statue, which he almost doesn't accept, saying that Shiva represents destruction and he's about to go on a plane. Sara reminds him that Shiva was also the god of rebirth, and suggests that it's time Merv shook his life up a little. They kiss each other goodbye and Merv runs out, reminding Sara that she's still got his shirt.

Tess comes in, wearing the clothes Gorgeous wore when she first arrived. Sara comments that it's a little much to go to Eastern Europe in, but Tess says she told Tom to go without her, saying that she needs to have her own life and time to figure out what that is. Sara tells her how everybody used to say how she (Tess) was just like Rita, and tells a story about Rita's beauty and courage. She agrees to sit down and be interviewed for Tess's school project. She gives her name and birth date, and Tess asks

when she started to sing. She then asks her to actually sing a few words. At first Sara refuses, but then Tess starts to sing an old jazz song and Sara joins in.

Act 2, Scene 3 Analysis

Gorgeous's brief comments into Tess's tape recorder illustrate the positive value of masks. When Gorgeous says accessories can improve the look of an inexpensive dress, the play is suggesting that masks can improve the way we're perceived and make getting along in the world easier. It's Gorgeous who makes this point. As we've seen, she represents the value of living honestly and fully, which suggests that masks only have this value when the person wearing them is fully aware of both the fact that the mask is just a mask and the true value of what is underneath the mask (i.e., the dress beneath the accessories). This explains why Tess makes her second appearance in this scene wearing the clothes Gorgeous entered in. She (Tess) is searching for a way to live fully and truly the way Gorgeous does.

As a whole, however, this final scene shows all three sisters embracing who they are and moving into the future. Gorgeous rejects the fantasy represented by the Chanel suit in favor of the reality of needing to pay for her children's education. Pfeni rejects the fantasy of life with Geoffrey, responds to her desire to give a voice to the disadvantaged of the Far East, and flies off to work on a new book. Sara opens herself to exploring the future with Merv, which is represented by her giving him the statuette of Shiva, suggesting that she is prepared to explore the possibility of them renewing their lives together.

The play's final moments complete Sara's journey of transformation. She has accepted the possibility of hope and renewal in her future by admitting she wants to spend more time with Merv. She has also accepted that she is her mother's daughter. In addition, by speaking directly and honestly about her youth and claiming her singing as part of her identity, she is also finally accepting the joy that she has so thoroughly and vigorously denied herself. This suggests that Sara is on the road to accepting all the aspects of who she was, is, and may yet be. This makes the thematic point that once the masks and fears are stripped away the freedom and joy possible through living the truth remain.

Finally, the fact that Sara and Tess sing together suggests not only that Sara is rediscovering joy but also that she's finally able to share that joy with Tess. She can also be a good mother to her in the way that Rita, in spite of her flaws, was to her.

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Characters

Geoffrey Duncan

Geoffrey Duncan is an attractive forty-year-old man, an "internationally renowned director and bisexual," and the love interest of Pfeni. He is also a business associate and friend of Merv, with whom he is organizing and recruiting the homeless to perform in a story-theater benefit. True to his theatrical roots, Geoffrey often bursts out in song and is observed dancing in his turquoise underwear in Sara's kitchen at six in the morning. A performer as well as a clown, at Sara's birthday celebration he kneels in front of her, announcing that he has been "dispatched twelve days on horseback" by her sisters to impart their birthday wishes for her.

Geoffrey met Pfeni at a ballet performance shortly after his male companion/lover leaves him for a chorus boy from *Cats.* In fact, Geoffrey gave Pfeni a stage name, stating, "if not for me, you'd still be plain and simple Penny Rosensweig." His affections for Pfeni, and his intentions for the relationship, zigzag as much as their on-again/off-again romance. Geoffrey swears he's faithful to Pfeni; however, in one moment, he's assuring Pfeni they'll be married soon and in another, he shuns the idea of domesticity for both Pfeni and himself for the sake of the arts.

Geoffrey is not at all reticent concerning his sexual orientation, admitting to Pfeni at one point that he is a "closet heterosexual." On the pervasiveness of homosexuality, he exclaims, "if those tights could talk! Why do you think that band of merry men was quite so merry!" In the end, it is Geoffrey's preference for men that leads to a break with Pfeni and, in turn, becomes a catalyst for Pfeni to find herself as a journalist.

Sara Goode

Sara Goode, the eldest of the three Rosensweig sisters and the mother to Tess, is an expatriate from the East Coast living in London who has left her Jewish-American past behind her. She is a woman of unusual character and intelligence. She not only is the first woman to be put in charge of the Hong Kong/Shanghai Bank, Europe, but has also made the cover of *Fortune* magazine twice. Of the Rosensweig trio, she is clearly in a position of great influence as the eldest sister, at one point even labeled by Gorgeous as the family "shtarker," Yiddish for someone who takes charge. Pfeni also shows equal deference for her sister's opinion by telling Sara, "there is no one I rely on in life more than you. There is no one I am more grateful to than you."

Where Tess is concerned, although an openly great admirer of her daughter, Sara is critical of her daughter's choices, particularly in men. When Pfeni, in a show of support for Tess's participation in the Lithuanian resistance, recommends places in Vilnius that she believes both Tess and Tom will enjoy, Sara responds sarcastically, "That way, Tessie, when they send the tanks in, you and Tom can take in a quick hamburger and a

show." Sara demonstrates an equally cool distaste for Tom by ridiculing him publicly, based on his seeming lack of personal depth. She tells Tess, "I just don't know what you have in common with someone who dreams of selling radio parts."

According to Tess, Sara actively discourages passion in her life. This assertion is particularly evident in her interaction with Merv, a furrier and friend of Geoffrey's, who inadvertently becomes a dinner guest at Sara's fifty-fourth birthday party. Sara openly shares with Merv that she prides herself on being threatening to men, subsequently making every effort to discourage him from making any advances. In one instance, when Merv gets too close after the party by asking Sarah if she wishes "to connect" to another person, she deflects the question with insult and sarcasm. "How many support groups did you join when Roslyn died?" quips Sara, immediately apologetic for demonstrating such cruelty.

During her conversations with Merv, Sara shares that she has been divorced twice and is openly bitter because of it. She has, on occasion, gone so far as to characterize herself as being an "old and bitter woman." But with Merv, Sara also demonstrates an equally vulnerable side by crying in front of him. Their relationship and the reunion of the Rosensweig sisters serve to open Sara's heart once more, to her past, and to the possibility of romance.

Tess Goode

Named for *Tess of the D'Urbervilles,* Tess Goode is a teenage idealist who finds life in London and her education at Westminster to be pretentious, and she longs for life in the States and, in her efforts to define herself, protests her mother Sara's encroachment into her personal life. The defiance she feels for her mother is evident in the opening scene of the play, when she says with marked disdain and a show of defiance that she intends to be a hairdresser.

The struggle Tess has with her mother is indicative of teenage rebellion. Her boyfriend does not meet with Sara's approval—nor does her choice to join the Lithuanian resistance. Tess also struggles to contain her own passions in situations in which both she and her mother share strong philosophical differences. In the case of Nicholas Pym, for example, she is exceedingly harsh in criticizing her mother's choice of dinner guests. Responding to her mother's distaste for Tom, she says she will tell her boyfriend "he's not invited to dinner here tonight with the socially acceptable, racist, sexist, and more than likely anti-Semitic Nicholas Pym." Further, she personally attacks her mother's dinner guest on the basis of these values.

Tess comes full circle by the end of the play, successfully asserting a place in her mother's life. She represents another generation of Rosensweig women embarking on the path of self-discovery. On some level, by watching Tess, the sisters also recognize in themselves that the rebellion against their own mother is no longer a luxury for them.

Mervyn Kant

"I was a show biz and novelty furrier. Now I am the world leader in synthetic animal protective covering." A business associate and friend of Geoffrey's, fifty-eight-year-old Mervyn Kant, or Merv (also more affectionately known as Murf the Smurf, or Sir Murf), is a quick-witted, fashionable Jewish-American professional residing at the Savoy Hotel over Charing Cross station in London. Like Geoffrey, he is prone to playfully breaking out in song. At the same time, he demonstrates a deeply serious devotion to his Jewish roots, in his travels to Budapest with the American-Jewish Congress or to Ireland to have lunch with the Rabbi of Dublin.

Merv's strongest qualities, perhaps born of life experience, hinge on his sense of courtesy. He shows a genuine interest in others and is often respectful to a fault. He decidedly demonstrates patience and tolerance in his encounters with Gorgeous, who endlessly prattles on to him when they are initially introduced, and is unaffected when she insists on calling him Merlin, even after she has taken the time to ask Merv his name. Sensitive and supportive, Merv also acknowledges Tess's passion for the Baltics by offering her facts about Vilnius related to her own Jewish heritage.

From the outset of the play, it is clear that Merv has more than a passing romantic interest in Sara. As the play progresses, Merv proves to be the one person, apart from Sara's sisters, who is able to chip away at Sara's chilly exterior to uncover her softer, more passionate side, by sharing intimate details regarding his own personal life. In one instance, Merv inspires a discussion on their intertwining past lives in New York and strikes a chord with Sara by calling her "Sadie," an endearing pet name Sara's own grandfather reserved for her. Finally, he encourages Sara, repeatedly insisting that she is capable and worthy of love, regardless of what she may think and feel to the contrary. In the end, when Sara off-handedly mentions that life with her may be difficult, Merv responds, "there are real possibilities in life, even for left over meat and cabbage," like him and Sara.

Nicholas Pym

"The racist, sexist, and more than likely anti Semitic Nicholas Pym" is a high-society Englishman and elitist on Sara's birthday party guest list. He is quick-witted and glib, speaking with a natural, off-handed ease that betrays a lack of sincerity. Making idle dinner conversation, Nicholas proves to be insensitive to the point of being extremely offensive. In a conversation with Tess and Tom, for example, he responds to the notion of Lithuanian culture and people wanting to be independent of the Soviets, stating, "So does Kentucky. Think of Colonel Sanders and all his yummy little chicken pieces."

Nick is a foil to Merv, a character whose personal qualities contrast strongly with Merv's, his haughty, elitist attitude clashing loudly with Merv's jocular good nature. At one point, Merv challenges Nick, and the two get into a bit of a disagreement over the influence of European anti-Semitism. Tess favors Merv as a suitor for Sara, suggesting to her mother that Nick is "one of those weirdo English bankers who takes sixteen-year-old

models to dinner" and afterward returns home, "puts panty hose over his head and dances to *Parsifal,*" a Wagner opera.

Pfeni Rosensweig

Pfeni Rosensweig is a forty-year-old eccentric journalist and shopping-bag-toting world traveler who has "dropped in" from Bombay, India, to attend Sara's birthday party. Absorbed in her work, Pfeni is truly gifted, famous enough that one of her books has been assigned to Tess for her next semester at Westminster. She has no permanent emotional ties, other than to her sisters Sara and Gorgeous, and visibly struggles with intimacy issues and her own sense of identity. Says Tess of her favorite aunt, "My mother says you compulsively travel because you have a fear of commitment and when you do stay in one place you become emotional and defensive just like me."

Pfeni is trying to come to terms with the rather unconventional niche she has chosen to carve out for herself by fixating on a future with Geoffrey. She chooses to half-heartedly pursue a future with a wishy-washy bisexual director with whom she has been in a long-distance relationship for years. Her insecurities about herself and her life drive Pfeni to pursue a more permanent connection with her lover. In the end, her failed relationship with Geoffrey becomes a source of great strength. Pfeni embraces her talent as a gifted journalist after realizing that world travel and a career are what she has desired on a subconscious level from the beginning.

She is also a defender of her young niece Tess, whose defiance and desires mirror Pfeni's at a very young age. Sara not only finds a source of support in Pfeni but, through her sister, also recognizes that Tess's defiance of her mother is natural and in keeping with both Sara and her sisters' desires when they were teens.

Gorgeous Teitelbaum

Dramatic, flamboyant, chatty Gorgeous Teitlebaum is the Rosensweig sister most consumed with being part of the status quo; her life is driven by appearances. She demonstrates this side of herself with Merv, for example, referring to her sisters as "such funsy people." She is a self-proclaimed new-age diva—a radio talk-show host acting as a pseu-do-psychologist to the ills of American pop-culture. According to Gorgeous, she is much more than a cliché—"I am what they call a middle-aged success story. And I am having a ball." Based on this, she often acts as a yenta [meddler] in her attempts to advise her sisters on marriage, as well as the self-appointed psychologist for the family. She is also the keeper of Jewish religious traditions. Says Gorgeous, "remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy," ignoring Sara when she interjects or protests, and continues to pray over candles.

Gorgeous is not intellectually sharp in the way that her sisters are. She is often injudicious, speaking without concern for the facts, much to the consternation of her sister Sara. She is also terribly self-absorbed in her prattlings with Merv, whom she continues to call Merlin even after he has corrected her. But it is her appearance that

Gorgeous hides behind to mask her vulnerability. Gorgeous, despite Sara's impressions, is more thoughtful than she seems, if not preoccupied in her shouldering of family financial burdens. Her unbridled enthusiasm and the image she projects of someone who cannot easily be rattled prove to surprise her sisters when she gives them the news that her husband's career is in shambles. As a result, her family sees a completely different side of Gorgeous and, taking a lesson from her, each sister realizes her own short-sightedness.

Tom Valiunus

Tom Valiunus is Tess's blue-collar boyfriend who is as passionate about the Lithuanian resistance as he is insistent on eating primary-colored foods. Tom's greatest ambition involves opening a radio supply store of his own. He is as seemingly impervious to the conflict between Tess and her mother as he is to Sara's dislike for him. Although Tom's heart is in the right place, he is not so bright, and his clumsy interjections become a source of comic relief in the work. When he and Tess walk in on Gorgeous's Sabbath prayers, for example, Tom asks of Sara and Gorgeous, "are you having a séance? . . . I love Stonehenge." In another, when Merv asks Tess what goes with European nationalism, Tom clumsily replies, "American movies and CNN?" Dating Tom represents another form of rebellion by Tess. He is also a foil to Tess, illuminating her great intellect as a teenager by being, himself, both thick-headed and dull.

Themes

Identity and Self

The struggle many of the characters experience in grappling with their own identities—whether it be as a Jewish American (Sara), as an adolescent (Tess), or as a bisexual (Geoffrey)—proves to be the chief focus of the play. In their interactions with each other, the characters are able to rediscover and ultimately transform themselves spiritually.

Pfeni, for example, struggles to deny who she is as a writer. She continues to insist on a life with Geoffrey on one level but betrays her true desires on another. When Pfeni pushes for a commitment, Geoffrey suggests that perhaps they should consider marrying. Pfeni is quick to respond with several questions, including how they expect to have children when she is "already forty." The answer lies in her untimely break with Geoffrey, which, instead of being a devastating occasion personally, proves to push her back in the right direction professionally, and she returns to Tajikistan to write. Says Pfeni of her own decision, "if . . . you make sure to fall in love with men who can never really love you back, one morning you wake up in your big sister's house and where you should be seems sort of clear."

Memory and Reminiscence

The process of recalling the past plays a pivotal role in the development of Merv and Sara's relationship. In the case of Sara, it is a catalyst for change. Merv recounts the past in an effort to break through Sara's icy exterior, and eventually he does so by evoking memories or images of her youth. Thus Merv is able to steadily chip away at her bitterness, proving to Sara that she, as much as he, still has a chance of reconnecting with someone in a meaningful way. Sara, in turn, is able to embrace a more youthful, spirited self, which has been overshadowed by bitter disappointment.

After Sara's evening of celebration, an intimate moment alone with Merv sparks memories of the past for both of them. Merv reminds Sara of her beauty, sparking her to respond. Sara tells Merv that, although he cannot hope for a relationship with her, he has encouraged her to succumb to her youthful, carefree passion. Sara expresses this wish in her desire to relive the past in a night of lovemaking, longing to be Merv's "Sonia Kirshenblatt at the Brighton Beach Baths."

Heritage and Ancestry

The idea of heritage is explored on many levels by several characters. Some emphatically defend their culture. Lithuania's struggle for independence is much more than a "pet" cause for Tom. His passion for the Baltics originates with his nationality. Tom's reason for joining the Lithuanian resistance is obvious. He states simply, "my dad is from Lithuania. And me uncles and me aunts still live there." The attraction Tess has

to Tom is fostered by such convictions. At the play's conclusion, it becomes clear that Tess is drawn to him because of his loyalty to his ancestry and his sense of heritage, aspects of self that she is actively seeking. Ponders Tess, "if I've never really been Jewish, and I'm not actually American anymore, and I'm not English or European, then who am I?"

Merv deeply values his own heritage, as demonstrated in his participation in and travels with the American Jewish Confederacy. In a show of support for Tess and Tom, he acknowledges, "before the Holocaust, Vilnius was home to about 65,000 Jews." This comment fuels a somewhat heated debate concerning anti-Semitism in Europe. Merv aptly demonstrates that the passion he feels for his heritage comes from as deep a place as does perhaps Tom's participation in the Lithuanian resistance.

The attraction Merv feels for Sara is also bound up in the idea of her Jewishness, as it relates to his own. When he looks into Sara's eyes, he sees the spirit of his mother's family. "When I look into your eyes," he tells Sara, "I see those women's strength and their intelligence." Because of this he confides to her, "to me you are the most beautiful and most remarkable woman."

Intellectuals and Intellectualism

The characters of the play pride themselves, and each other, on their intellectual prowess. Members of the Rosensweig family are as apt to discuss at the breakfast table the efficacy of the American educational system as they would a day at work—and often do. In this way, Wasserstein creates strong, powerful female characters who are able not only to stand up for themselves but also, in doing so, to prove they are as capable of rising to mental challenges as are their male counterparts, if not more so.

Certainly this ability is well demonstrated at Sara's birthday celebration, where even Tess, Sara's sixteen-year-old daughter, aptly demonstrates her knowledge of modern history. Wasserstein is careful to highlight Tess's ability by juxtaposing the teens Tess and Tom. Whereas Tess can quickly and correctly respond to Merv's questions, Tom's contribution to a discussion on the Concert of Europe and the issue of anti-Semitism is completely flat, apart from providing some comic relief. When Merv asks Tess to explain what goes hand in hand with European Nationalism, Tom offers, "American movies and CNN?"

Appearances and Reality

The outward aspects of many of the characters' lives do not always gel with the perceptions of those around them. Assumptions between characters lead to misunderstandings in the form of gross misperceptions. An exercise of judgment based on outward appearance often leads to comments that are simply inappropriate, if not just rude or hurtful. More importantly, in such gross misperceptions the audience is able to see, as well as to appreciate, that depth and complexity of character can be surprisingly elusive even to the most perceptive individual.

A good example of this is both Sara and Pfeni's impression of Gorgeous. For a large portion of the play, Gorgeous sells herself as the happy-go-lucky, somewhat bubble-headed, babbling housewife who "has it all." Her sisters, Sara in particular, chastise her for her artifice, her new-age mentality, and her airy intellect. To them, Gorgeous lacks dimension, but neither sister is prepared for the truth behind their baby sister's façade. Gorgeous quickly turns the tables in a show of strength and character when she commands her sister to "put the phone down" when Sara decides to call Henry to ask him to buy her sister another pair of shoes. Sara has a difficult time accepting that her sister's spouse, the Harvard educated lawyer, is unemployed, insisting not only that he should be employed but also that employment for someone like him is inevitable. When she tells Gorgeous "maybe I know someone" who can get him a position, Gorgeous snaps, "you don't know anybody. Henry isn't even looking for a job. He's writing mysteries in the basement."

Style

Point of View

The events of the play are told from the third person, independent of any one character's perspective. At no time does a character address the audience or offer any special insight into his or her motivations or actions. Instead, the audience is able to draw conclusions about the characters by observing them in dialogue with various other characters. The dynamic nature of such interactions gives breadth and depth to these individuals and helps the audience to better understand their motivations. In Sara's case, she chooses to share with Merv that her husband "is on his fifth wife," adding, "My first I've lost track of and personally I doubt there will be a third," giving him a glimpse of the bitterness she feels for men, and for love. As Merv presses her to open up, Sara responds, "You know what really irritates me in life, Merv? When men like you tell women to take it easy because somewhere they believe that all women are innately hysterics." The audience can infer, without Sara actually stating such, that her issues with men run deep, thus explaining her desire to push Merv away.

Structure

The play closely follows the traditional unities, the principles of dramatic structure based on rules regarding action, time, and place. The play does stick to a single plot, that of the reunion of the Rosensweig women and the transformative power of their reunion to change the course of their own lives. The play has a succinct beginning, middle, and end, documenting the journey they take together to come to some significant realizations as women. The main action is limited to the day of Sara's birthday celebration; the setting, to Sara's flat in Queen Anne's Gate.

Stereotypes

All of the characters created by the author are representations of understood "types" of individuals. In the play, for example, all of the sisters in the Rosensweig family are succinct stereotypes. Pfeni is described as a shopping-bag-toting, eccentric forty-year-old world traveler and journalist. Gorgeous, on the other hand, is the somewhat bubble-headed, upper-middle-class, self-appointed new age guru and modern housewife, the sister who "did everything right," whereas Sara is the intelligent, thick-skinned, "hot-shot Jewish lady banker" who has made the cover of *Forbes* magazine twice. The use of stereotypes is effective for several reasons. First, the variety of characters illuminates the struggles of women from various perspectives. This is an effective approach—the women represent not one voice, but many. Second, by using such stereotypes, Wasserstein is able to break through the social veneer separating one from the next, by adding surprising personal dimension to any one character, as expressed in dialogue. For example, Sara may seem to be the hardened business professional, but in a

conversation with Merv, she shares that her seemingly impenetrable heart is a defense mechanism developed out of fear, in reaction to the loss and disappointment she feels after two failed marriages.

Zeitgeist

The play represents "the spirit of the time," the moral and intellectual trends of the late 1980s. Characters engage in deeply thoughtful, intellectual discussions about contemporary issues of the time—the fall of the Soviet Union, the Lithuanian resistance, the efficacy of the top educational institutions in the United States, and the like. For example, when prompted to share what Sara has heard about the United States, she tells Merv that it is a "society in transition." She expounds even further, stating that the evolving transactional U.S. economy is "exacerbated by a growing disenfranchised class, decaying inner cities, and a bankrupt education system." Her comments mirror the effects of Reaganomics on the social and economic life of many Americans.

Historical Context

Introduction

The period of the 1980s to the early 1990s forms the backdrop for much of *The Sisters Rosensweig*. The fall of the Soviet Union signaled the end of the cold war, and its dissolution, with its fragmentation of the country into sovereign independent states, literally redrew the map of Europe. The end of the cold war also exposed the truths about the devastating impact of a nation scrambling to keep up with the technology of a superpower on a third-world budget, and that of great environmental destruction. Ronald Reagan, hero of the cold war, was in the meantime implementing economic policy, which, although presented as an economic stimulus plan for the United States, would prove to line the pockets of a select, wealthy few, while many Americans faced unemployment, or worse, homelessness.

The Collapse of the Soviet Regime

Tess is quick to point out that "it's just like my mother to have a dinner party on the night the Soviet Union is falling apart." The irony of this statement is found in the events leading up to the demise of the system itself. The Soviet collapse was the result of a stagnant economy and an apathetic work force uninspired in the absence of competitive forces driving a capitalistic economy. Others offer the belief that pressure exerted by Reagan, particularly in the escalation of his "Star Wars," or satellite weapons system, provided the push needed to destroy the Soviet economy.

Whatever the cause, there were definite contributing factors on Soviet soil. Mikhail Gorbachev's liberalization of the government fell apart when the demands of its citizenry for democratic capitalist reform became too great to ignore. In 1987, perhaps the greatest symbol of the Soviet regime, the Wall, was torn down after a stirring speech given by Ronald Reagan commanding Gorbachev to dismantle it.

Reorganization of the Soviet Union

"Lithuania has a culture and people independent of the Soviets," states Tom in defense of the Lithuanian resistance movement. His sentiments reflect a time of great change in Europe, particularly in the Soviet Union. Most of this change was in fact precipitated by the liberal policies of Mikhail Gorbachev.

Gorbachev's renouncement of the Brezhnev Doctrine was perhaps one of the more radical changes to be instituted as a result of his policy of liberal reform. The doctrine was the brainchild of Leonid Brezhnev, who was president of the Soviet Union from 1977 to 1982. It essentially allowed for the USSR to exercise military intervention at will in the Warsaw Pact nations and therefore prevented the possibility of rebellion. As a direct result of Gorbachev's decision, however, these once-dissolved Soviet Republics

declared themselves independent nations, with only nine of fifteen in agreement with Gorbachev's new union treaty.

Members of the KGB, army conservatives, and stragglers of the old regime were not keen on negotiation with the re-established republics, subsequently placing Gorbachev and his family under house arrest. As tanks rolled through the streets of Moscow, Boris Yeltsin and his followers, sympathetic to the plight of the leader, barricaded themselves in the Parliament building of the Russian Republic. Construction workers, in a show of support, erected barricades around the building as Soviet citizens by the thousands began to encircle it, hands clasped together to form a human chain. As the human chain grew in depth, the Moscow militia, in a show of sympathy, distributed gas masks to the crowd. In fact, several army units involved in the coup, including those manning tanks, abandoned their efforts, and the coup was over in just a few days. Gorbachev was released and returned to Moscow.

The Republics by and large voted to dissolve the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. They instead claimed they were part of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Despite their new identity, these states would continue to be referred to as being part of the former Soviet Union. The problem with their newfound independence ran deeper than identity—the Soviet system was abandoned with essentially nothing to replace it and was expected to participate in a free-market economy.

The Environmental Aftermath of Soviet Occupation

It was not only the new Republics which suffered; several environmental disasters with widespread consequence can also be attributed to the failing Soviet economy. The artificial economic system could no longer sustain the latest technology, particularly evident in the events of Chernobyl. Engineers were experimenting with reactor number four on April 26, 1986, when a miscalculation was said to have been made. This caused an atomic chain reaction that spiraled out of control and became the catalyst for a power surge responsible for an explosion of radioactive steam, followed by a chemical explosion.

Gorbachev was not forthcoming about the disaster immediately, instead informing the public of the scope of the event several days later. In all, thirty-one people were killed in the blast and an additional five hundred were injured. The area was evacuated within a nineteen-mile radius. In addition, Europeans were concerned about contamination of food and water supplies from airborne radioactive materials. Many Europeans still lived on contaminated soil, and in the 1990s, incidents of cancer and other conditions skyrocketed. The government chose to maintain the system instead of considering alternative power sources and, amazingly, despite reports of several additional accidents, the facility was kept open.

Reaganomics

Events occurring in the United States at the time are equally relevant to the play, as is particularly revealed in Sara's comments regarding her former residence. She shares that "in many ways America is a brilliant country. But it's becoming as class-driven a society as this one." The divisiveness of the classes in America had everything to do with the trend in the economy. During the Reagan years, David Stockman, director of the OMB, or Office of Conservative Management and Budget, had come up with a fiscal plan. Supply-side economics called on the government to stimulate the economy by the deregulation of commerce and industry and by cutting taxes. Stockman felt that the production of goods and services would create a demand for them. In other words, the more goods and services created, the more people would buy. By cutting taxes and easing up on industry regulations, businesses would then be able to "beef-up" production. President Reagan adopted the plan, but in consideration of the budget he also cut government spending.

It was called "trickle down" economics by some—the idea that relieving the tax burden on the rich would encourage investment by the rich and that this investment would "trickle down" and thus impact the less-well-off in the form of jobs. Further, Reagan felt that increased investment meant more taxable income generating more revenue. George Bush found the notion absurd, calling Reagan's plan for financial reform "voodoo economics." In the end, tax cuts did not benefit middle and lower-income individuals but, instead, helped an elite few of the extremely wealthy in the form of profitable business deals. Companies merged or were dismantled and sold at a profit to the stockholders, resulting in even fewer jobs and higher unemployment.

The New Homeless

"I have an idea to do this year's homeless benefit at the National as sort of a story theater. I want to hear their brilliant voices," says Geoffrey. His idea is to use actual homeless people to effectively capture their stories. In the United States, at least, there certainly would be no shortage of potential participants. As a result of Reagan's policies, many people found themselves in the position of being underemployed, if not unemployed, just one paycheck away from financial ruin, unable to invest in their futures. Suddenly large numbers of homeless were visible on city streets. Alan Axelrod, in *The Complete Idiot's Guide to 20th Century History,* says that during this time "'homeless people' became a ubiquitous euphemism for those formerly described as indigent, derelicts, or bums" and called them the "walking wounded of Reaganomics."

Critical Overview

According to many critics, *The Sisters Rosensweig* has a feminist appeal in its portrayal of generations of Rosensweig women that is undeniable. This idea is in keeping with the bulk of Wendy Wasserstein's plays, which are consistently described as being treatises on women and their attempts to fit accepted social roles while at the same time maintaining a sense of self-identity. She is, at times, recognized and even appreciated for her typecasting of predictable characters, which work in tandem to speak to a more encompassing feminist perspective. Other critics, however, have seen this stereotyping as a reason for less-than-engaging story lines and a lack of action.

However predictable Wasserstein's characters are, they manage to be equally colorful. Critics have delighted in the lively, entertaining Rosensweig bunch. Their diversity brings a lot to their often intellectually engaging conversations, stimulated by the events of the late 1980s and early 1990s, as does their supreme sense of wit. Again, however, Dick Lochte, in his review of the play in the *Los Angeles Times,* draws attention to the predictability factor in the work. Lochte states, "Though most of these supporting characters get their fair share of witty dialogue, there is something just a bit too predictable about everything they do."

Finally, she has been praised for her depiction of the Jewish culture as it is realized in her characters. Wasserstein, in Michael P. Kramer's *Beyond Ambivalence: (Re)imagining Jewish American Culture; or, "Isn't that the Way the Old Assimilated Story Goes?,"* comments on the complexity Wasserstein takes on in the work's consideration of ethnic assimilation, explaining, "Wasserstein carefully casts Sara's declaration of Tess's independence from Jewish guilt and ambivalence as an affirmation of her daughter's Jewishness."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Kryhoski is currently working as a freelance writer. She has taught English literature in addition to English as a second language overseas. In this essay, Kryhoski considers the issue of identity as a function of age.

What fuels the *The Sisters Rosensweig* thematically is the issue of identity as it is expressed in or explored by all of Wendy Wasserstein's characters. The play is rich in its representation of women struggling to define themselves against the backdrop of conventional social roles as a function of their age. In this respect, the work affords its female audience either a look forward or a look backward, or it invites them to dip a toe or two into the pool of present social values surrounding them, in self-reflection, in personal introspection, or in self-affirmation.

Pfeni's sense of identity is a bit ambiguous at forty. In conversation, Pfeni is obsessed with her bisexual director boyfriend, insisting that a life with him would define her own life, giving it the meaning and substance she is seeking. "I love you Geoffrey. I'm not going to travel anymore. I want to stay with you," declares Pfeni. She is building a defense for her present life, without even realizing it. She responds adversely to the idea of children and, on a subconscious level, of marriage, stating, "Geoffrey, I'm already 40." It is in this statement that Pfeni fails to hear herself. In this way, Wasserstein comments on the idea of identity from a mid-life, feminine perspective. For most women, forty is a time for either looking back with trepidation or looking forward with a sense of hope and security about the future and one's place in the universe. Pfeni is at a spiritual crossroads, and in her obsession with Geoffrey she succumbs to the temptation to "look back," without realizing that the need for self-expression as a journalist supersedes any desires for domestic bliss.

Identity is a function not only of age but also of any one character's ability to hear his or her own voice. In the case of Pfeni, she expresses feelings of insecurity and self-doubt to Geoffrey concerning the nature of their relationship. Pfeni discusses the nature of Geoffrey's bisexuality to confirm his unwavering commitment to her, but she is missing the bigger picture with respect to her own dreams and desires. Geoffrey makes promises to Pfeni. Anticipating her need for commitment, he tells her that if marriage will console her, he will marry her. But Pfeni's agenda, on a deeper level, is not dependent on the status of the relationship. Geoffrey's convictions are met with protest. The "truth" about Pfeni is all in the "hearing." She protests the idea on the basis of her Jewish heritage, asking if the children will be Jewish. An affirmative from Geoffrey leads to yet another protest on the basis of age.

In her depiction of Pfeni, Wasserstein is also coming from a personal place. The author shares in an interview that before turning forty she became depressed. Making lists of things she had to do before forty, she drove herself crazy. After turning forty, she stopped focusing on the list and, ultimately, was much happier. For Wasserstein at least, with middle age comes the sense that youth is no longer a physical condition but merely a state of mind. For women, age brings an end to fertility, another limiting factor in terms

of personal choice. Values change, and time becomes more important. The author's point is that there is a mental empowerment that must take place before true contentment is realized. In consideration of Wasserstein's own personal feelings regarding age, the empowerment involves a mere shift in perspective. Therefore, identity for Wasserstein, and by extension her character Pfeni, hinges on self-acceptance, rather than on potential or on a preoccupation with what could be. By the play's end, Pfeni comes full circle in her convictions. She announces she is returning to Tajikistan to finish her book. The ingredients for her decision, she confides in Gorgeous, are the choices she has made. She shares that her unexplored writing potential and her involvement with an emotionally unavailable bisexual have been subconscious positives for her. In making these choices, she has set limits on both her marriage and her career.

Tess, too, is at a crossroads in her young life. Her sense of identity is also a function of her pubescent angst. As a teenager, Tess is pushing out against invisible boundaries to discover her convictions and, in those convictions, to express her individuality. Throughout the play, Tess remains vocal about the Lithuanian resistance. Her passion for the movement, however, is more or less dictated by a need to assert herself as an individual. Tess gets into a scuffle with her mother, and she responds to Sara's criticism of the Lithuanian resistance and of her boyfriend, Tom, with criticism of her own: "Tom comes from a perfectly balanced and normal family which is something you've never managed to maintain despite being on the cover of *Fortune* twice." Her response to Sara is quite rebellious.

In a conversation with Nicholas Pym, her convictions become suspect—when Nicholas Pym asks Tess to explain her interest in the Baltics, Tom fills in the blanks, responding that his family has been personally affected. Tom speaks for Tess, but she never seems to speak of her own personal motivations for joining the resistance. As the play comes full-circle, so does Tess's level of awareness. She tells her mother that she has told Tom to go on to Vilnius without her, upon the realization that she felt "apart" in some way from Tom's convictions. Specifically, it is her experience at the rally that is a point of personal discovery for her. She asks Pfeni, "are we people who will always be watching and never belong?"

For Tess, an attachment to Tom and to the Lithuanian resistance movement attracts her in her search for identity. Tom's personal convictions draw Tess to him precisely because she longs to harbor some convictions of her own. The teenage years, for many, symbolize a time of great transition. Desirous of adult respect and autonomy, Tess is attempting to pull away from Sara's values and opinions in an effort to discover and forge her own. This is not a comfortable process. Tess has initially been given a set of values by her parents, which, ultimately, may not match her own. As she begins to test things, to embark on the process of self-discovery, she moves from a point of comfort to one of confusion in an effort to define herself.

Sara doesn't always respect Tess through this confusing time, and thus the conflict between mother and daughter intensifies. Wasserstein is careful to point this process out in a conversation between Sara and Pfeni. Worried that her daughter is determined to pursue a life that runs completely counter to her own, Sara implores her sister to

speak with Tess. Pfeni defends Tess, recognizing the necessity for her niece's acts of defiance, telling Sara, "that's exactly what we set out to do because of our mother." Indeed, this idea is affirmed in her daughter's own words. Tess speaks of opting to stay behind on the trip to Vilnius, telling her mother that she made the decision for herself rather than for Sara. "You have your own life," says Tess.

Linda Rohrer Paige, in *Wendy Wasserstein: Overview,* asserts that Wasserstein's work often "highlights female community and friendship, even amidst the tension ignited by woman's trying to 'fit in' to prescribed social roles, yet simultaneously, attempting to 'define herself.'" Certainly, this idea is evident in the author's portrayal of both Pfeni and niece Tess. Pfeni is responding to prescribed social roles in her pursuit of Geoffrey and a life of domestic bliss. Tess, on the other hand, is reacting to the social roles imposed on her by her mother, in an attempt to break away from them in order to achieve a sense of autonomy. Ultimately, it is their communion with each other—sister to sister, aunt to niece, mother to daughter—that transforms the women of the Rosensweig family, helping them to see and to define themselves.

Paige also asserts that the appeal of the Wasserstein's plays for feminists (as exemplified by *The Heidi Chronicles*) is in an identification with the protagonist's struggle for change and search for her own identity. Adds Paige, "At times, self effacing, but at other times, powerful and wise beyond her years. . . . Her struggle is, in many ways, our own." Women breaking through socially imposed boundaries of age, of gender, and of ethnicity to define themselves—this is the touchstone for Wasserstein's work. In *The Sisters Rosensweig*, the issue of age figures prominently. The beauty of the work is the personal growth continuum represented by generations of Jewish-American women who, on some level, are responding to ambiguous social cues and their own passions to define themselves. As confusing and daunting a process as it may seem, there is one consistent message that Wasserstein imparts to a female audience: "you are smart enough, and brave enough, and certainly beautiful enough to find your place in the world."

Source: Laura Kryhoski, Critical Essay on *The Sisters Rosensweig,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

DeFrees has a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Virginia as well as a law degree from the University of Texas, and she is a published writer and an editor. In the following essay, DeFrees discusses the notion of forging an identity within the inevitable confines of family relationship.

Throughout her career, playwright Wendy Wasserstein has focused relentlessly on the issue of a woman's right to own her independence, strength, and integrity in what is essentially a "man's world." In seeking this independence, her characters—and the characters in *The Sisters Rosensweig* are no exception—often undergo some kind of transformation, either a change of circumstance or a change of mind. In *The Sisters Rosensweig,* Wasserstein's women do both: in bringing together three Jewish-American sisters in the physical setting of Queen Anne's Gate in London, Wasserstein allows the mundane event of a birthday party to force the women to examine the familial bonds that have both drawn the sisters together and repelled them from one another. In coming together, and in being forced to speak truthfully of their feelings about one another and their past, each sister faces an emotional epiphany.

Wasserstein uses her characters to span the generational gaps of various women from one Jewish-American family from Brooklyn, New York. The play opens with the daughter (Tess) of one of the three sisters (Sara), listening to an old recording of her mother's ivy league college a cappella singing troupe. Immediately, Wasserstein establishes that her characters are upper-crust, thus supposedly dispensing with the themes of poverty or economic strife and honing in on the emotional lives of the women. Pfeni, the middle Rosensweig sister, arrives from traveling in Bombay. She brings with her, in one of the many shopping bags she carries in lieu of real suitcases, a present for Tess, which is a statue of Shiva the destroyer, an Indian god said to "destroy all evil and bring you hope, rebirth, and a lifetime guarantee that under no circumstances will you grow up to be like me." Pfeni's self-deprecating manner introduces self-doubt and a picture of a smart, well-traveled writer who is grappling with her place in the world. In fact, the use of the profession of international writer is particularly clever on Wasserstein's part. She has created a woman who travels the world in search of an elusive sense of self, who never pauses for long enough to examine her personal needs and desires, nor to assess whether those needs are being met. For the previous four years, Pfeni has dated Geoffrey, a bisexual and world-renowned British stage director, never seeing him for more than a few days or weeks at a time, never allowing herself to settle down long enough to investigate her deeper feelings. When Geoffrey tells her that he wants to date men again, she hardly reacts, but when he says "I miss men," she rather coldly replies, "It's all right, Geoffrey. So do I." It is not until she confides in her sisters that Geoffrey has left her that she breaks down. Back in the arms of her family, Pfeni is able to examine her life and realize the loss, not just of her lover, but of the years she has spent closed off from her dreams. Tying herself to Geoffrey had been typical of the way Pfeni consistently attached herself to mismatched goals—or rather, how she avoided diving in to the very things she most craved, out of trepidation and fear of failure. Pfeni stayed in a dead-end relationship to avoid true intimacy with a man, just

as she spent years skirting around the book she is writing about the women in Tajikistan, to avoid the pain of experiencing their plight. As a travel writer, she can justify a flighty existence, to a point. When discussing Tess's intention of going to witness the Lithuanian revolution, Sara questions Pfeni as to why Pfeni stopped writing about revolutionary causes and settled into being a travel writer. Pfeni tells Sara, "Somewhere I need the hardship of the Afghan women and the Kurdish suffering to fill up my life for me. And if I'm that empty, then I might as well continue to wander to the best hotels, restaurants, and poori stands." But, Sara does not accept Pfeni's self-deprecating excuse, and says to her:

> Pfeni, real compassion is genuinely rarer than any correct agenda. I'm a pretty good banker, but it's not a passion. You, on the other hand, have a true calling, and the sad and surprisingly weak thing is you're actively trying to avoid it. I think you care too much and you're looking for excuses not to.

Hearing her sister's frank words, Pfeni takes Sara's hand and tells her, "[t]here is no one I rely on in life more than you." Sara quickly pulls away, and the moment evaporates, but not before Pfeni can appreciate herself through her sister's eyes. After Geoffrey leaves her, Pfeni decides to return to her passions and tells her sisters as she is leaving Sara's house to return to Tajikistan:

> Well, Gorgeous, if you only write "Bombay by Night" and you make sure to fall in love with men who can never really love you back, one morning you wake up at forty in your big sister's house, and where you should be seems sort of clear.

Sara, the oldest sister, speaks earnestly to Pfeni, and in fact, speaks forthrightly to everyone in the play except herself. Twice divorced, Sara is convinced of her future as a solitary woman—she is mistrustful of men, in part as a result of two failed marriages and of being a female executive in the misogynistic world of international finance. Thus, when Mervyn Kant arrives as an unexpected dinner guest and subsequently as an unexpected love interest, Sara is automatically closed off to his advances. In the simplest, most obvious way, and with the help of Sara's sisters, Merv opens Sara's life to the possibility of love. Using an almost rote character—the Jewish New Yorker with a heart of gold—Wasserstein rekindles the heartstrings of a woman who had renounced the very idea of love. It is a lovely gesture on Wasserstein's part, to have culled a stereotype from the topography of stock characters and imbued him with a wistful air that rings true. Merv serves as a foil to Sara: he is all heart, worn on an unbuttoned sleeve, while Sara is a deflection of love.

Just as she has soured on love, each character in the play introduces sweet offerings of love, and of acceptance and honor, to her. It is not clearly spelled out why all of the

other characters are so willing to look beyond her cold exterior and attempt to reach Sara's hidden warmth, but clues in the dialogue are interspersed throughout the play. She seems to speak truthfully about issues that the others skirt. Gorgeous, the youngest of the Rosensweig sisters, saunters into Sara's home, dressed to the hilt in fake Chanel and overdone accessories, speaking in as glib and gilded a tone as her clothing. When Gorgeous says, "Some of the most interesting men I know in Newton, Massachusetts are furriers," and then is unable to substantiate her statement, she balks when Sara pokes fun at her. In response, Sara says, "I am asking you to be specific. I am asking you to take responsibility for whatever it is you babble about. Life is serious business, Gorgeous. Life isn't funny." Ironically, if anyone of the sister's lives is not funny, it is Gorgeous's life. Her husband has been unemployed for two years, and she is living in an estranged, and strained, arrangement with him. While he stays up all night every night attempting to write detective novels, Gorgeous must find a way to make ends meet. Gorgeous, unready or unwilling to share these facts, threatens to leave and stay with friends rather than deal with the strained relationship with her sister, and Merv and Sara together quell Gorgeous's anger. It is a foreshadowing of Merv's ability to relate to Sara that becomes more pronounced as the play progresses. Interestingly, however, it is Sara who finally prods herself out of her dark disposition toward love—a subtle statement by Wasserstein that, ultimately, it is up to the individual woman to choose to face her fears, rather than sidestepping them. Sara spends the day after her birthday waiting for Merv to call her, despite the fact that she told him to leave and that she was not interested. The evening before she calls, Sara and her sisters have congregated, and after Pfeni and Gorgeous loudly encourage Sara to call Merv, Gorgeous says that she wishes that "each of us can say at some point that we had a moment of pure, unadulterated happiness! Do you think that's possible, Sara?" Sara, without the usual sarcasm or defenses, answers, "[b]rief. But a moment or two." It is possible—love is possible, and even if only fleetingly, Sara has opened the door to happiness.

Wasserstein's theme of sisterhood and family ties is not new—female writers in the past hundred years have written vociferously on the topic, in fact. What differentiates Wasserstein's storytelling from the rest of the tales of female self-discovery that poured onto the stage in the latter half of the twentieth century is that she drives her story from a specifically religious building block. The characters of Gorgeous and Tess provide a framework for the theme of how religion plays an integral part in each woman's search for meaning in their lives. Gorgeous, the youngest of the sisters, and Tess, Sara's daughter, ground the play in the theme of religious journeys. Gorgeous has retained all of the ritual of her Jewish upbringing, and she is steadfast in adhering to its tenets; however, beyond the surface, it is not clear that she understands her reasons for her faith. Thus, while she has never strayed from her Judaic upbringing, blindly modeling the life her mother led, she has also never quite owned up to glaring faults in a life she tries to portray to the outside world as easy and complete. Tess, Sara's daughter, is the foil to Gorgeous's on-the-surface complacency. Tess is full of resolve to make a difference in the world, but also full of questions about her place in that same world. She is constantly asking the philosophical questions that frame all of the women's lives. At one point, she asks, "Aunt Pfeni, are we people who will always be watching and never belong?" And to her mother, she asks, "Mother, if I've never really been Jewish, and I'm

not actually American anymore, and I'm not English or European, then who am I?" Gorgeous and Tess come from opposite planes of introspection: Tess is an avid intellectual who directly seeks the answers to her questions about her faith and her place, and Gorgeous just as avidly seeks to avoid confronting those same questions. In the familial embrace of Sara and Pfeni, each of the women, while not necessarily finding answers to her questions, at least finds comfort in the realization that in their journeys, they are not alone. When Gorgeous breaks the heel of an expensive pair of shoes she has just purchased, Sara tries to call Gorgeous's husband and tell him to replace the shoes. Not until this moment is Gorgeous forced to admit to her sisters that her husband is unemployed and has been for two years; that her love life has fizzled; and that she is, under all of her baubles and sweater sets, deeply unhappy. But, the act of admitting her unhappiness allows her a release—free from the weight of keeping up appearances, she gains a newfound will-power, as well as a closeness with her sisters that had not been previously possible. It is a quite breakthrough, tenable and lasting. What she has lost in pride, she has gained in compassion.

The Sisters Rosensweig is perhaps Wasserstein's most adamant construction of what it means to be a woman in the twentieth century. Her characters exhibit the post-Industrial Revolution woman's freedom to travel, to work in any field she chooses, and to have both a family and a career. Yet, along with all of these accomplishments comes the crashing realization that, while achieving these hard-won goals, a woman's identity becomes an all the more fiercely guarded prize. Wasserstein seems to be asking, "Who am I if I am not my mother? How do I forge my future when my past teaches me no lessons for this future?" Ultimately, the answers to these questions come round to the realization that whatever path a woman takes or does not take, and whatever choices she makes or events happen in her life, she is the product of her heritage. Whether her life takes her to Tajikistan, or London, or Newton, Massachusetts, family remains the basin of memory, the origin of spiritual understanding, and the crux to the understanding of the world one builds for oneself.

Source: Allison Leigh DeFrees, Critical Essay on *The Sisters Rosensweig,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following review, Simon commends The Sisters Rosensweig *for being "both of its time . . . and of all time." The Sisters Rosensweig* is Wendy Wasserstein's most accomplished play to date. It is through-composed, with no obtrusive narrator haranguing us. Its central, but not hypertrophic, character is the eldest sister, Sara Goode, divorced from her second husband. An expatriate in London, she is celebrating her fifty-fourth birthday, for which her younger sister Gorgeous Teitelbaum has flown in from Boston, where she dispenses personal advice over the airwaves. From farthest India, the youngest sister, Pfeni Rosensweig, has jetted in; now a travel writer, she is shirking her mission, a study of the lives of women in Tajikistan. Equitably, all three sisters end up sharing center stage, both literally and figuratively.

Gorgeous, who, we are told, is happily married with four children, is group leader of the Temple Beth-El sisterhood of Newton, Massachusetts, on a visit to London; Pfeni is here to touch base with her lover, the famous stage director Geoffrey Duncan, whom she has converted to heterosexuality and may soon be marrying. Here, too, is a friend of Geoffrey's, the New York *faux* furrier and genuine mensch Mervyn Kant. Rounding out the cast are Tess, Sara's precocious teenager; Tom Valiunus, Tess's dopey but good-natured punker boyfriend, with whom she is planning a political-protest trip to his ancestral Lithuania; and Nicholas Pym, a British banker, stuffed shirt, and suitor to Sara.

This is the stuff of Anglo-American comedy, more specifically Anglo-Jewish-American drawing-room comedy, in which some related but diverse mores and some diverse but trying-to-become-related people are playing off one another. Sara, a banker herself, is high-powered, smart, and sex-starved. Pfeni and the ebullient but labile heterosexual Geoffrey are having difficulties. And the ostensibly contented Gorgeous is there to stick her bobbed but nosy nose into everybody's business.

A seasoned theatergoer may well guess several plot developments, though there are also a few surprises. But plot is far less important than character and dialogue, both of which Miss Wasserstein does handsomely and humorously. She is surely one of our wittiest one-liner writers, but under the bubbles and eddies of her wit are real people in deep water, resolutely and resonantly trying to keep from drowning. And she is able to orchestrate the interaction of her disparate characters into a complex, convincing polyphony. There may be a touch of the arbitrary here and there; mostly, however, the play flows, entertains, and liberally dispenses unpompous wisdom about ourselves.

Particularly pleasing is that *Sisters* manages to be both of its time, 1991, and of all time, unless human nature changes radically, which for these 5,000 years it hasn't. The three Rosensweig sisters are by no means unworthy descendants of a famed earlier sisterly trio, to whom an occasional quotation in the text alludes. If I have any problem with the play, it is that several of its characters have a propensity for bursting into song and dance at the slightest, or even no, provocation. In a straight play, this can be as unsettling as long spoken passages in a musical.

Source: John Simon, "The Best So Far," in *New York,* Vol. 25, No. 43, November 2, 1992, pp. 100-1.

Critical Essay #4

In the following review excerpt, Kroll complains that Wasserstein goes for "the clever laugh, the situation that charms rather than challenges" in The Sisters Rosensweig.

There's a fine borderline between entertaining an audience and ingratiating oneself with it. In her new play *The Sisters Rosensweig* Wendy Wasserstein violates that border. Wasserstein, who won the 1989 Pulitzer Prize for her play *The Heidi Chronicles*, has dealt deftly with the thorny ironies of the young feminist middle class. But in her new play she settles for—ironies of the young feminist middle class. But in her new play she settles for—no, insists on—the clever laugh, the situation that charms rather than challenges. The play deals with three Jewish-American sisters celebrating the 54th birthday of the eldest, Sara, in London, where she's become a big-shot banker. Sara (Jane Alexander) has been on the cover of Fortune, but her emotional life is in a spiritual safe-deposit box. Pfeni (Frances McDormand) is a travel writer who restlessly ricochets between the world's flash points. Gorgeous (Madeline Kahn) is a housewife who's embarked on a radio career as Dr. Gorgeous, a kind of non-Teutonic Dr. Ruth. Consider the possibilities.

Wasserstein considers them, evokes them and then gaily abandons them with gags and banter that use her undoubted comedic gifts to evade rather than confront. The breakup of the Soviet Union, the American recession, the plight of the homeless, the question of Jewish identity, the problem of bisexuality—all these are embodied in specific situations, and all are disposed of with a winsome superficiality that would look one-dimensional in sitcom land.

Mervyn Kane (Robert Klein), a faux furrier who falls for Sara, speaks of the anti-Semitism he's encountered in his travels. So? So nothing, there's no follow-through—Wasserstein can't wait to get to a party scene where she dispenses shopworn gossip about hanky-panky between Laurence Olivier and Danny Kaye. Pfeni's improbable affair with a bisexual English director ends even more improbably when he informs her that a lecture he gave to a women's club made him realize that "I miss men." Wasserstein even commits the mortal sin of betraying her own characters. In a cheap-laugh scene, she has Tess (Julie Dretzin), Sara's idealistic daughter, give up her "revolutionary" zeal, putting on the Bergdorfian baubles of her aunt Gorgeous.

Such japery demeans the work of this gifted writer. In her collection of essays, *Bachelors Girls*, she confesses that "being funny for me [has] always been just a way to get by, a way to be likable yet to remain removed." Director Daniel Sullivan and a notable cast can't conquer the play's final effect of likability smothering substance. Wasserstein's most appealing character is Merv the furrier, played with fine wit and heart by comic Robert Klein. It's nice to see a feminist writer show her pivotal female character saved by a real *mensch.*

Source: Jack Kroll, "You Gotta Have Heart," in *Newsweek,* Vol. CXX, No. 18, November 2, 1992, p. 104.

Topics for Further Study

Critics overwhelmingly acknowledge Wasserstein's great contribution to feminist thought as a playwright. In consideration of the feminist movement, study one of the author's plays, and comment on the work as it relates to historical developments in the movement. Do Wasserstein's characters resemble their contemporaries today? Describe the differences and similarities.

Thematically, Wasserstein's plays explore the issue of Jewish identity in society. Study the current crisis in the Middle East between the Palestinians and the Israelis. How do aspects of Israel's struggle mirror those of the characters in the author's work?

The Holocaust had a devastating effect on the Jews of Poland. The author, having traveled to the area, was startled to see no familiar Jewish faces in a town once inhabited by her people. Investigate the impact of the Holocaust in Poland on its Jewish citizenry.

Environmental issues like Chernobyl loomed large in the 1980s, and the effects of a third-world economy on what was considered a superpower took its toll on the Soviet Union. Examine environmental problems in Europe today. How have they changed since the 1980s?

Memories bring Merv and Sara closer together. In their mutual sharing, they discover they have common pasts, besides sharing a common ancestry. Write about the power of reminiscence in the play. Would Merv and Sara have made a connection without a similar past? What does this say/ not say about Sara's sense of identity?

What Do I Read Next?

Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood (1996), by Rebecca Wells, accounts for the Ya-Yas, a circle of women whose activities seem to center on Siddalee's mother, Vivi. This is a book about female friendship, love, and the power of forgiveness as expressed in the memoirs of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood.

Schindler's List (1982), by Thomas Keneally, recalls the story of Oscar Schindler, a Jewish businessman and wartime profiteer who, during World War II, saved more Jews from the gas chamber than did any other individual. The book is a great source for understanding the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust and its impact on the Jews of Poland.

The Heidi Chronicles and Other Plays (1991), by Wendy Wasserstein, is a collection of three of Wasserstein's plays: *Uncommon Women and Others, Isn't It Romantic,* and the Pulitzer Prizewinning *Heidi Chronicles.* These plays are further examples of the author's feminist works.

The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America (2000), by Ruth Rosen, is a contemporary history of the Women's Movement in the United States, beginning in the 1960s with the advent of *The Feminine Mystique.* Rosen looks back at women's roles in the 1950s, moving forward then to develop a chronicle of those people, places, and events that have shaped the lives of American women today.

Further Study

Barnett, Claudia, ed., *Wendy Wasserstein: A Casebook,* Casebooks on Modern Dramatists series, Garland, 1998.

This casebook contains discussions of the author's works in consideration of Jewish storytelling, feminism, comedy, and so forth. The author is also compared to playwright Anton Chekhov and others to provide context and understanding for her works.

Ciociola, Gail, *Dramatizing Women, Their Choices and Their Boundaries,* McFarland, 1998.

A scholarly study of Wasserstein's works, this book also provides helpful explanations of current feminist terminology to set up Ciociola's textual analysis and in-depth character study.

Homes, A. M., "Wasserstein, Wendy," in *Bomb,* H. W. Wilson Company, Spring 2001.

In this interview with the playwright, Homes and Wasserstein discuss such topics as the concept of political correctness, a writer's social and moral obligations, and the influence of motherhood on the author's work.

Johnson, Haynes, *Sleepwalking through History: America in the Reagan Years,* Doubleday, 1991.

Johnson's work paints a harsh portrait of America during the Reagan years by recounting the nation's economic and political fall in the 1980s.

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Lochte, Dick, "The Sisters Rosensweig: Play Review," in *Los Angeles Times,* Vol. 39, September 1994, pp. 140-41.

Paige, Linda Rohrer, "Wasserstein, Wendy," in *Feminist Writers,* edited by Pamela Kester Shelton, St. James Press, 1996.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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