Street Scene Study Guide

Street Scene by Elmer Rice

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Introduction

Since its debut on January 10, 1929, at The Playhouse on Broadway in New York City, *Street Scene* has been considered one of Elmer Rice's most successful works and has cemented his reputation as a serious playwright. Rice himself directed the original production, which ran for 602 performances. *Street Scene* won the 1929 Pulitzer Prize for drama. Rice had written the play over several years and saw it rejected by numerous Broadway producers for what they perceived as a lack of content, too many characters, and too much plot. Nothing like *Street Scene* had been produced before, and many producers were not sure this kind of play would draw an audience. Yet when a producer was found, the success of *Street Scene* defied expectations.

Street Scene was one of the first plays to critique the negative effects of urban and industrial society on the average person. It was also praised for its innovative structure, including the same multiple plots and characters of which so many potential producers had been wary. Many believed *Street Scene* captured a mosaic of different kinds of lower-middle-class people living in New York City.

After its initial run, *Street Scene* was produced regularly throughout the world, though not always successfully. Surmounting the difficulties of translating the plethora of types was not always easy in other countries. In 1947, Rice contributed the book to an operatic version of the play scored by Kurt Weill. *Street Scene* is still produced today. While critics acknowledge its strong core and praise how it captured a moment in time, many regard its prejudices and situations as dated. When *Street Scene* won the Pulitzer Prize, J. Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* wrote, "It is saturated in the America that is New York. It is the finest wrought chiaroscuro of middle-class life that an American dramatist has drawn across the stage. It is complete. It is original by virtue of its simple integrity."

Author Biography

Rice was born Elmer Leopold Reizenstein in New York City on September 28, 1892. He was the son of Jacob Reizenstein and his wife Fanny (neé Lion), German-Jewish immigrants. Jacob Reizenstein worked as a traveling salesman and bookkeeper but suffered from epilepsy and had problems finding employment. This situation contributed to Rice leaving high school while he was still a sophomore to seek employment. He worked in several office jobs, which left him unhappy. After spending a year at a law firm, Rice decided to pursue a legal career to support himself, though he was not particularly interested in the law.

To that end, Rice passed a state exam that gave him the equivalent of a high school diploma, then entered New York Law School in 1910. During the long legal classes, Rice would read plays to relieve his boredom. He had been a fan of the theater since his youth. After graduating from law school and passing the New York State bar in 1912, Rice spent a year working as a lawyer. Still wearied by office work, Rice took night classes at Columbia University. He also began writing plays, poetry, and short stories. By 1913, Rice decided that he would become a professional playwright and left his legal career behind.

In 1914, Rice had his first play produced, *On Trial*, a success from the first. This success established Rice's reputation as a serious playwright whose plays were in demand. Rice used his position to promote his left-wing views and his concerns with social issues. He sympathized with socialists and often discussed issues from a socialist perspective in his plays. In addition to continuing to write plays, Rice also taught and worked with an acting troupe, Columbia University's Morningside Players. In 1918, Rice began writing for the movies. He wrote for Samuel Goldwyn for two years but was not happy at the studio.

One of Rice's most important plays was *The Adding Machine* (1923). An expressionist drama about an oppressed office worker, it has become a classic of the American theater. Many of the plays that followed *The Adding Machine* in the 1920s were not as successful—until 1929, when he wrote *Street Scene*. The Pulitzer Prize-winning, realistic drama was one of Rice's major plays. Rice directed the production and many of his subsequent plays. Two works that followed *Street Scene—The Left Bank* (1931) and Counsellor-at-Law (1931)—were successful, but many subsequent plays in the 1930s met with mixed or little success.

In the mid-1930s, Rice worked briefly as the head of the Federal Theatre Project, before becoming one of the founders of the Playwrights' Company, which produced many of his plays. Rice continued to write plays throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Only a few were truly successful and well received, among them *Two on an Island* (1940) and the romantic comedy *Dream Girl* (1945). After retiring from playwriting, Rice published his memoir, *The Living Theatre*, which revealed much about the inner workings of the theater world. By the time of his death, twenty-four of his plays had been produced on

Broadway. Rice died of a heart attack on May 8, 1967, in Southampton, England, survived by five children from three different marriages.

Plot Summary

Act 1

Street Scene opens outside a brownstone tenement (apartment building) in New York City in the evening. Dwellers are seen in their windows and meeting outside on the stoop. They exchange small talk about the hot weather and their neighbors. Several women gossip about Mrs. Maurrant whom they believe is having an affair with the milk company bill collector, Steve Sankey, right under her husband's nose. Their suspicions seem confirmed when Mr. Maurrant comes home and announces he will be working out of town the next day, which pleases his wife.

Sankey walks by, ostensibly on the way to the drug store to get a ginger ale for his wife. After he leaves, Mrs. Maurrant excuses herself to look for her young son Willie. As soon as she is gone, the gathered neighbors continue their gossip. One tenant enters, a Miss Cushing, who tells them that she has just seen Sankey and Mrs. Maurrant together outside a nearby warehouse. Mr. Maurrant comes out looking for his wife. They tell him that she is searching for their son.

Another tenant, Mr. Fiorentino, arrives with ice cream cones for everyone. A charity worker, Alice Simpson, looks for Mrs. Hildebrand and her children. Mrs. Hildebrand is about to be evicted because her husband abandoned their family, and she cannot pay her rent. Simpson is angry that Mrs. Hildebrand has spent money taking her children to the movies when they accept money from charity. Affected by Mrs. Hildebrand's plight, Mr. Fiorentino gives her some money. Miss Simpson disapproves, and asks to talk to Mrs. Hildebrand inside.

Mrs. Maurrant returns and tells her husband that she could not find Willie. The tension between them is broken as Miss Simpson returns and reiterates to Mr. Fiorentino that he should not give Mrs. Hildebrand money. Old Mr. Kaplan gets in an argument with her about charities. He believes they are part of a capitalist economic system, which exploits people. This leads to an argument between Kaplan and his daughter Shirley and their other neighbors. Mr. Maurrant decries the influence of foreigners in the United States, much to the chagrin of his many immigrant neighbors. Mr. Maurrant wants law and order to rule. Maurrant and Kaplan nearly come to blows.

After the argument ends, Mrs. Maurrant declares that she would like to live in peace. Sam Kaplan, Mr. Kaplan's younger son, returns from law school. He gets into a discussion about music with Fiorentino. Mrs. Fiorentino plays piano in their apartment, and Mr. Fiorentino and Mrs. Maurrant dance. Their steps are interrupted by the reappearance of Sankey, who is on his way home. Willie Maurrant finally comes home, but Mr. Maurrant continues to be angry that his elder daughter, Rose, has not come home from work yet. All the Maurrants, save the missing Rose, retire to their apartment. The neighbors catch each other up on the relevant gossip, including the fact that Sam Kaplan is in love with Rose. Everyone soon goes inside for the night.

Rose Maurrant appears with her boss, Harry Easter. Closing her window, Mrs. Fiorentino wishes them a good evening. Easter wants to spend more time with her, to come up to her apartment. He tells her he will put her up in her own apartment and try to get her started in an acting career. Easter's wife does not have to know anything. Rose turns him down, but he only leaves when Mr. Maurrant comes down. There is a confrontation, which is interrupted by the appearance of Mr. Buchanan. His wife is in labor. Rose goes to make his calls for him so he can stay with his wife.

When Rose returns, another neighbor's son, Vincent Jones, tries to get her to go out with him. She refuses, and Sam Kaplan steps in. Vincent hits Sam, but the confrontation is interrupted by the appearance of Vincent's mother, Mrs. Jones, who makes him come upstairs. Sam still wants to kill Vincent, but Rose calms him down. Sam and Rose have a long conversation and share their ideas about life. It ends with the appearance of Mrs. Buchanan's doctor, Dr. Wilson. Rose goes upstairs to help.

Act 2

The next morning, the doctor is on his way out. Sam comes outside looking for Rose, but his sister makes him come in to eat breakfast. Mr. Buchanan tells Mrs. Fiorentino that his wife delivered a girl late last night, and that Mrs. Maurrant stayed with her nearly the whole time. Rose tells Mr. Fiorentino that she is not in love with Sam Kaplan. Mrs. Maurrant comes out for a bit and is chided by Mrs. Jones for considering letting her daughter marry a Jewish man (Kaplan).

Mr. Maurrant leaves for work, angry that his wife seems more concerned with Mrs. Buchanan than their family. After an upset Mrs. Maurrant leaves to buy a chicken, Mr. Maurrant starts in on Rose. She tries to convince him to move to the suburbs, but he will not consider it. Mr. Kaplan talks with Rose, but is much kinder to her. Mrs. Maurrant returns with the chicken and tells Rose that she has tried to be a good wife to her husband, but that never seemed to matter. Rose tries to persuade her mother that Sankey should not come around as much but to no avail.

After her mother goes upstairs, Rose stays on the stoop. Shirley tells her to stay away from her brother. Rose becomes angry at what Shirley is implying about her. Sam comes outside, and they have another conversation about the meaning of life. Rose tells him that she is considering Easter's offer because it might mean a better life for her family. When Rose makes an offhand comment about wanting to run away, Sam eagerly chimes in that he would like to run away with her. Easter appears to take Rose to the funeral of an office mate. Easter continues to try and manipulate Rose, but she remains independent, even in the way she goes to the funeral.

Sankey comes by, on his collection rounds for the milk company. Mrs. Maurrant invites him upstairs. In the meantime, the marshals come to evict Mrs. Hildebrand and her children. Mr. Maurrant appears again, drunk. Sam tries to stop him from going inside, but Maurrant pushes him aside. Shots are fired: Mr. Maurrant shoots both Mrs. Maurrant and Sankey. Mr. Maurrant escapes through the gathered crowd. Sankey was killed

instantly, but Mrs. Maurrant is still alive and taken out by ambulances. Rose Maurrant returns to the horrible scene of her mother being taken away.

Act 3

Later that afternoon, the marshals continue to put Mrs. Hildebrand's furniture on the sidewalk. Random people stop by to view the now famous crime scene. Mr. Maurrant is still at large. Easter appears looking for Rose. When she returns to the tenement, she tells him that she hopes her father gets away. Rose reports that her mother has died. She again turns down Easter's offer of a place to live. She intends to take Willie and live somewhere better on her own.

While Rose is in the apartment gathering some things, Mr. Buchanan informs everyone that the police have found Mr. Maurrant hiding nearby. Rose confronts her father as he is carried off, asking him why he did it. He says that he was insane at the time and tells her to take care of Willie. Sam offers to come away with her again, but Rose turns him down. Sam tells her that he loves her, but Rose points out the reality of the situation and declares that she does not want to belong to anyone. Still, he kisses her passionately before she leaves. As she goes, a couple sees a sign for rooms to rent. The gossip on the stoop continues.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

Before the first act of *Street Scene* begins, the setting of the play is explained in great detail. There is a walk up tenement style apartment located in a dodgy, dilapidated part of New York City, built in the 1890s. It has a four-tiered stoop leading to double wood doors. The janitor's apartment is located just below street level, beneath the stoop. A sign reads, "Flat to Let. 6 Rooms. Steam Heat."

One of the first floor apartments bares a sign advertising that its resident, Prof. Filippo Fiorentino, is a musician and teaches lessons.

The audience is able to see the first floor windows and the bottom of the second story. To the left there is a partial view of the attached building, a storage warehouse under heavy construction. The house to the right is being demolished.

The janitor's apartment windows are lit, as are those in the first floor. There is a red light coming from the demolition site. Abraham Kaplan, a Russian Jew, is sitting in his window reading a Yiddish newspaper. He is an older man, past 60 years of age, with gray hair and horn-rimmed glasses. At the other side of the front door, Greta Fiorentino leans out her window fanning herself. She is a big boned, short, blond woman in her forties. She wears a flowered housecoat, and her large breasts are uncorseted.

Throughout the play it is explained that there is constant noise: the noise of the city. One can hear the boats on the river nearby, children laughing and playing, the L above, pedestrians walking by, streetcars, police sirens, fights, and various other commotions. While the volume may lower, it is never completely quite.

The curtain rises. There is some commotion off stage and Emma Jones appears. She is a middle-aged woman, tall, and skinny. She says hello to Greta, calling her Mrs. F. Greta responds with a slight German accent. They speak of the weather, of the extreme heat. Olga Olsen, a slight Scandinavian woman, ascends from the cellar. She is the janitor's wife. She reminds Greta to put her garbage in the dumb waiter. She, too, comments on the oppressive heat. Olga's child has been crying all day from the heat and her new tooth. She and Mrs. Jones exchange their experiences raising children.

Willie, a young boy, rolls to the stoop in roller skates, calling out for his mother. Mrs. Maurrant, an attractive woman in her forties, appears in one of the first floor windows. Willie wants a dime for an ice cream cone; it is hot and his mother gives in, although he has had several already today. After her son leaves she exchanges hellos with the other woman. They ask Mrs. Maurrant to come and join them. She does, and leaves her apartment. As she is walking down the other women gossip about how the woman has a lot of things to think about, that a man named Sankey has visited her for the third time this week.

Mrs. Maurrant steps out of the building. She comments on the heat and the fact that she would have liked to go to the concert in the park that evening but her daughter hadn't come home yet, probably had to work overtime. The other women agree that their older girls are never home. Mrs. Olsen chimes in saying that she hears the same thing from her sister in Sweden. Olga hears her baby cry and she runs downstairs.

Mrs. Jones comments that foreigners don't know anything about raising babies. Mrs. Fiorentino takes offence saying that her mother did just fine. Mrs. Jones said oh no, the Germans are fine, as they are like the Irish. It is the Polish and Jews that need help.

Mr. Buchanan interrupts them, calling down from a third story window. They exchange greetings and he comments on the horrible weather. They all ask how his wife is doing in the heat, as she is expecting any day. His wife is doing fine. She calls him in and he says his goodbyes. They all comment on how excited the soon-to-be father seems. Mrs. Fiorentino wistfully comments on how she has no children.

Mr. Maurrant arrives home, looking grim. He stops for a minute on the stoop, saying hello to the women. He exclaims how he has been working all day in the heat and he must go to Stanford tomorrow. His wife tells him that she has supper upstairs, to which he replies that he has already eaten at the coffee shop. He moves to leave and asks her if their children are home. She tells him that Willie is playing with his friends and Rose must be working late. He lectures her on how it is her responsibility to know where her daughter is, that Rose should not be out so late.

George Jones exits the house, running into Mr. Maurrant and the ladies. Mr. Maurrant turns and goes upstairs. Mr. Jones sits down and talks with the women. The talk about the sour mood that Mr. Maurrant seems to be in; the ladies brush it off saying that all men just want to get their way. Mr. Jones says that it is the same with women, and they agree. Mrs. Fiorentino comments that we all just need to get along in life. Mrs. Maurrant agrees saying that as humans we need kind words and sympathy for one another. Mrs. Jones tells the group that you get married for better or worse and that if it doesn't turn out the way you expected than you just have to make do.

Mrs. Maurrant is still speaking when Steve Sankey appears. Mr. Sankey looks cheap, dressed in a low quality suit. He is in his early thirties and is prematurely balding. Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Fiorentino exchange a knowing look. Mrs. Maurrant and Mr. Sankey try to avid eye contact. They continue to do so throughout the scene. He greets the women and comments on the heat. It becomes apparent that the country is in the middle of a heat wave. The just heard that six people had died on account of the heat in Chicago. Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Fiorentino ask how his family is doing. Mr. Sankey has a wife and two daughters. With that he quickly goes on his way.

Agnes Cushing, a thin woman in her fifties, exits the building. She is off to get ice cream for her elderly mother whom she takes care of. After she leaves the women talk about poor Miss Cushing and how she has cared for her mother her whole life, not really living herself.

Mrs. Maurrant decides to leave to look for her son. As soon as she is out of ear shot the women start gossiping about Mrs. Maurrant and Mr. Sankey. They wonder if Mr. Maurrant is suspicious of his wife's relationship with the milkman. Miss Cushing enters the scene excitedly. She has just seen Mrs. Maurrant and Mr. Sankey together. Mr. Maurrant exits the building asking about his wife's whereabouts. They tell him she went to find their son.

Shirley Kaplan appears in one of the windows. She serves her father tea and exchanges greetings with her neighbors. She asks her father to turn his reading lamp off, as it was increasing the temperature in their apartment.

Outside Mrs. Jones comments on the fact that she doesn't understand how the Kaplans can read the newspaper in Hebrew. Mr. Jones is explaining that Hebrew is their first language when his wife quickly interrupts him when she realizes that Shirley has reappeared at the window.

Mr. Filippo Fiorentino, a short Italian man, enters the scene balancing his violin and five ice cream cones. Filippo, Lippo for short, has a think Italian accent that sounds as he offers the cones to his neighbors. He refuses reimbursement for the cones.

Alice Simpson, a woman representing a charity, arrives looking for Laura Hildebrand. She is outraged to learn that Laura has gone to the movies. Mrs. Hildebrand arrives with her two children. Ms. Simpson berates Mrs. Hildebrand for spending money on the movies. Mrs. Hildebrand explains that it was not too much money and they always went to the movies on Thursdays when her husband was with them. Ms. Simpson argues that she is now at the mercy of charity and that it doesn't look like her husband will be returning. The neighbors stand up for Mrs. Hildebrand; Filippo gives her coins from his own pockets for the movies. Ms. Simpson leads Mrs. Hildebrand and the kids to their apartment.

Mrs. Maurrant returns. Her kids are still not home and Mr. Maurrant is telling the group that he is going to punish them. The others are trying to convince him that kids will be kids.

Ms. Simpson leaves the building. The group asks after Mrs. Hildebrand. The charity worker tells them the mother and her children will be thrown out of their apartment tomorrow. The neighbors tell her that she is being cruel to the woman. Ms. Simpson leaves after making an offensive comment about Jews to Kaplan. Lippo pretends to go after her. Mr. Maurrant points out that the landlord who is throwing Mrs. Hildebrand out is a Jew. He points his remark to Kaplan.

Kaplan points out that the landlord's religion has nothing to do with it, that he believes it is the capitalist structure of the country that is harmful. The neighbors get into a discussion about labor unions, the working class, and America's prosperity. Kaplan is a socialist and calls for a revolution. The others adamantly disagree. Mrs. Jones asserts her belief that socialist teachings pronounce that there is no God and teaches the theory of evolution. Mr. Maurrant agrees, and voices his disgust of foreigners coming to

America, trying to change things. Mrs. Fiorentino and Lippo tell them that there is nothing wrong with foreigners.

They argue over the person who discovered America, Leif Erickson or Christopher Columbus. The group then gets into a discussion of how the different immigrant groups have contributed to New York City. This culminates into a tirade concerning the current demise of society, the higher divorce rate, premarital sex, smoking, birth control, and hippies. These rants are lead by Mr. Maurrant.

Kaplan voices his belief that the family unit will no longer be necessary once there is no more personal property. This comment angers Mr. Maurrant. Words are exchanged which ends with each man lunging at each other. Shirley leads her father away from the window.

Throughout the conversation, Mrs. Maurrant tries to quietly assert her opinion that everyone should be able to live in peace and accept each other's differences. Each time she speaks her husband mocks her. Mr. Maurrant and the Jones' think that people should just live with their own kind.

Sam Kaplan walks up to the group, absorbed in a book. He is a young man of 22 s and is Mr. Kaplan's son. He sits down and greets the group. Mr. Lippo asks how he liked the concert. He replies that he didn't like the type of music that was played. The group discusses music and their respective favorites. Mr. Jones leaves to play pool in the middle of the conversation. Mrs. Fiorentino goes to her piano and begins playing. Lippo and Mrs. Maurrant dance in the sidewalk.

Just then, Mr. Sankey arrives. Mr. Maurrant stands when he sees Mr. Sankey. Lippo and Mrs. Maurrant stop dancing. Mr. Sankey comments that it is too hot to dance before he leaves. Mrs. Fiorentino stops playing the piano. Mr. Maurrant gets cranky, asking his wife how she can dance when she doesn't even know where their kids are. Just then Willie appears, crying. He has been in a fight. Mr. Maurrant yells at both his wife and son before sending Willie up to bed. Mrs. Maurrant follows her son. Mr. Maurrant goes to join Mr. Jones at the bar.

Mrs. Fiorentino comes back to the window. They tell her what had just happened when Mr. Sankey showed up. They disparage Mrs. Maurrant's character, one of them calling her a whore. Sam shouts at them, telling them that they are awful for being so cruel to her. He quickly leaves, entering the building.

The group collectively wonders out loud what is wrong with the young man. One of them thinks that he is in love with Rose Maurrant. Mrs. Jones expresses her distaste for a Jew to date a Christian.

The group begins to break up, leaving to go to bed. Rose Maurrant and Harry Easter walk to the stoop. Rose is 20 years old, Mr. Easter is 15 years her senior. By the way he is dressed it shows that he has considerably more money than she. Rose thanks him and tries to say goodnight. He does not take the hint and puts his arm around Rose. She extradites herself from his arms as Mrs. Olson exits the building, exchanging

pleasantries with Rose before once again exiting down the cellar stairs. Once they are alone Mr. Easter pressures her into letting him upstairs. Then he forces a kiss. She runs up the stairs exclaiming that he is married.

Mrs. Jones exits with her dog. She tells Rose that her father has been worried about her. She leaves to walk her dog. Rose tells Mr. Easter that he must leave or the whole building will be gossiping about her. She also tells him that he must stop looking at her at work as all of the other girls in the office were starting to talk. Easter tries to convince her to quit her job and find her own apartment. He tells her that he will help find her a job on stage. She tries, unsuccessfully, to interrupt him. He tells her that they will have lots of good times once she gets her own little apartment. His wife never needs to know. She finally frees herself from him while telling him that she does not feel right about what he is asking of her. Mr. Easter finally agrees to leave.

Rose is searching through her purse for her keys as her father gets back from the bar. Mr. Maurrant asks to whom she was speaking. Rose explains that it was her boss who took her to dinner and dancing after she worked late. Her father presses her, asking if there was something more, perhaps a physical relationship between her and her boss. Rose is insulted by her father's line of questioning.

As they are arguing Mr. Buchanan rushes out of the building. His wife is in labor. Rose offers to go to the pay phone to call the doctor. Mr. Buchanan goes back into the building to see to his wife. Mr. Maurrant follows to get his wife to help them. As Rose runs off she passes Mae Jones and Dick McGann, both in their early 20s and very drunk. The young couple is still dancing around, inebriated, when Rose reappears. Mae asks her how the milkman is. Rose looks embarrassed at her comment.

Rose is still on the stoop as Vincent Jones appears. He looks like a typical New York City taxi driver. He greets Rose and begins to harass her, moving his hands over her body. Rose tries to fend him off as Sam sees them through his window. He yells at Vincent to get his hands off Rose as he climbs out his window and on to the stoop. The two men get into a physical altercation resulting in Vincent getting shoved to the ground. Vincent, Sam, and Rose are still arguing when Mrs. Jones gets back with her dog. She leads her son upstairs with a snide remark to Rose on her many admirers.

Sam and Rose are left alone. He sits on the stoop sobbing, and calls himself a coward. Rose disagrees and comforts him. Rose asks him if he thinks there is any truth to the rumor about her mother and the milkman. He tells her that he did hear the neighbors talking. She confides in him that she doesn't know what to do. Her father is so strict; he suppresses her mother's joy. They comfort each other. At Rose's request Sam recites a poem.

The doctor arrives and Mr. Maurrant calls for Rose to come inside. She says goodbye to Sam and allows, at his asking, him to kiss her. His embrace is passionate, yet she does not respond. When she gets to her window she blows him a kiss before closing her shade. The scene ends with Sam sitting alone with his head in his hands.

Act 1 Analysis

The description of the setting for *Street Scene* allows the audience to infer a few things. The people that live in the building, and therefore the characters of the play, are probably working class judging from the description of the apartment house and neighboring buildings as being old and falling apart. In areas of neglect crime rates tend to be higher.

As the audience is introduced to the inhabitants of the apartment it becomes known that this building houses people from a multitude of backgrounds. They are all converging in this one place, one city, one building. They have all come from such different places; most are immigrants or first generation Americans, yet they all share similar experiences. This is first noticed when a couple of the female neighbors talk about raising their children. Even the janitor's wife says that her sister in Sweden is confronting the same issues. These neighbors are also facing the same financial struggle, as they are living in this older building, in a less desirable part of the city.

The neighbors, being in such close proximity, share their lives with each other. They do this through gossip, sharing an ice cream on the stoop, and dancing in the street. When they are talking in the group they form almost a family-like relationship. They look out for one another, and defend each other, such as the case with Mrs. Hildebrand's upcoming eviction. The neighbors all band together and defend her character to the social worker. On another occasion, when one of the residents goes into labor, Mrs. Maurrant and Rose are all too happy to help. They are also charitable to each other as is the case when Lippo brings home ice cream for not only himself but also his neighbors. He refuses payment for the treat and his neighbors share in the simple pleasure of eating an ice cream cone outside on a hot day.

Despite sharing the joys of life with one another and having much in common, there are also quite a number of differences. The Kaplans are Jewish, a commonly discriminated group at the time. Also there are at least four different immigrant families: Jewish, German, Swedish, and Italian. Each family has their own beliefs and customs according to their heritage. Several neighbors make openly hostile, racist comments towards one of their fellow neighbors.

The neighbors, as a group, are quite interested in gossip, and as such are quite taken with the subject of Mrs. Maurrant and her supposed lover, Mr. Sankey. At the time in which the play takes place, women were considered property of their husbands. Thus, infidelity took on a different connotation that it does even today. Mrs. Maurrant is called horrible names behind her back.

The attitudes toward woman at the time of the play are further illustrated through the character of Rose. She is looked upon only as a pretty young woman who is working as a secretary until she finds a husband. Her boss wishes to keep her as his mistress and thinks nothing of pawing her. One of the neighbor boys also finds it acceptable to harass her. The mother of the young man accuses Rose of attracting male attention.

It is in the first scene when the audience first becomes privy to Sam and Rose's relationship. It is evident from their conversation and resulting awkward embrace that Rose feels friendship towards Sam while he yearns for something more.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

Dawn the net morning. Mrs. Jones is making his way home from the bar, noticeably drunk. He passes Dr. Wilson, who is just leaving, on the stoop. May and Dick appear. She refuses to give him a goodnight kiss, explaining that he has already had enough. He leaves and she enters the building. Through the windows the audience can see people waking, moving about their apartments. Sam exits the building to read on the stoop. Children exit to play. The neighbors are beginning their day. Sam goes inside to eat breakfast at his sister's insistence. Mr. Buchanan tells Mrs. Fiorentino, who is at her window, that his wife had a girl last night. Rose exits looking for Sam. Lippo and she exchange greetings. Talk turns to the weather. Lippo tells Rose that the high temperature is reminiscent of the weather in Italy where he grew up. He advises Rose that she marry a man with money so that he can take her to Italy so that she may see its beauty herself. Before his wife calls him for breakfast he tells Rose not to make the mistake of hooking herself up with a Jew.

Mrs. Maurrant joins her daughter. She is tired, as she has been helping Mrs. Buchanan nearly all night. Mrs. Jones appears and tells Mrs. Maurrant that she shouldn't allow her daughter to get involved with a Jew. Rose tells her it is none of her business. Mrs. Jones enters the building. Mrs. Maurrant tells Rose to ignore the woman. Rose wistfully tells her mother that their life might be better off out of the city, in the suburbs.

Mr. Maurrant exits the building, headed off to work. On his way out he harasses his wife and accuses her of letting other men visit her. Mrs. Maurrant runs inside. Rose pleads with her father, asking him to just be a little nicer to his wife. Mr. Maurrant brushes her off as he takes several swigs from his flask. She brings up her belief that if they moved to an outer borough perhaps the whole family would be happier. He brushes off her suggestion and leaves.

Rose sits on the stoop. Mr. Kaplan comes outside, limping down the stairs with the help of a cane. He asks the young woman why she appears so sad. He tells her that it is the same way with his son, Sam. All the young people today, he says, are so unhappy. They can't wait to grow up and be adults. He says that now, as he is old, he only thinks of the little time he has left. Rose asks Mr. Kaplan why people are so mean to each other, why things don't change. Mr. Kaplan tells her that there is no clear answer to her questions. He begins to tell her that he believes it all stems from economic policy when Charlie and Mary Hildebrand interrupt them, exiting the building. Mary tells Rose and Mr. Kaplan that Mary's family is to be evicted from their apartment that afternoon. Mary elaborates, saying that their father left and now they cannot pay the rent. Rose asks what their family will do. Mary replies that Ms. Simpson from the charity told them she will find a place for them but they must learn not to be so extravagant with their money. Charlie is pulling at his sister, telling her they must go to school. The children leave.

Mr. Kaplan points to the children, demonstrating yet more troubles with the world. He, of course, believes the troubles stem from economic and social policy. He tells Rose that they must do away with the practice of capitalism and the system of wages for work. Rose asks him if people will still be mean to each other, despite the removal of capitalism. Mr. Kaplan voices his opinion that wage for labor practices is the same as slavery, and that this type of slavery is what causes man to be unkind to each other, that it creates greed.

Mrs. Maurrant approaches with a paper bag in her hand and Mr. Kaplan leaves. Mrs. Maurrant asks her daughter if Mr. Maurrant has left. Rose affirms her inquiry. Mrs. Maurrant has bought the chicken. She announces her plan to make some soup for Mrs. Buchanan. Rose tells her mother that her father had his flask with him. She voices her fear that he has begun drinking again.

Mrs. Maurrant asks her daughter if Mr. Maurrant said anything to upset her. Rose tells her no, but that she tried to bring up the subject of them moving out of the city but he would not listen. Mrs. Maurrant tells her that she knew he would not. Mrs. Maurrant tells her daughter that she has always tried to give him everything he has wanted, tried to be a good wife. But that nothing seems to improve his mood, or make him more congenial. She goes on to tell Rose that she has tried to be a good mother, too. Rose agrees that she has been both a good wife and mother.

Rose begins to suggest that her father's attitude may be on account of Mrs. Maurrant's relationship with the milkman but is unable to get the words out. Her mother knows what she is implying. She tells Rose that she can't believe that she is acting like the others. She thought Rose would be the one person who would understand. Mrs. Maurrant bursts into tears. Rose tries to comfort her mother. Mrs. Maurrant tells her daughter that she needs something in her life that brings her joy, if she has nothing to make her happy then what is the point of living. Rose warns her that someone is coming. Mr. Jones exits the building. He comments on the heat to Mrs. Maurrant and Rose as he leaves.

Rose suggests that maybe the milkman doesn't come around so much anymore. Mrs. Maurrant agrees, reluctantly. Rose tells her that it is account of all the talk from the neighbors. Mrs. Maurrant agrees but tells her daughter that she just needs someone to talk to, which will listen to her. She tells Rose that of course she trusts her but she is a young woman and it is not the same. Rose understands but elaborates that is best if he not come around. She is afraid what her father might do, especially if he has started drinking again. Mrs. Maurrant tells her daughter that sometimes she thinks that she would be better off dead. Rose wishes aloud that there were something she could do to make her mother feel better. Mrs. Maurrant tells her that there is nothing either of them can do. Things will just continue to be the same and nothing will change.

Mr. Buchanan approaches the building. He has just got back from getting medicine for his wife. Mrs. Maurrant tells him that she will be making some nutritious chicken soup for her. He offers to pay for the chicken but Mrs. Maurrant refuses, telling him that the Maurrant family will have it for supper that night. Mr. Buchanan tells the two women that he has been given the day off of work to stay with his wife and new baby. He leaves to

go upstairs. Mrs. Maurrant reminds him that she will be up later. He thanks her for being so helpful. Mr. Buchanan leaves.

Mrs. Maurrant comments to her daughter that he is such a nice man. She leaves to start the chicken soup. Rose tells her that she will be home after the funeral. Shirley exits the building. She and Rose talk about the weather. Shirley tells Rose that the heat makes it harder to control her classroom. She is looking forward to summer vacation, in two short weeks. Shirley, unfortunately, won't have any vacation, as she will be taking summer courses.

Shirley tells Rose that she wants to talk to her about her brother, Sam. Shirley explains that Sam will be graduating college in a month, and then he has three years of law school. After which, he will have to pass the bar exam and begin his practice. Rose is agreeing throughout Shirley's speech. Rose comments that it is hard work to become a lawyer. Shirley continues saying that it might be ten years before Sam will be making a decent living, able to support a family. Only then will Sam be ready to marry. Rose is surprised and tells Shirley that she is just good friends with Sam. Shirley replies by saying that if Rose was such a good friend that she should realize that their relationship could be distracting Sam from his studies. Rose tries to explain that she hasn't meant to distract Sam in anyway. Shirley goes on to say that she has worked very hard to ensure Sam's future. Every cent that she earns teaching goes to his education. Their father's only source of income is writing for the socialist newspapers. Rose agrees that Shirley works very hard and that Sam feels like he is in debt to her.

Shirley is angered at this comment. She misinterprets it as Sam and Rose both feeling sorry for her. She tells Rose that she could have been anything she wanted to be, including a "vamp," but she chose to be a schoolteacher. Rose tells her that she was not trying to be a vamp; she and Sam just get along. Shirley tells her to stay away from her brother, that it is not good to get involved with someone so different from her, that she should stick to her own kind. Rose tells her that she thinks that people who are different can be friends if they truly care for each other. Shirley tells her that Sam only sees a pretty face in Rose. Rose is hurt by this and angrily tells Shirley that she knows she is not as smart as either her or Sam. Shirley apologizes for hurting Rose's feelings telling her that she is just looking out for what is best for Sam. He is the only thing that she has in her life. Sam appears in one of the windows and greets the pair. Shirley whispers to Rose not to mention what she has said to Sam. Rose agrees to keep it between them. Shirley rushes away.

Rose turns to Sam in the window and asks him if there is a certain way certain way she should Act 1n a synagogue. The funeral that she will be attending today takes place in a synagogue and Rose has never been to one. Sam tells her that he too has never been to a synagogue. Rose seems confused at this. She asks him if their family didn't go to one after his mother died. He tells her that she was cremated. Rose tells him that she thought that everyone went to church or a synagogue, at least when they were growing up. She asks him if he believes in God. Sam replies that God is just a superstition, a myth that people believe in to make themselves feel better. Rose says that maybe it is better to just believe in something, anything, if it will provide even the smallest amount

of happiness. Sam believes that happiness, too, is just an illusion. Rose asks him what the point of living is if that is the truth. Sam doesn't know the answer to that question.

Sam suggests that they both end their lives together. Rose is shocked. She tells him that no one is happy all the time, it is hard for everyone, but there are still things worth living for. She wants to live and she doesn't want to hear him suggesting killing himself again. She tells him that he is her best friend. He responds by telling her that she is all he ever thinks of.

Rose changes the subject by telling Sam that someone wants to put her on stage, someone from her office. She thinks that if she gets away from this place, makes a little money, and finds and apartment things will be better for everyone, herself and her family. Sam, disgusted, tells her that this man will want only one thing in return for his assistance. She replies by telling him that no one gets anything for free, and perhaps it would be worth it to get out of her current situation. Sam expresses his shock that she would even think of such a thing.

Vincent exits the building, interrupting their conversation. He picks on Sam before leaving on his way. Rose motions to Vincent as another example of how bad things are for them. She suggests running away. Sam suggests they run away together. He tells her that he could get a job, give up law. He would give up anything to be with her, he tells her. They are interrupted once again, this time by Mr. Easter. Rose is surprised to see him; the neighborhood is quite out of his way. She introduces him to Sam. After much awkward silence Mr. Easter suggests they walk to the funeral together. He tells her they should go to the beach afterward to cool off. Rose declines; sighting too many things she needs to do.

Rose tells Mr. Easter that they should be going in order to make the funeral in time. After some discussion back and forth Mr. Easter agrees to walk although he had wanted to take a cab. They leave, telling Sam goodbye. He watches them leave in silence. Mrs. Maurrant, too, watches them from her window.

People come and go from the building, carrying on with their business. One can hear a pushcart operator in the distance selling strawberries. The audience is able to see some of the activities of the apartment residents through their windows. Mrs. Maurrant still watches out the window, appearing to be waiting for something.

Mr. Sankey appears. He is in his milkman uniform and he carries a bill collector envelope. Mrs. Maurrant motions him over to the window and invites him upstairs. After asking about Mr. Maurrant's whereabouts, he agrees. Mr. Sankey bumps into Sam coming out of the building, and, after an awkward pause, Mr. Sankey quickly enters the building.

Sam sits on the stoop and looks up to the Maurrant's window. The shades have been drawn. He begins to read a magazine. Throughout the scene the audience hears the piano being played by one of Lippo's students. James Henry, a city marshal, and his assistant, Fred Cullen, stop in front of the building. They marshal and his assistant have

a dispossess warrant for Mrs. Hildebrand. Since no one is there to take away her furniture they begin to dump it in the sidewalk.

Mr. Maurrant reappears with his work sack. Sam tells him that he thought he was going to Stanford for work. Mr. Maurrant begins to tell Sam that he changed his mind when he realizes that the shades are drawn to his apartment. He strides up the steps with visible determination. Sam tries to stop him but Mr. Maurrant pushes him aside. Mr. Maurrant enters the building.

Sam begins yelling Mrs. Maurrant's name outside her window. Mrs. Jones hears the commotion, as she leaning outside the window drying her hair. Sam urges her to go and warn Mrs. Maurrant. Mrs. Jones rushes from her window.

Mrs. Maurrant is heard yelling her husband's name, "Frank!" Then next thing heard are two gunshots. The shade in the apartment is pulled up revealing Mr. Sankey, frantically trying to open the window. He only succeeds in breaking the glass pane before Mr. Maurrant pulls him from the window. Another shot is heard. The marshal yells for someone to get an ambulance.

The marshal, Sam, and a few men from the neighboring worksite run off to the left to get help. A crown forms in front of the building. The crown looks nervous as they talk excitedly about what may have happened inside the building. Suddenly Fred, the marshal's assistant appears at the Maurrant's broken window yelling at the crowd that Mr. Maurrant is about to run out of the building. He orders them to catch him.

Mr. Maurrant emerges from the building. His clothes are ripped and he is covered with blood. The crowd makes an effort to close in on him until he pulls out his revolver and points it at the gathering. The crowd clears a path for him and he exits down the cellar stairs. A scream from Ms. Olsen is heard downstairs.

Miss Cushing appears at the Maurrant's window and yells for an ambulance. No one pays attention to her. A policeman arrives and goes down into the cellar with two men from the crowd. Miss Cushing continues to yell for an ambulance until someone hears her and sends a boy to the hospital.

The marshal returns and is updated on the situation. Fred exits the building, telling the crowd that a man has shot his wife and another man. The man was dead when Fred arrived. Sam arrives with another policeman. The policeman runs up the stairs to the Maurrant's apartment, telling the marshal not to let anyone leave or enter the building. The marshal takes his position after telling Fred to continue disposing Mrs. Hildebrand of her possessions. Sam repeatedly tries to find out whether or not Mrs. Maurrant is still alive, but no one answers him. The marshal does not allow him to enter the building.

Finally the ambulance arrives. By now Mr. Buchanan, Miss Cushing, and Mrs. Hildebrand are all in the Maurrant's apartment. They yell to the arriving doctor that she is still breathing. A stretcher is brought into the building.

Someone in the crowd spots Rose returning home. She asks Sam what happened. He simply tells her that there was an accident and she should go away. Rose clings to him demanding that he tell her what happened. She asks if her mother is okay. Sam tries to push her away. Rose stands watching as her mother is brought out of the building on a stretcher. She yells to her mother. Mrs. Maurrant has just enough strength to open her eyes and say Rose's name. She is carried off to the left. The crowd, including Sam and Rose, follow.

Act 2 Analysis

The second act of *Street Scene* is packed with both action and gossip. The reader begins to learn the feelings of the building residents toward the blossoming friendship between Sam and Rose. Everyone who voices his or her opinion is against a Christian dating a Jew. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Sam's own sister believes Rose is distracting to his schoolwork. Rose has been painted as a pretty young girl who is looking for marriage or money from a man. She has been likened to her mother, as someone with loose morals.

This act also gives more information about the relationship between Mrs. Maurrant and Mr. Sankey. Up until Mrs. Maurrant's conversation with her daughter, the audience is not sure if she is involved with Mr. Sankey or if their relationship has been invented by the neighborhood gossips. Even after this discussion it is unclear whether Mrs. Maurrant and Mr. Sankey are platonic friends or have a sexual relationship. Mrs. Maurrant voices her genuine unhappiness with life to her daughter and her reluctance to stop seeing Mr. Sankey. Mr. Maurrant's unpleasant and genuinely angry demeanor is also further revealed. It is learned that he is once again drinking, inferring that he had a drinking problem at one time.

Overall, between the Maurrant characters and Sam, there is a feeling of unhappiness with life. A belief that if one somehow got themselves out of their current living situation then their quality of life would somehow improve.

At the arrival of Mr. Maurrant, who was supposed to be away at work, the situation comes to a head. The audience is left in the dark as to why he has returned home early; perhaps he forgot something, or was there to apologize to his wife or daughter for his behavior. Sam, seeing the realization on Mr. Maurrant's face upon seeing the closed shades in his apartment, knows that Mr. Maurrant is capable of doing something horrible. Sam and Mrs. Jones' actions make the audience aware of this when they try to stop Mr. Maurrant and warn Mrs. Maurrant.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

It is mid-afternoon, the same day. Furniture movers are off at the left finishing up collecting Mrs. Hildebrand's belongings. A policeman exits the building carrying bloody garments. Two nursemaids each pushing carriages stop in front of the building. They are gossiping about the recent murder. One of them refers to a fresh copy of a tabloid that described the event in detail. A policeman appears at the Maurrant's broken window, telling the two women to keep moving. They ask if they may come up and look around but the idea is not warmly received. The nurses move on.

Mr. Easter arrives with several newspapers tucked under his arm. He yells up to the policeman, asking if he knows the whereabouts of Miss Maurrant. The police officer has not seen her since this morning when they carried her mother from the building. He asks the policeman if they caught Mr. Maurrant yet. The police officer responds in the negative. Mr. Easter then asks Mrs. Jones, who has just come back from the police station, if she knows where Rose could be. Mrs. Jones does not know; perhaps the hospital, she offers. Mr. Easter has just come from there.

Mrs. Jones is telling Mrs. Olsen that they asked some pretty embarrassing, personal questions at the station. Mrs. Jones tells her that while there is no excuse for murder she thinks that if anyone had the right to commit it, it was Mr. Maurrant. Just then Rose appears carrying several packages.

Rose asks the group whether or not they caught her father. She is relieved to hear they had not. Her mother, she tells, never opened her eyes again. She has bought a white dress and stockings to bury her in. She is in the middle of refusing the help of a persistent Mr. Easter when Shirley arrives with a newspaper sticking out of her book bag. She tells Rose how terrible the news was. Rose agrees but tells her that she had a bad feeling that something like this would happen. She thinks her father was just not in his right mind.

Mr. Olsen comes up from the cellar and tacks up the black crepe paper that Rose has bought. Rose thanks Mr. Easter and firmly refuses his help. She tell him goodbye and he reluctantly leaves. Rose tells Shirley that she and Willie will be staying at her aunt's. Sam has gone to Willie's school to pick him up and bring him there so that the young boy would not have to come home to such a frightening scene. Rose asks Miss Kaplan if she might go up to the apartment with her while she grabs a few things, confessing that she is afraid to do so alone. Miss Kaplan is happy to help they enter the building together.

Mr. Buchanan exits the building and sees Mr. Kaplan in the window reading. The neighbors greet each other and talk briefly about the murder. Mr. Buchanan is of the mind that what Mrs. Maurrant was doing was wrong but Mr. Maurrant had no reason to

kill her and Mr. Sankey. Mr. Buchanan leaves to fetch the doctor explaining that his wife has had a relapse caused by the grief of losing Mrs. Maurrant, whom she considered a friend.

Lippo stops by Mr. Kaplan's window shortly after. They discuss the fact that Mr. Maurrant has not been caught. Lippo wonders if he will get the electric chair. Sam arrives back home. He interrupts the two men to tell his father that the police are going to make him testify against Mr. Maurrant. He does not want to be responsible for sending a man to the electric chair. He explains that he tried to stop Mr. Maurrant and tried to warn Mrs. Maurrant.

Suddenly two shots are heard in the distance. Lippo surmises that they must have found Mr. Maurrant. Lippo and Sam run off to the left followed Mr. Olsen who runs up from the cellar. Mrs. Olsen comes up the stairs. Mr. Kaplan, Mrs. Fiorentino, Mrs. Jones, the policeman at the Maurrant's, Shirley, and Rose all lean out their respective windows. Rose is wearing a mourning dress. Another shot is heard. The policeman leaves the window as Rose worries that they have shot her father.

Mr. Buchanan runs up to the building. He shares what he has just witnessed down the street. The policemen found Mr. Maurrant hiding in a furnace. He fired at the police and they fired back. They are bringing her father down the street. The neighbors try to get Rose back in the building but she refuses.

Mr. Maurrant is led to the building by a couple of police officers and followed by a crowd, which includes Sam and Lippo. Rose runs to her father and the first police officer allows Maurrant to have a word with his daughter. Mr. Maurrant asks about Mrs. Maurrant and is very apologetic. He tells Rose that he never should have killed her mother, but he was just so out of his mind, and he had been drinking. He is sorry for his actions and doesn't care if he gets the electric chair. He apologizes to Rose for not being a good father and tells her to take good care of Willie and not let him become a murderer like him. The two embrace, Mr. Maurrant is crying heavily. Sam and the police officer pry Rose off her father. The police continue leading him down the street, a crowd following them. Rose and Sam stay on the stoop as the neighbors enter the building.

Rose tells Sam that she thinks she and Willie will leave New York as soon as they can. Sam insists that he come, too. He would do anything to be with her. He says that they would belong to each other. Rose tells him no. He is her best friend and she is very fond of him but she doesn't feel like anyone should belong to anyone else. That is when, she believes, people start to feel stuck, like her mother. She tells Sam that she wants to find love, she doesn't want to be alone her whole life, but first she wants to find herself. She tells Sam that if they said goodbye now it wouldn't have to be forever. One day when they are older they may still end up together. Rose tells her that she has such confidence in him that he will become a great man and a great lawyer. They share one kiss and Sam runs inside.

Shirley exits with Rose's things packed in a suitcase. Rose tells her that her Sam will be fine and thanks her for being such a big help. They embrace and wish each other good

luck. Rose leaves carrying the suitcase. Mr. Kaplan leans out the window asking Shirley why her brother is crying in his room.

A middle-aged couple stops in front of the building looking at the "for rent" sign. They see the black crepe paper, noting that someone must have died recently. They wonder out loud whether that is the reason for the empty apartment. They decided to take a look. As the couple walk up the stairs Mrs. Jones and Miss Cushing are busily gossiping about the day's events. Mrs. Jones predicts that Rose will become just like her mother, as she has seen Mr. Easter's interest.

Act 3 Analysis

Following the shooting of Mrs. Maurrant and Mr. Sankey there is a collective blasy feeling towards the event. Only several hours have passed since the murders yet the horror is almost forgotten. Even though these events have proved to be a break from the normal routine of the building, its residents do not seem to be particularly surprised or affected by it.

The marshal and his assistant have finished up their task of removing Mrs. Hildebrand's belongings. Not even a murder will delay a woman and her children being dispossessed of their shelter. These actions lead the reader to believe that this sort of violence happens frequently in this neighborhood. Indeed, it might even be expected. The conditions of a dodgy neighborhood, a building in need of disrepair inhabited by the working class, combined with the intense heat wave can push most people to their breaking point. Mr. Maurrant had the additional stress of a cheating wife and a drinking problem.

The neighbors, fueled by the quickly produced tabloids, dissect the minutia of the murder and the events and actions leading up to it. Even though Mrs. Maurrant was a kind woman, a friend, and helpful neighbor to the some of the building's inhabitants, she is quickly branded a sinner. Most of the neighbors who voice their opinion have decided that while they do not condone murder, they do see how Mr. Maurrant could reAct 1n such a violent way, as what Mrs. Maurrant did was unforgivable.

The last act of the play also contains the eventual capture of Mr. Maurrant. The dialogue with his daughter immediately following the scuffle with the police is completely unexpected. Nowhere in his previous interactions with any of his family members or neighbors has he said one kind word. Yet when faced with his sure jail sentence and possible execution he is suddenly filled with remorse. His remorse includes not only the killings, but also remorse for how he has not been a good father or husband.

The apology that he delivers to Rose supports her belief that her father had snapped. That he somehow was not in his right mind when he murdered her mother and Mr. Sankey, and that the circumstances were too much for him and he went out of control.

There is one important point to be made. The author gave no reason as to how Mr. Maurrant came into possession of a handgun so quickly. Had the family kept one in their

house for protection? This seemed quite unlikely considering the time and place of the play. It was also not a gun used for hunting or recreational use.

Finally, the end of the play signals the end of the relationship between Rose and Sam. Rose, in an effort to own her newfound independence, verbalizes her need to belong only to herself and to no other. She believes that belonging to someone else, having no sense of one's own worth or a way out is what lead to the disastrous events of that morning. She leaves Sam with the dream that one day, perhaps when they are older, they will end up together.

Rose exits, her dream of leaving this place realized, but through unfortunate circumstances. Just as quickly as she has gone, a new couple arrive to check out the "for rent sign" mentioned in the opening scene description of the play. And so life resumes for the inhabitants of the building.

Characters

Daniel Buchanan

Daniel Buchanan is a tenant in the apartment building. He is a nervous expectant father whose wife is in labor. Buchanan has Rose call the doctor and his wife's sister for him. In the morning at the beginning of act 2, he is the semi-proud father of a new baby girl.

Harry Easter

Harry Easter is the office manager who is Rose Maurrant's boss. Despite the fact that he is married, Easter is enamoured with his employee. He wants to be involved with her. Easter offers to get Rose her own apartment and start her on a new career as a stage actress. Rose turns him down, but Easter is persistent. In the morning, at the beginning of act 2, Easter shows up again, offering Rose a ride to the funeral. Again, she refuses him. At the beginning of act 3, Easter shows up at the tenement and wants to take care of Rose and her brother. Rose finally dismisses him without taking a thing. Easter finally accepts that Rose does not want him in her life at the moment, either as a friend or lover.

Filippo Fiorentino

Filippo Fiorentino (also known as Lippo) is the husband of Greta Fiorentino. He is an Italian immigrant. Mr. Fiorentino makes his living as an accordion player and musician. He belongs to the musician's union. Mr. Fiorentino is generous with his money. On this hot day, he brings home several ice cream cones for his neighbors and gives money to Mrs. Hildebrand and her children when Alice Simpson, the charity worker, is critical of their going to the movies. He also plays music for his neighbors and dances with Mrs. Maurrant. While Mr. Fiorentino is a lively, happy man, he also is a bit callous towards the feelings of others. He chides his wife for not yet having children, when the subject is touchy for her. He does the same thing to others who live in the tenement, but his happy-go-lucky demeanor makes up for it to some degree.

Greta Fiorentino

Greta Fiorentino is the rather large, loving wife of Filippo Fiorentino. She is a German immigrant and a musician. She makes her living giving children music lessons in her tenement apartment. Mrs. Fiorentino is frustrated by the fact that she has not been able to have children of her own. She gets slightly annoyed by her husband's generosity and his callousness towards her over her barrenness. She is one of the women who spends much time gossiping on the stoop of the tenement but is generally kind.

Charlie Hildebrand

Charlie is the child of Laura Hildebrand. He and his sister Mary are about to lose their apartment because of their destitute state. Still, they go to school in the morning at the beginning of act 2. They do not seem to be particularly affected by their imminent eviction.

Laura Hildebrand

Laura Hildebrand is the mother of Mary and Charlie Hildebrand. She has been abandoned by her husband and is destitute. Her family is about to be evicted from the building. Though Mrs. Hildebrand is about to lose her place to live, she tries to keep her children's lives as normal as possible. She takes them to the movies as they did every Thursday night. When Miss Simpson admonishes her for such actions, Mrs. Hildebrand meekly agrees because she has no choice.

Mary Hildebrand

Mary is the child of Laura Hildebrand and the sister of Charlie. She and Charlie share an apartment, which they are going to be evicted from.

Emma Jones

Emma Jones is the middle-aged wife of George and the mother of Mae and Vincent. She also has a dog, Queenie, whom she takes on walks regularly. She is one of the more gossipy tenants in the apartment building, fond of judging the others, especially those who are immigrants. Mrs. Jones is also critical of Willie and Rose but does not see the problems with her own children.

George Jones

George is the husband of Emma Jones, and father of Mae and Vincent. Like his wife, George is a gossip and very judgmental of those who are not like himself. He is critical of foreigners, though not as much as his wife.

Mae Jones

Mae Jones, about twenty-one years old, is the daughter of George and Emma Jones and the sister of Vincent. She is not a "nice girl" but stays out all night with her boyfriend, Dick McGann. She works in a shop.

Vincent Jones

Vincent Jones is the son of George and Emma Jones and brother of Mae. He is a young adult and works as a taxicab driver. He is a large man, and likes to throw his weight around. Vincent is attracted to Rose and tries to get her to go out with him. When she refuses him, Sam tries to step in to get Vincent to leave her alone. Vincent pushes Sam aside. Like his parents, Vincent is not very tolerant of those who are different than him.

Abraham Kaplan

Abraham Kaplan is the old Jewish man who lives in the tenement apartment building with his daughter Shirley and son Sam. Kaplan is unpopular with most of his neighbors for several reasons, including his religion. Kaplan also spouts off his radical political and economic beliefs on a regular basis. He is critical of the capitalist economic system, preferring instead socialism. Kaplan generally means well, but his demeanor rubs most the wrong way.

Sam Kaplan

Sam Kaplan is the younger brother of Shirley Kaplan and son of Abraham Kaplan. He is a university student who is studying law and considered quite bright. Sam is fond of poetry, music, and, especially, Rose Maurrant. Sam is ready to abandon his father and sister and go anywhere with Rose. He tells her he loves her and intercedes when men like Vincent Jones try to take advantage of her. While Rose is fond of Sam, she ultimately rejects him, for both his own good and hers. Sam is essentially under his sister's thumb but has a promising future.

Shirley Kaplan

Shirley Kaplan is Abraham Kaplan's eldest child and primary caretaker. The unmarried woman works as a teacher to support her elderly father and to put her younger brother through law school. Like her father, Shirley is unpopular among the tenants of the tenement for her brusque ways and religion. Shirley is primarily concerned with her family, making sure her father and brother's needs are met. To this end, she tells Rose Maurrant to stay away from her brother Sam because he is their future breadwinner. Shirley does have a sympathetic side. When Rose has to go back into her apartment after her father murdered her mother and her mother's lover, Shirley accompanies her for support.

Lippo

See Filippo Fiorentino

Anna Maurrant

Anna Maurrant is the wife of Frank and mother of Rose and Willie. Mrs. Maurrant is unhappy in her marriage to Frank and is having an affair with the milk company's collector, Steve Sankey. This liaison provides much of the fodder for the tenement gossips. It also distracts Anna from the care of her son Willie. Though Rose Maurrant tries to dissuade her mother from being so obvious about the affair, it does no good. At the end of act 2, Mr. Maurrant finds Sankey and his wife together, and he shoots both of them. Mrs. Maurrant later dies from the gunshot wounds.

Frank Maurrant

Frank Maurrant is the husband of Anna, and father of Rose and Willie. He works as a stagehand and is in the stagehands' union. Mr. Maurrant is a rather hard man to his wife and children. He does not approve of Rose's life choices and suspects something might be going on with his wife. Because of this situation, he is also the subject of much of the tenement's gossip. When Mr. Maurrant comes home unexpectedly at the end of act 2, he catches his wife together with Steve Sankey, the milk company collector. He shoots them, killing Sankey instantly while his wife dies later. After the shootings, he hides out in a nearby furnace room. The police catch him, and he is taken to prison. At the end of the play, it is implied that Mr. Maurrant will be put to death for his crime.

Rose Maurrant

Rose Maurrant is the twenty-year-old daughter of Frank and Anna Maurrant and older sister of Willie. She is a young woman who works in a real estate office and has many male admirers. They include her office manager, Harry Easter, who wants to set her up in an apartment of her own and get her started on a career in show business. Rose rejects all of his insistent advances. Vincent Jones also tries to get Rose to stay out all night with him, but she refuses him as well. Rose's most sincere suitor is Sam Kaplan. Kaplan pledges his love to her. While Rose connects with Sam in some ways, she also knows that he has a better future without her and that she has problems of her own. Rose tries to please her father, while influencing her mother's choices with Sankey. Rose's actions cannot change the outcome of the story, but at the end of the play, she is determined to make sure Willie has a better life in a better place. Rose is kind to many of her neighbors, including Mr. Buchanan.

Willie Maurrant

Willie Maurrant is the ten-year-old son of Frank and Anna Maurrant and younger brother of Rose. His mother cannot particularly control him. He runs rather freely on the streets, much to the chagrin of his father and sister. Willie is more interested in ice cream and being with his friends than being neat and tidy and hanging around at home. Rose tries to protect Willie as much as possible and keeps him in mind when she makes decisions.

Dick McGann

Dick McGann is Mae Jones' boyfriend. They stay out all night together at the end of act 1.

Carl Olsen

Carl Olsen is the husband of Olga Olsen and father of an infant child. Like his wife, he is an immigrant from Scandinavia. He lives in the basement apartment and is the building's janitor and maintenance man. Olsen is not above gossiping but is not particularly malicious. He helps the other tenants when he can. For example, at the end of the play when Rose wants to put up black crepe as a symbol of death, Olsen completes the task for her.

Olga Olsen

Olga Olsen is the wife of Carl Olsen and has an infant child. She is an immigrant from Scandinavia and lives in the basement apartment. She helps her husband with his janitorial duties in the building. Mrs. Olsen is one of the tenants who enjoys gossiping about her neighbors, though she is not as judgmental as some of the others. Mrs. Olsen helps others when needed.

Steve Sankey

Steve Sankey is the milk company collector who is having an affair with Mrs. Maurrant. Sankey is married and has two children. His rather open affair leads to his murder by Mrs. Maurrant's jealous husband.

Alice Simpson

Alice Simpson works for the charities and comes to the tenement to help Laura Hildebrand and her children. She is a spinster and rather cold and dismissive of the tenement's residents. Miss Simpson is especially hard towards Mrs. Hildebrand because she has taken her children to the movies, despite the fact that they are about to be evicted from their apartment. Still, she makes sure the Hildebrands have a place to go after their eviction.

Dr. John Wilson

Dr. John Wilson is the doctor who comes to the tenement to deliver Mrs. Buchanan's baby.

Themes

Ethnic and Religious Intolerance

In *Street Scene*, many of the residents of the crowded tenement building express beliefs that are prejudiced and intolerant of their neighbors and others. Sitting on the brownstone's front stoop, they deride the way those different from themselves conduct their lives. For example, in the first moments of the play, Mrs. Jones, one of the nonimmigrant residents of the building, says "What them foreigners don't know about bringin' up babies would fill a book" about Mrs. Olsen. Mrs. Olsen is an immigrant from Scandinavia. Mrs. Jones makes this statement to Mrs. Fiorentino, a German immigrant who is married to an Italian immigrant. Mrs. Fiorentino is slightly offended by the implication. Mrs. Jones also expresses intolerant beliefs about most everyone in the play.

One of the more unpopular resident families in the tenement is the Kaplans. Elderly father Abraham, his daughter Shirley and son Sam are disliked by many of their neighbors for being Jewish as well as for holding radical political beliefs. Abraham Kaplan is a socialist who believes the capitalist economic system exploits workers. Many residents are intolerant of Mr. Kaplan and his beliefs, and blame Jewish people for various problems in their world. Similarly, most residents do not approve of the potential relationship between Sam Kaplan and Rose Maurrant. They tell Rose and her parents that they would never let their daughter become involved with someone who is Jewish. By depicting these kinds of prejudices and situations, Rice depicts the diversity of New York City's populace and their beliefs. Not every aspect is positive.

Individual versus Machine

Throughout *Street Scene*, Rice underscores how oppressive the machine of modern urban life is. (The machines here are New York City, life in the tenement building, and the kind of jobs held by these lower middle class people.) The play is set on a hot day in June and many of the characters suffer from the heat. Because the characters reside in an unbearably close living situation, they are packed on top of one another, making the heat all the more oppressive. This situation also leaves them very little real privacy and, in many ways, limited opportunity. For example, everyone knows about Mrs. Maurrant's affair with Steve Sankey, the milk company's bill collection man. But she also might not be having the affair if the machine did not affect her husband, Mr. Maurrant, so deeply. Mr. Maurrant works as a stagehand and does not seem happy with his life. These tensions contribute to *Street Scene*'s tragic ending but do not end with the double murder. More tenants will move into the building, and those who live there will continue to be affected by these pressures.

Victim and Victimization; Choices and Consequences

The focal point—if there is one—of *Street Scene*'s diffuse plot is the affair Mrs. Maurrant is having with Steve Sankey, the milk company's bill collector, and its effect on the tenement. In many ways, Mrs. Maurrant is a victim of the city as well as an unhappy marriage. Mr. Maurrant is depicted as a rather loutish man who tries to control his family by the threat of violence. His marriage is not particularly happy, and he does not seem very concerned about his wife's emotional needs. To replace some of what her marriage lacks, Mrs. Maurrant has the affair. While her husband suspects that something is going on, her daughter, Rose, knows about the affair. To that end, Rose encourages her mother to be more discreet. Rose's warnings are not heeded, and Mrs. Maurrant and Sankey are murdered by Mr. Maurrant. Mr. Maurrant believes he will be put to death for the crime.

Though Mr. and Mrs. Maurrant are victims whose choices lead to serious consequences, Rose and her brother might benefit from their mistakes. She will not be a victim of the city or a bad marriage. Rose decides not to live her life for others (except her younger brother) and rejects the amorous offers of her boss, Harry Easter, and her young admirer, Sam Kaplan. She will move her brother to the suburbs or some place outside of New York City. In her family, at least, the cycle of victimization will not be repeated.

Cycle of Life

In *Street Scene*, Rice includes the entire cycle of life from a birth to two (untimely) deaths. By the beginning of act 2, the unseen Mrs. Buchanan has given birth to a daughter. At the end of the same act, Mr. Maurrant has shot both his wife and Sankey. As the play ends, it appears that a new couple is about to replace the recently evicted Hildebrand family. Rice has characters of every age in the play, from infants to old Mr. Kaplan and contrasting types of similar ages (Mae Jones contrasts with Rose Maurrant; Sam Kaplan to Vincent Jones). By depicting such a breadth of characters, Rice shows the diversity of New York City and how the city affects this cycle.

Style

Setting

Street Scene is a drama that takes place in New York City in contemporary time (the late 1920s). The date is a hot day in June. The action of the play is confined to one location: the exterior of a brownstone tenement that is about thirty years old. The building is somewhat shabby but features a stoop where many of the residents gather to escape the heat and socialize. Also visible are the front windows of several of the apartments, in which residents can be seen or heard. The building is located on a street that features warehouses as well as other housing. By limiting the play to one familiar setting, Rice underscores *Street Scene*'s themes. It emphasizes the characters' social circumstances and how dehumanizing life in New York City can be for those of the lower-middle classes.

Realism

Street Scene is a written as a realistic play. Realism is the faithful depiction of real life. Rice tries to capture what life was really like in New York City in the late 1920s for a certain class of society. To that end, he sets his play in a realistic setting: the tenement. Many of his characters are immigrants who speak English with an accent. Some, like Mr. Kaplan, maintain distinct ties to their past. Mr. Kaplan reads a newspaper written in Hebrew. Rice also shows how these people interact with those who consider themselves American, like the Joneses and the Maurrants. Their concerns are simple, related to everyday life: the affair that Mrs. Maurrant is having, how to stay cool on warm summer day, the young love of Rose Maurrant and Sam Kaplan.

Many minor characters add the play's realistic elements. Throughout the play, different kinds of people walk by the building, from children, to policeman, to those who want to gape at the murder scene in act 3. Many do not have lines, but those who do just talk about things like playing Red Rover or the like. To emphasize Rice's social message, he includes some better-developed minor characters as well. Miss Simpson, the spinster charity worker, looks down upon many of the tenement's residents. Though she is ostensibly helping Mrs. Hildebrand and her children (who have been left destitute after Mr. Hildebrand abandoned them), Miss Simpson cannot help but push her beliefs on others. Such characters add to the play's realism by including the kinds of people who would be found in such a place in real life.

Sound Effects

Rice goes to great lengths in the play's directions to emphasize the importance of sound to the realism of *Street Scene*. Throughout the play, Rice calls for steam whistles, traffic, and other street noise to be heard by the audience. In the original production, which Rice directed, he had the stage constructed so that audiences would hear footsteps as

they are heard when walking down the street. He also made records with the kinds of street noise he believed was vital to the play's realism.

Multiple Plots

In *Street Scene*, Rice does not use a typical linear plot. Instead, he weaves many plots, both large and small, throughout the play. The primary plot focuses on the Maurrant family: Mrs. Maurrant's affair, her husband's knowledge of the affair or lack thereof, Rose's love life, and Willie's rambunctiousness. While many of *Street Scene*'s subplots are linked in one way or another to the Maurrants, there are a significant number that are not, including Mrs. Hildebrand's eviction. By depicting this kind of variety of stories, Rice adds to the realism and power of the play. There is not one primary story in life, but many that are linked and some that are not.

Historical Context

In 1929, the United States was on the verge of transition from the Jazz Age to the Great Depression. The 1920s were a complicated decade in American history. There was an illusion of economic prosperity. Big business got bigger in the economic boom as corporations grew. This boom made many rich and powerful and gave others the idea that they could become wealthy as well. The source for this wealth was perceived to be the stock market, which kept getting bigger throughout the 1920s. In 1929, stock market madness hit its peak, and those who ran the stock market could not keep up with the rapid changes. Warning signs were ignored about the artificially high bull market. On October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed on Black Tuesday and soon the Great Depression set in. Within a month, unemployment rates had quadrupled.

Before the crash, cities were seen as places of opportunity. Throughout the United States, there was an increase in urbanization. Office buildings, industrial complexes, hotels, and apartment buildings were constructed at a rapid rate. The Empire State Building was begun in 1929, and completed in 1931. New York City was regarded as the epitome of possibilities and drew many new immigrants and rural Americans to make their fortune. Yet in New York City there was widespread pollution and overcrowding. As people became successful, they moved to newly constructed suburbs. First the upper classes moved to the suburbs, then middle-class suburbs grew as well.

Not everyone benefited in the 1920s economic boom. Working-and lower-middle classes, which included teachers, did not, though they did have steady employment and relatively high wages. Unions were not really powerful or respected in the 1920s, though they did exist. Unskilled factory work was boring and their work situations were unstable. Many urban dwellers lived in crowded apartments. Only seventy-one percent had running water and eighty percent had electricity. Rural America was even worse off. Rural America and small towns were already on the decline, and farmers were already suffering under tremendous economic pressure. Only ten percent of farm families had electricity, and only thirty-three percent had running water.

Throughout the 1920s, there was a conflict between rural and urban America and between the native-born and immigrants. There was concern over what to do with all the new Americans and their needs: more than a quarter who came to this country were illiterate. While many groups sprang to indoctrinate immigrants into American society, a nativism movement feared what immigrants brought to this country. People were afraid of communism, socialism, and other radical ideas. Many did not like Germans (because of World War I), Jews, or Catholics. Anti-Semitism was rampant. The Ku Klux Klan grew in power, though the actual number of lynchings declined in 1929. Such pressure led to the National Origins Act in 1924, which placed restrictions on the numbers and kinds of European immigrants. Still, immigrants came, even after the stock market crash signaled the end of an optimistic decade and the beginning of a desperate decade.

Critical Overview

When *Street Scene* was first produced, most critics praised the play for its realism and its characterizations. R. Dana Skinner of *Commonweal* called it "a play of extraordinary sweep, power and intensity, which catches up with amazing simplicity and sincere feeling the ragged, glowing, humor and tragic life that pours in and out of one of those brownstone apartment houses hovering on the upper edge of the slum district of New York." *New York Times* critic J. Brooks Atkinson was also nearly unqualified in his praise. He wrote, "He has transferred intact to the stage a segment of representative New York life, preserving not only its appearance but its character, relating it not only to the city but to humanity."

Atkinson also approved of Rice's characterizations. In another review, he wrote, "Mr. Rice has succeeded in relating it to life and enlisting your sympathies for the tatterdemalions who troop along his average street, hang out of the windows on a hot summer evening, gossip, quarrel, romance, and make the best of their stuffy lot. Mr. Rice does not sentimentalize about them. He does not blame them for their prejudices and blunders and short tempers." Later in the same review, Atkinson argued, "Never did the phantasmagoria of street episodes seem so lacking in sketchy types and so packed with fully delineated character."

Many critics of the original production commented on these ideas, though they were more mixed in their praise. The unnamed critic in *Catholic World* believed that Rice's characters alone redeemed the play. The critic wrote, "[B]ecause all these insignificant bits of characterization are a legitimate and helpful part of the larger design, *Street Scene* is rescued from being merely photographic." Similarly, Joseph Wood Krutch of the *Nation* wrote, "One may distrust the 'slice' or the 'cross-section' of life. One may doubt, as I certainly do, the ultimate importance of this particular kind of naturalism as a dramatic method. But one cannot doubt Mr. Rice's remarkable mastery of it."

Stark Young of the *New Republic* was one of the few critics who had many problems with the play. *Street Scene*, he noted, "on one plane of consideration is pleasantly entertaining. On another plane, where you take the play seriously and where you ask yourself whether for an instant you have believed in any single bit of it, either as art, with its sting of surprise and creation, or as life, with its reality. For me, who was not bored with it as an evening's theater, it is something less than rubbish, theatrical rubbish, in that curious baffling way that the stage provides."

In writing about the original London production in 1930, Charles Morgan of the *New York Times* had some problems with Maurrant's love/ murder plot and how it affected the story but found much to praise structurally. He wrote, "Mr. Rice's method is an extremely interesting one which has its symbol in the fact that we see the apartment house always from the outside, never entering into it and being permitted only now and then to glance through its windows. The truth of its inhabitants must appear, Mr. Rice would seem to say, without admission of the audience into the position of all-seeing God with keys to individual hearts."

Street Scene's power remained intact for at least one critic through the 1940s. Though writing about the musical version of the play written by Rice with a score by Kurt Weill in 1947, Atkinson of the *New York Times* commented on the stage play. He believed its power as a drama made it a good choice for musical adaptation. Atkinson wrote, "To him the characters are not specimens but human beings, grinding out what pleasure they can from the squalor, heat and grime of an ugly neighborhood. . . . Toward the characters his attitude is kindly without sentimentality, amused without condescension; it is realistic without bitterness or judgment. In the midst of a swirling and raucous city, he is observing life in tranquility."

By 1996, when the play was revived by the Willow Cabin Theater Company at the Theater Row Theater in New York City, what had been seen as innovative and rich in 1929 was regarded as outdated. Calling the play "a sprawling mess," D. J. R. Bruckner of the *New York Times* wrote, "Its stock characters are poor immigrants from everywhere; its dialogue and ideas are clichéd, and its climax is a murder that seems pure camp by now." Donald Lyons of the *Wall Street Journal* thought better of the play, though he had similar problems. He argued that "There is on parade a batter of workingclass ethnic types . . . fresh maybe in 1929, but now merely stale. But Rice's focal stories still have power."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

In this essay, Petrusso shows how much Rice's play has in common with today's daytime television soap operas.

When Elmer Rice's *Street Scene* was first produced in 1929, it was unlike most other plays of the day. The play featured numerous, realistic characters, and many, sometimes intersecting, story lines, and neither of these aspects was developed in depth. Rice was discouraged from even producing *Street Scene* at all by his colleagues. Yet the drama was produced and was somewhat successful. To emphasize its realism, Rice insisted that the original production feature prerecorded street noise and other natural sounds to underscore that this tenement was really in the heart of New York City. Furthermore, Rice also added an element of contemporary social criticism to *Street Scene*. In one subplot, Mrs. Hildebrand and her two children are about to be removed from their home because they are without funds after Mr. Hildebrand abandoned them. They are "aided" by a social worker, Miss Alice Simpson, who seems only interested in controlling the poor family.

This kind of realism and social criticism is no longer so unusual in mainstream theater. *Street Scene* uses other techniques that are also common, not with socially oriented drama but with the daytime soap operas that have been found on television since the 1950s. The kind of events that occur in *Street Scene* are stock-in-trade of this kind of episodic television. More importantly, Rice's way of writing the play makes it seem like an episode in a longer drama. None of the stories in the tenement has a beginning that starts only after the curtain rises, and only a few story lines have a clear ending, though there is more to explore in these subplots. In other words, the interrelated stories of *Street Scene* could have had plays/episodes before them and continue after this point, not unlike a soap opera. This essay looks at two primary elements of *Street Scene*—themes and structure—and how they resemble a modern day soap opera.

In his essay "A Social Scientist's View of Daytime Serial Drama," George Comstock defines a soap opera as "the continuing saga of a group of people involved with each other through lineage, passion, ambition, hostility, and chance." This definition could well be applied to *Street Scene*. The characters in the play are grouped into small families who live in different apartments in the tenement. Their decision to live in this building is, at least in part, by chance. They may not have much money, but there are many other tenements in the city of New York. There is also hostility among them. Abraham Kaplan's constant stream of Marxist rhetoric, for example, is not appreciated by most of his neighbors. The Joneses are depicted as vicious bullies. The son, Vincent Jones, takes pleasure in harassing Sam Kaplan, who in turn is in love with Rose Maurrant. Sam is willing to give up his future to be with Rose, though his sister, Shirley, does everything in her power to discourage the romance. Ambition is hard to come by in the tenement: mostly characters hope to survive. Only the Kaplans seem to have much of a chance to escape, through education.

Admittedly, most modern day soaps do not focus on lower-middle to lower-class characters living in one tenement house. A majority of characters in soap operas are middle-to upper-class, with many professionals, both men and women. But almost every soap focuses on one community, and a number of families that live in it. James Thurber, in his essay "Ivorytown, Rinsoville, Anacinburg and Crisco Corners," provides another definition. He writes, "A soap opera deals with the plights and problems brought about in the lives of its permanent principal characters by the advent and interference of one group of individuals after another." This statement can be applied to *Street Scene*. If the families who live in the tenement are taken as the principal characters, then people like Miss Simpson, Steve Sankey (the milk company collector who has the affair with Mrs. Maurrant), or Happy Easter (Rose Maurrant's married boss, whose desire to have an affair with Rose and complicates Rose's life) can be seen as those who interfere.

No matter what class the principal characters are in, however, both soaps and *Street Scene* share thematic concerns. Mary Cassata and Thomas Skill in their essay "Television Soap Operas: What's Been Going on Anyway?—Revisited" define four kinds of stories in soap operas. They are "(1) Criminal and Undesirable Activity; (2) Social Problems; (3) Medical Developments; and (4) Romantic and Marital Affairs." All four of these elements can be found in *Street Scene*. The murder of Mrs. Maurrant and her lover falls under the category of criminal and undesirable activity. One medical development is the birth of Mrs. Buchanan's baby. There are at least two affairs in *Street Scene*: the illicit one between Mrs. Maurrant and Steve Sankey, and the more innocent, if one-sided, one between Sam Kaplan and Rose Maurrant. (Social problems are discussed below.)

Other scholars add more specific situations to the list of soap opera themes. In the Comstock essay quoted earlier, the author argues that in soaps, "the kinds of tribulations are real enough for everyone— money, sex, health, mates, social competition, mental disorder, drugs, alcohol." Nearly all characteristics are also found in *Street Scene*, some of which already have been discussed. Money problems force the Hildebrands out of the tenement. Characters like Lippo try to be generous despite the general lack of funds, as when he buys a number of ice cream cones for his neighbor or when he gives the Hildebrand children a nickel each. His wife notes that this kind of behavior accounts for their economic problems. Marital problems have driven Mrs. Maurrant to have an affair. Indeed, many couples argue in *Street Scene*. There is much social competition, especially between the Jones and others. Alcohol plays a role in the murder of Mrs. Maurrant by her husband. These are but a few of the relevant situations in *Street Scene*.

Critical social elements are one of the most important themes of *Street Scene*. In the essay "The More Things Change, The More They Are the Same: An Analysis of Soap Operas from Radio to Television," Mary Cassata argues that "soap operas have dealt with issues and themes that have constituted the social concerns of their times." Among other things, *Street Scene* shows the diversity of people in New York City and how that creates some social squabbling. The different ethnicities get along but do not always live in harmony. Rice also touches on the problems of the working woman, as Rose tries to fend off Happy Easter.

The best example of a social theme, one that was extremely controversial in Rice's time, is the charity subplot involving the Hildebrands. In the way the story is depicted, Rice seems to question how helpful such charities really are. Miss Alice Simpson fails the Hildebrands in some ways because she tries to control them. She berates Mrs. Hildebrand for taking her children to the movies when they are about to lose their apartment. Simpson also becomes disgusted when Lippo gives the children money. While there may not be an outspoken Marxist like Abraham Kaplan on most soap operas, such shows, like this play, use the audience's sympathies, guiding them towards an emotional connection with what the creator considers wrong and right about societal attitudes.

Structural qualities are also common to both soap operas and *Street Scene*. In the play, the plot jumps between stories rather quickly and in short spurts. Though there is an overall flow, Rice weaves in bits about different story lines constantly. The plot is not linear but pieces of stories that develop over time. Soap operas use a similar technique in their use of multiple story lines. And as Laura Arliss, Mary Cassata, and Thomas Skill argue in their essay "Dyadic Interaction on the Daytime Serials: How Men and Women Vie for Power," "the action on daytime serial drama consists, for the most part, of talk." The same is basically true of *Street Scene*: a lot of talk and little actual action.

Though *Street Scene* has an ending, only a few of the stories are resolved with any finality: Mrs. Maurrant and her lover are murdered, Mrs. Buchanan has her baby, and the Hildebrands are removed. The rest of the story lines are left open-ended. Even those with endings are not particularly final. There is a baby to raise and different homes for both the Hildebrands and the Maurrant children. New families will be moving into the tenement, living different lives. As Horace Newcomb says in his essay "A Humanist's View of Serial Drama," "the triumph of the soap opera form is that it engages us in the sense of progressive unfolding, emergence, growth and change." None of the characters are static at the end of *Street Scene*. There is potential for yet more plays and episodes and more multiple crossing story lines. Rice was ahead of his time when he wrote *Street Scene*, anticipating the power of these innovations.

Source: Annette Petrusso, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Mantel is a freelance writer and editor based near Boston. In the following essay, Mantel contends that Rice's realistic play contains not-soobvious expressionistic elements.

Elmer Rice's success and most-remembered works peaked during the second decade of the twentieth century. John Gassner claims in *Twenty-Five Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre*, "So far as the theatre is concerned, the American century was born in 1919." American theater addressed the social conditions of the times via two main influences in dramatic style.

One influence arose out of the break from the idyllic and romantic plays of the late nineteenth century, with their moralizing and their admonitions of the less than morally pure audiences, to the desire to present the world in an authentic way. This style was known as realism. The second influence was the introduction, primarily through German plays, of the then-European technique called expressionism. Expressionism went beyond mere representation to exploring symbolically the inner life— the psyche—of characters. It was a technique that, as Louis Broussard says in *American Drama: Contemporary Allegory from Eugene O'Neill to Tennessee Williams*, "abandoned the photography of realism, the dramatic sequence of events, for a stream of consciousness in terms of stage symbols whereby the surface of life becomes disjointed, scattered, as in a dream . . ."

On the surface, Rice's *Street Scene* (1929) seems like a play straight in the realism mode, but on further examination, it is filled with expressionistic elements. "It was not to be simply a realistic play," states C. W. E. Bigsby in *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*. It would be a stretch to say that the play is a type of expressionist realism, but one can still discern the experimental feel of the play and the themes that echo those found in expressionistic plays of the time.

The expressionistic play uses short disconnected scenes, sometimes out of sequence, to reflect the disorder of the human mind that it seeks to expose. It focuses on internal action. Because one cannot replicate these internal workings on the stage, symbols are used to represent emotional struggles and conflicts. Often characters exist as both individuals and types, which allows the playwright to tell a story involving individuals but also to allude to social or political trends via a type of dramatic shorthand. Expressionistic plays tend to address the theme of alienation. In stark contrast to the turn-of-the-century plays, which incorporated ills that fate or God willed on mankind, the experimental plays, as Jordan Miller and Winifred Frazer indicate in *American Drama Between the Wars: A Critical History*, addressed instead "what man has done to himself." The outsiders of the 1920s experienced rampant discrimination, and they as well as natives toiled away at repetitive, strenuous, and low-paying factory jobs—conditions that could be considered man-made. As a result, they began to experience a profound disconnection from each other.

In *Street Scene*, as in an expressionistic play, the characters are both individuals and types. Rice throws together a host of ethnic groups. These groups certainly represent the probable mix of a 1920s New York tenement building, but the divisions —an Italian man, a Russian-Jewish family, a Swedish couple, a German woman, and an Irish-American stagehand, among others—are almost forced. The mix is *too* accurate. The dialects and accents are so precisely reproduced that the individuals are types that border on being caricatures. Each character in *Street Scene* must embody the voice, culture, value systems, and expectations of his or her respective ethnic group, country, and religion. Of course, America, as a social experiment, is the great homogenizer, and being American is the common denominator of all these early twentieth-century ethnic groups. So we have a boisterous, happy-go-lucky Italian music instructor; a pondering Jewish student; and native New Yorkers who resent outsiders taking what rightly belongs to them and who believe that instilling "the fear of God" will somehow make the world and their lives better. Although each character is unique because of his or her ethnicity, this uniqueness ironically becomes the element that makes each character a representative type.

If being American is the common denominator of New York's inhabitants, then the tenement building is the common denominator of Rice's characters. *Street Scene*, like an expressionistic play, uses the gloomy brownstone as a symbol. The tenement building, the play's only backdrop, is an expressionistic symbol of urban life as a prison from which to escape. The oppressive heat, the characters lingering on the front steps, the cramped quarters—all reek of immobility and inertia. "Rice resisted the idea of simply copying an existing tenement building in order to create the set. It was a conscious effort to raise that setting to the level of symbol," Bigsby says. The characters' incessant climbing of the stairs can be viewed as another symbol—this time as the long economic climb of the middle class and its desire for material goods and a way of life that most of them agree is better.

Brief scenes and fragmented storylines characterize expressionism. Despite having a couple of traceable story lines, *Street Scene* mostly uses fragments and snippets of people's lives; these snippets, which all exist in real time rather than in an expressionistic heaven or hell or individual mind, are cleverly spliced together to form a cohesive whole. As Rice explains in *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, "instead of unity of action, there was a multitude of varied and seemingly irrelevant incidents."

There are only two main storylines in *Street Scene:* the story of a woman and her jealous husband who shoots her and her lover in a jealous drunken rage; and the story of that woman's daughter, who now is the primary caretaker of the young son and who itches to escape the tenement and live on her own terms—even if that means rejecting several men. These storylines are not overly detailed or complicated but provide a hook on which to hang the rest if the action. For example, Mrs. Buchanan, whom we never see, endures a painful and complicated birth while Rose and Sam discuss their futures; Sam and Vincent Jones get into a couple of scuffles; and the Hildebrands get evicted. Bums shuffle by. Two schoolgirls discuss concavity. The Old-Clothes Man appears and

disappears. Vendors hawk their wares. Crippled people hobble past. The central characters spend a good portion of stage time talking about the heat and gossiping.

But gossip is local color, and what Rice succeeds in doing is using expressionistic fragmentation as a tool for revelation. The seemingly insignificant drunken encounter between Mrs. Jones' daughter and her boyfriend reveal further the nature of Mrs. Jones' hypocrisy: her children's behavior is nowhere near the level she would have us believe. Her daughter is sexually easy, and her son is an obnoxious brute. Kaplan's rantings, particularly his hostility for Alice Simpson, reveals the contemporary collective fear of Socialism. Shirley's "Everybody has a right to his own opinion," spoken softly reveals the fragile democracy America espouses. How the characters react to seemingly unrelated and random occurrences—Mrs. Buchanan's labor cries, the Hildebrand eviction, and the affair everyone knows is going on between Mrs. Maurraut and Sankey, for example—allows Rice to address, through the expressionistic technique of story line fragmentation, the social mores of the times.

In addition, *Street Scene*'s themes are similar to those found in a typical expressionistic play. Mardi Valgemae, in *Accelerated Grimace*, writes that August Strindberg, the "father of German expressionism," addressed the "stifling effect of social conformity on personal happiness" in *Ghost Sonata*. In that play, Strindberg's student asks, "What do we find that truly lives up to what it promises?" In *Street Scene*, Mrs. Maurraut, Rose, and Sam invoke similar questions. Sam says, "Everywhere you look, oppression and cruelty! . . . It's too high a price to pay for life—life isn't worth it!"

These seemingly innocuous complaints in *Street Scene* actually belie a Strindbergian/expressionistic concern with alienation. Bigsby discusses the importance of experimental theater in America, claiming that "it [took] as its primary subject the loss of an organic relationship with the natural world, with one's fellow man, and with oneself." In *Street Scene* the two most prominent forms of alienation are alienation from one's fellow man and alienation from oneself.

Mrs. Maurrant, always wondering why people can't be nicer to each other, is the spokeswoman for how people have lost touch with their fellow man. None of the characters in *Street Scene* really communicate with each other. It seems that they are either gossiping amongst themselves or arguing with each other. What passes for neighborly relations continues, but everyone seems to be watching and waiting, poised to criticize and pass judgement. Even an innocent round of ice cream leads to an argument about who discovered America—an argument that arouses nothing less than nationalist sentiments and quickly brings out the worst in everyone. Some of the characters lament the Hildebrands eviction, for example, but no one does anything about it. No one lends a hand or gives a kind word. The last few moments at the end of act 2 are telling: the shooting has just occurred, and a man, who is removing the personal items of the Hildebrands, pauses on the steps to look. How can the Hildebrands sympathize with the Maurrants and vice-versa? How can any of the characters, living in fear and distrust of each other, depending as they do on gossipy second-hand information and rumors, even begin to understand the real circumstances surrounding an event? Mrs. Maurrant is arguably the hero of this play: she is the only

one who cares enough to actually lift a finger for another character —in this case making soup for a very ill Mrs. Buchanan—only to find herself bitterly rejected and criticized by her neighbors and severely wounded by a shot fired from her own husband's gun.

If Mrs. Maurrant embodies alienation with one's fellow man, then her daughter, Rose, is the voice for how people have lost touch with themselves. Rose says, "I don't think people ought to belong to anybody but themselves," and rightly supposes that the terrible shooting that serves as the dramatic underpinning of the play would never have happened if, say, her parents had been truer to themselves. The moment she learns this lesson she applies it to her own life: at the end of act 3 she shuns Sam's offer to take her away from the tenement, wisely doubting that his optimism and hope, his promise of living happily ever after, and his insistence that love can conquer all can be their salvation.

In *Street Scene*, we don't really enter the minds of the characters in a true expressionistic way, nor are the characters totally reduced to mechanical automatons as they typically are in a true expressionistic play. Nevertheless, the use of caricature and symbolism, as well as the theme of alienation due to social conformity, give this realistic play a distinct expressionistic feel.

Source: Tara L. Mantel, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Wendy Perkins

Perkins, an Associate Professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland, has published several articles on several twentieth-century authors. In this essay, she explores how the structure of Rice's play emphasizes its focus on survival.

The positive public response to Rice's play was due to its authentic depiction of lower-class men and women struggling to survive the crushing reality of urban life. As Fred Behringer notes in his article on Rice for *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*, "the power of the play lies not in the surface reality, but rather in the intense struggles beneath." Rice illuminates these struggles through the play's creative structure. As he juxtaposes brief glimpses of his characters, he explores the various ways human beings find to cope with the harsh reality of everyday life.

In his stage directions, Rice sets the tone and establishes the fragmented structure characteristic of the entire play. He writes, "Throughout the act and, indeed, throughout the play, there is constant noise. . . . The noises are subdued and in the background, but they never wholly cease."

These noises represent a myriad of separate personal stories being played out simultaneously, creating a mosaic of lower middle class urban life. Behringer explains that in an interview, Rice claimed, "the intended total effect [of the play] was a panoramic impression of New York," one that included "shopkeepers, clerks, artisans, students, a schoolteacher, a taxi driver, a musician, janitors, policemen."

What all these characters have in common is their desire to overcome the hardships of their daily life. Rice's fragmented structure illustrates the various mechanisms humans employ during this difficult process.

In the first act, Rice introduces all the major characters and suggests some of the frustrations they face. As several of them sit on the front stoop of their "walk-up" apartment house "in a mean quarter of New York," their immediate concern is the oppressive and inescapable heat, which results in sweat-soaked clothes and crying babies. The audience soon discovers other problems caused by the urban environment. The play's cacophony of voices illustrates how life on these "mean" streets exacerbates family relationships. Parents fret about the negative influences on their children who stay out too late. Glimpses into their lives reveal how their marriages strain under the pressure of economic hardships coupled with concerns for the children. Some suffer as a result of prejudice while others must face the biological realities of childbirth and death.

Mrs. Jones never specifically identifies the problems her family experiences, but Rice suggests their source when he presents vignettes that focus on her daughter's and husband's alcoholism. Mrs. Jones illustrates the consequences of the tense relationship she has with her family when she insists, "Men are all alike. They're all easy to get along with so long as everythin's goin' the way they want it to. But once it don't—good night!" Mrs. Maurrant's more egalitarian response nevertheless confirms Mrs. Jones' point of view: "I guess it's just the same with the women. . . . People ought to be able to live together in peace and quiet, without making each other miserable."

Most of the characters cope with the stresses in their lives through affiliation. Sharing their problems helps alleviate them to a degree, especially when others offer sympathy. As each neighbor laments the consequences of the overwhelming heat and delineates their family problems, the others respond with understanding nods and their own similar stories.

This camaraderie inevitably leads to another form of release for the characters—gossip, and in the opening scene, they feel that they have much to gossip about. As soon as Mrs. Maurrant comes into view, those on the stoop begin to chatter about her affair with Steve Sankey as they try to forget the heat and their own personal problems. All condemn the two for their actions, but some are more sympathetic than others to what they see as the couple's inevitable fate when Mr. Maurrant finds out.

Mrs. Jones shifts the focus of the conversation to the affair after Mrs. Fiorentino sympathizes with Willie Maurrant's treatment of his mother. Mrs. Jones notes, "I guess it don't bother her much. She's got her mind on other things." Her critical tone reveals another coping mechanism she employs —devaluation. Throughout the play, Mrs. Jones deals with stress by attributing exaggerated negative qualities to others. This becomes most evident in her racist remarks about her neighbors. For example, when Mrs. Olsen fails to comfort her baby, Mrs. Jones insists, "What them foreigners don't know about bringin' up babies would fill a book." After Mrs. Fiorentino takes offense at her words, Mrs. Jones makes a feeble attempt at tact: "Well, I'm not sayin' anythin'

about the Joimans. The Joimans is different—more like the Irish. What I'm talkin' about is all them squareheads an' Polacks—an' Jews."

Others take their minds off of their problems through altruism. As the neighbors gossip about the Maurrants, Filippo Fiorentino buys them ice cream cones to help ease the heat. He also shows his generosity when he gives money to a woman about to be dispossessed. When the worker from the charity office chastises him, insisting, "you'd be doing her a much more neighborly act, if you helped her to realize the value of money instead of encouraging her to throw it away, Filippo replies, "Ah, lady, no! I give 'er coupla dollar, make 'er feel good, maka me feel good—dat don' 'urt nobody."

Some of the other neighbors also reveal generous spirits. Filippo's wife Greta offers soup for Mrs. Buchanan who will soon deliver her baby. Mrs. Maurrant prepares food for Mrs. Buchanan and stays with her throughout her difficult labor. Mr. Buchanan tells the others that Mrs. Maurrant was up with his wife nearly all night and admits, "I don't know what we'd have done without her." Mrs. Maurrant, though, has found an additional way to ease her troubles, but this coping mechanism will result in her murder.

Pieces of dialogue from several of the characters reveal that Mr. Maurrant treats his wife harshly and continually complains about their children. Mrs. Maurrant expresses her need for comfort and suggests the reason why she enters into an affair with another man when she explains, "I think the trouble is people don't make allowances. They don't realize that everybody wants a kind word, now and then." In a moment of desperation, she tries to justify her actions when she insists to Rose, "What's the good of being alive, if you can't get a little something out of life? You might just as well be dead."

Kaplan deals with the stresses of his environment through intellectualization, the excessive use of generalizations to complain about a situation. He blames all the neighbors' problems on the country's economic system, insisting, "As long as de institution of private property exeests, de verkers will be at de moicy of de property owning klesses. . . ." Kaplan believes that if the country adopts a socialist system, poverty, along with their troubles, will be eliminated.

Mr. Maurrant also employs this tactic, which allows him to vent his frustrations over his suspicions about his wife. He decides, "what we need in this country is a little more respect for law an' order" and cites examples of what he sees to be the decline of the American family. Homes, he claims are being broken up by divorce and the relaxation of sexual taboos. As a result, he determines, "it's time somethin' was done to put the fear o' God into people!"

His intellectualism quickly turns threatening, however, as his humiliation over his wife's affair surfaces. When Kaplan suggests that if private property is abolished, "the femily will no longer hev eny reason to excest," Maurrant explodes. He insists the family will survive, with "children respectin' their parents an' doin' what they're told . . . An' husbands an' wives, lovin' and' honorin' each other, like they said they would, when they was spliced." He ends his tirade with a devaluation of Kaplan, warning him, "any dirty sheeny that says different is li'able to get his head busted open." Soon, his inability to

cope with his wife's infidelity will push him over the edge, causing him to take her life and that of her lover when he finds them together.

Sam, Kaplan's extremely sensitive son, is another character who has not developed effective ways to cope with the reality of his life. He tries to escape into books, but they do not help him block out the cruelty and despair he finds everywhere. When he comes across the neighbors gossiping about Mrs. Maurrant, he tries to defend her, yelling "stop it! Stop it! Can't you let her alone? Have you no hearts? Why do you tear her to pieces, like a pack of wolves?" But he cannot face them and so escapes, dashing abruptly into the house, choking back a sob.

When he tries to defend Rose against Vincent Jones' advances, Vincent knocks him to the ground, where he remains, cowering in fear. After Vincent leaves, Sam crumbles. Rice notes, "he throws himself on the stoop and, burying his head in his arms, sobs hysterically." Rose tries to comfort him, but he resists, exclaiming

That's all there is in life—nothing but pain. From before we're born, until we die! . . . The whole world is nothing but a blood stained arena, filled with misery and suffering. It's too high a price to pay for life. . . . life isn't worth it!

Rice's focus on short exchanges between Sam and Rose highlights diametrically opposed responses to the harsh reality of life. Sam suggests that he and Rose kill themselves and so end their suffering. Rose refuses, exclaiming that there is a lot to appreciate in life, "just being alive—breathing and walking around. Just looking at the faces of people you like and hearing them laugh. And . . . listening to a good band, and dancing." Out of all the characters in the play, Rose finds the most effective ways of coping with her life.

She refuses to adopt Sam's pessimistic attitude. While he sees nothing but cruelty and misery, she suppresses her problems during a walk through the park. There, she admits, "everything looked so green and fresh, that I got a kind of feeling of, well, maybe it's not so bad, after all." Her optimism later emerges in a discussion of religion with Sam. She asks him, "don't you think it's better to believe in something that makes you a little happy, than not to believe in anything and be miserable all the time?

At a moment of weakness, she accepts the attentions of Harry Easter, her married supervisor. Influenced by his offer to help her launch a career on the stage, she considers becoming his mistress. Eventually, though, after coming to terms with her family's tragedy, she finds the strength to survive through her determination to move out of the city and to live an independent life. Admitting that she does not love either Harry or Sam, and refusing to become dependent on either of them, she tells Sam, "I don't think people ought to belong to anybody but themselves."

Behringer concludes, "In spite of the violence, oppressiveness, and loss in the play, the central idea is one of affirmation. . . . Rice emphasizes the notion that not only is happiness possible, but that it is, in large part, a matter of personal choice." R. Dana Skinner, writing in *Commonweal*, suggests, "it is perhaps hard to believe that from

incidents as varied and scattered as these, Mr. Rice could create an enthrallingly vivid sense of reality, poignancy, cowardice, despair and courage. But he has succeeded in an overflowing measure." He succeeds in large part because his arrangement of the short glimpses into the lives of his characters underscores the play's theme. As *Street Scene* catalogues the various ways we cope with the often harsh reality of existence, it ultimately affirms the resilience of the human spirit.

Source: Wendy Perkins, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Hogan examines the themes present in Street Scene *through the series of events that happen to the characters.*

Street Scene was produced in 1929, ran for 602 performances, won the Pulitzer Prize, and is one of the great plays of the American theatre. It had the longest Broadway run of any of Rice's plays, and, with the exception of the London production of *Judgment Day*, it gave him probably the greatest satisfaction. The tragicomic history of the play is fascinatingly told in Chapter XIX of *The Living Theatre* and Chapter XIII of *Minority Report*. Of special interest is the difficulty that Rice had in marketing the script.

The responses of the producers were emphatically and unanimously negative. I remember some of them. The Theatre Guild, which had produced my play *The Adding Machine*, said that *Street Scene* had "no content." Winthrop Ames, a man for whose judgment I had great respect, said that it was not a play. Arthur Hopkins, who had scored a great success with my first play, *On Trial*, told me that he found *Street Scene* unreadable. Others found it dull, depressing, sordid, confusing, undramatic. One producer opened the script, looked at the list of characters and read no further.

It seems astonishing that so many astute authorities could have been so wrong; still, a book could be filled with similar cases. If any generalization is to be drawn from such facts, it might be that the commercial theatre imposes its own standards upon those who work in it. When money is the first consideration, safety is the second and quality is the last. Of the play itself, Rice once wrote:

The background and subject matter had been in my mind for many years: a multiple dwelling, housing numerous families of varying origins; and a melodramatic story arising partly from the interrelationships of the characters and partly from their environmental conditioning. The setting was the façade of a "brownstone front"—a type of dwelling of which there are still thousands of examples in New York—and the sidewalk before it. . . . The house was conceived as the central fact of the play: a dominant structural element that unified the sprawling and diversified lives of the inhabitants. This concept was derived partly from the Greek drama, which is almost always set against the face of a palace or a temple. But mainly I was influenced, I think, by the paintings of Claude Lorrain, a French artist of the seventeenth century. In his landscapes, which I had gazed at admiringly in the Louvre and other galleries, there is nearly always a group of figures in the foreground, which is composed and made significant by an impressive architectural pile of some sort in the background. In fact, the original title of my play was *Landscape with Figures*; but I felt that this was a little too special, so I borrowed again from the terminology of painting and called the play *Street Scene* . . .

There is a central love story: a sort of Romeo and Juliet romance between the stagehand's daughter and the radical's son; and a main dramatic thread of murder, committed by the girl's father when he comes home unexpectedly and finds his wife with her lover. But there are numerous subplots and an intricate pattern of crisscrossing and

interweaving relationships. The house is ever present and ever dominant, and the entire action of the play takes place on the sidewalk, on the stoop or in the windows. I give these details in order to make it clear that, whatever the play's merits or defects, it is an unconventional drama, in setting, in technique and in size of cast.

The problem of discussing this large and unconventional play is that, in one sense, it is too large to discuss. So much happens and there are so many characters, that one scarcely knows where or how to begin. On the other hand, if one stands further back for a broader view, there seems curiously little to discuss. From the welter of incidents, ultimately emerges one simple story, and the rest is scene painting. So viewed, the whole conception seems simplicity itself.

Although the play is realistic, its realism has seldom been seen on the stage since the days of such sprawling Elizabethan plays as *Bartholomew Fair*. It is a realism that suddenly makes one understand with a sort of shock that experiments in realism are still possible. The realism bequeathed by Ibsen was the portrayal of a middle-class drawing room, a front parlor inhabited by half a dozen people. A play like Rice's takes the theatre out of that parlor and sets it down in the middle of a busy metropolitan street. The effect is as if a slab of reality had been hurled at the audience, as if realism itself were abruptly revitalized and its true possibilities beginning at last to be explored.

Compared with *Street Scene*, the front parlor drama seems unreal, contrived, and artificial. It is as if the front parlor dramatists had been using the delicately honed scalpel of realism to extract the meat from nuts rather than the pith from life. Perhaps it is wrong to forget a lesson from Ibsen's own front parlor drama, *A Doll's House*. At the end of that play, its heroine stormed from the house and into the street. And, indeed, most of Ibsen's later plays—*Rosmersholm, John Gabriel Borkman, The Master Builder, The Lady From the Sea* and *When We Dead Awaken*—all finally escape from the parlor, into the sea, the mountains, and the air. The man who wrote *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* did not regard realism as a confinement, but as the quickest way to freedom. The free realism of *Street Scene* seems to prove the vitality of that realistic form from which so many lesser playwrights have found "No Exit."

I am not suggesting a return to the mere spectacle for spectacle's sake so dear to the heart of Boucicault, but merely suggesting that the modern stage rarely uses its full resources, and that the large cast and the small spectacle performed by real people may be one realization of the theatre at its most vital. *Street Scene* is as pertinent a reminder as *Endgame* or *The Chairs* of what the theatre can do if it will but extend itself. Really, *Street Scene*, with its cast of eighty, may even beat the movies at their own game of spectacle. The eighty-odd characters of *Street Scene* are there, immediate, palpable, tangible; and the elect of real people over colored shadows (no matter how clearly one can see the cleavages in their Brobdingnagian bosoms) is so much more vivid, that eighty real people may dwarf thousands of celluloid shadows.

In the nineteenth-century theatre, actors were accustomed to play types, character types and national types. In our post-Stanislavskian stress upon individual characterization, we may have forgotten a value of the older practice which was, after

all, effective, economical, and based upon legitimate observation. *Street Scene* has many national types in its cast—Jews, Italians, Scandinavians, Irish, and so on, and much of the play's effect comes from the delineation and juxtaposition of these types. The jangling cacophony of their dialects, fusing with the diverse street noises, creates a convincing harmony of reality. Such roles not only provide valuable exercises for actors caught in a morass of subtlety, but also allow individual characters to be built up with an economy of effort. Consider, for instance, the effect that Rice gets from a mere stage movement in this exchange between the extroverted Italian Lippo and his German wife.

MRS. FIORENTINO: Lippo, what do you think? Mr. Buchanan has a little girl.

LIPPO: Ah, dotsa fine! Margherita, why you don' have da baby, ha?

MRS. FIORENTINO: [*abruptly*] I must go and make the coffee.

With similar economy, Rice builds up the characterizations of his large cast, so that his play requires both considerable excellence from each actor and an ensemble playing difficult to achieve. One character who benefits greatly from this economy and rings particularly true is the Irish father, Maurrant. His black savagery is clearly caught by the simple repetitions which Rice allows him.

Who's been sayin' things to you?

Shut up your swearin', do you hear?—or I'll give you somethin' to bawl for. What did he say to you, huh?

What did he say to you?

Nobody's askin' you? . . . What did he say? . . .

G'wan up to bed now, an' don't let me hear no more out o' you. [Raising his hand] G'wan now. Beat it.

The theme is expressed with similar economy in several dialogues between Rose Maurrant and Sam Kaplan, the young Jewish student. It is probably, however, the part of the play that suffers most by blunt and economical statement. Most bluntly, it is stated in this interchange from Act I.

SAM: That's all there is in life—nothing but pain. From before we're born, until we die! Everywhere you look, oppression and cruelty! If it doesn't come from Nature, it comes from humanity—humanity trampling on itself and tearing at its own throat. The whole world is nothing but a blood-stained arena, filled with misery and suffering. It's too high a price to pay for life—life isn't worth it!

ROSE: Oh, I don't know, Sam. I feel blue and discouraged sometimes, too. And I get a sort of feeling of, oh, what's the use. Like last night. I hardly slept all night, on account of the heat and on account of thinking about—well, all sorts of things. And this morning, when I got up, I felt so miserable. Well, all of a sudden, I decided I'd walk to the office.

And when I got to the Park, everything looked so green and fresh, that I got a feeling of, well, maybe it's not so bad, after all.

The events of the whole play can be seen in these terms, as examples of unfeeling brutality or of sympathy and compassion. Or, to put it another way, as examples of worthlessness and worth, or even of comedy and tragedy. The inhabitants of the tenement help each other, but they also tear at each other. For example, here are the last two speeches of the play, the first compassionate and the second callous.

MISS CUSHING: The poor little thing!

MRS. JONES: Well, you never can tell with them quiet ones. It wouldn't surprise me a bit if she turned out the same way as her mother. She's got a gentleman friend that I guess ain't hangin' around for nothin'. I seen him, late last night, and this afternoon, when I come home from the police.

This dramatization of compassion and brutality is more effective than the overt statement in the interchange between Sam and Rose. Further, just as Mrs. Jones's speech is much longer than Miss Cushing's, so do the brutal events come to outweigh the compassionate ones. There is more of geniality and humor in the first act than in the second, and the last act is relieved only sporadically from grimness. In this increasing darkness of tone, the play resembles the tragicomedies of Gorky and O'Casey and perhaps of Chekhov.

The compassion in the play establishes the worth and humanity of the characters. The brutality does not erase that worth, but makes the plight of these people even more poignant. Rice is not laying the blame on a narrow social basis. He is not condemning a particular society or a certain system of economics for the lives of his people. One of his characters, Abraham Kaplan, does make such a condemnation, but Rice makes it clear that Kaplan is not his *raisonneur*. Rice is not expounding socialism, but human nature; and his play seems to prove that people inevitably destroy themselves, that they carry in themselves the seeds of their own brutality. Without wishing to, they cannot avoid hurting each other. Even Maurrant, who is driven to kill his wife, cries out in agony that he had not meant to. There is no character, except perhaps one outsider, the social worker, who is basically unsympathetic—not even the bullying Irishman Vincent Jones, not even Rose's boss Harry Easter, who is trying to seduce her. Even the savage Maurrant is a basically sympathetic man driven by his own human nature. He is a mixture of brutality and compassion, and the brutality overwhelms the good. This triumph of brutality over compassion is probably the basic theme of the play—a generalization about the human condition, about the nature of man.

Many critics called the play, or at least the story of Maurrant, a melodrama. In the usual sense of the term, melodrama seems inappropriate. One way in which tragedy is usually distinguished from melodrama is by the thickness of characterization. While Maurrant is not a memorable character, as are Hamlet and Othello, he is certainly more valid than the Scarlet Pimpernel or even Sydney Carton. Further, one may plausibly argue that the thinness of his character is filled out by the other characterizations in the

play. None is fully drawn, but none is false, and the group to which Maurrant belongs is memorable in the same way that the hero of a tragedy is memorable. Also, the theme of Maurrant's story is acted out in other forms by most of the other characters. Ultimately we get a group as hero, rather as we do in Hauptmann's *The Weavers* or Toller's *Man and the Masses*. The greatest difference is that Rice's group hero is considerably more individualized than Toller's and even more than Hauptmann's.

The importance of the theme, however, is the strongest reason why one may not dismiss *Street Scene* as melodrama. The essence of melodrama is that the theme be unimportant, or at least stated in such heroic or sentimental or platitudinous terms that we do not have to take it seriously, and may therefore concentrate upon an exciting series of events. The theme of *Street Scene* is emphasized by its plot, and is in itself valid and moving. Really, the theme is the same as that of great tragedy and tragicomedy, and this fact seems established by the extent to which the play deeply moved its audiences.

If this notion is true, then the play is one further refutation of Krutch's theory that tragedy is impossible in the modern world. All that is necessary for tragedy is the affirmation of human value. By the compassion of its statement, *Street Scene* establishes that value. Actually, one might take this argument further without unduly stretching it: if one were to judge the play by the classic values of tragedy, it would stand up well. If we take the story of the Maurrant family to be the main story of the play, then the other characters provide an enormous chorus. If we apply the scale of beauty of language, we could even make a case, although some of the dialogue may at first seem flat and bald. The quotations above from Sam and Rose seem naïve and awkward, if compared to any purple passage from Sophocles or Shakespeare. Rice is admittedly not a poet, but the flatness of the Sam-Rose dialogue arises not so much from a limitation of Rice's talent, as from a limitation of realistic dialogue. Of this fact, he himself is quite conscious, as we shall see in *Not for Children*, where he satirizes the attempt of the realistic writer to rise above flat statement to beauty or poetry.

We must consider also that speech in a play is more than words and their meanings and overtones; it is also the sound of words. One of Shaw's most valid criticisms of the Shakespearean productions of the 1890's was that they extracted the meaning from Shakespeare while butchering the "word music." Even the Sam-Rose dialogue, when spoken with the right tone, expression, and dialects, provides beauty as well as realism. There is no way to prove this on paper. It can only be proved by speech, by actual production, but that fact is no reason for the assertion not to be made.

I have been emphasizing the tragic value of the play, but it has much comic value also. I do not merely refer to the many laughs which Rice's accurate observation will evoke, but also to the audience's satisfying realization that this observation truly reveals man's state with its faults, foibles, and poignance. *Street Scene* may not have the deft ironies of Chekhov's tragicomedies or the lyrical language of O'Casey's, but Rice's combination of tragedy and comedy, of brutality and compassion, does provide an effect of ineffable poignance at the tragicomic waste of humanity. It is a large play and a great play. The technical brilliance of putting so much together—so much action, so many characters —

in a coherent and moving manner, I have scarcely touched upon, but the theme could never have emerged so lucidly and movingly had the play not been so superlatively wrought. *Street Scene* is one of those plays which affirm that the value of drama is that it asserts the value of man. Indeed, the way in which *Street Scene* pushes back the boundaries of the drama may almost itself negate the triumphant brutality of the play's theme. There can be no higher praise, I think, than that.

Source: Robert Hogan, "The Realist," in *The Independence of Elmer Rice*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1965, pp. 46-54.

Critical Essay #4

Street Scene *is described as "selective realism at its best." In the following excerpt, Downer outlines the problems he notices with the play.*

Rice presented his audience, not with a single family living under carefully controlled conditions, but with a cross section of city life as experienced by a large group of people who live in or are somehow connected with a huge brownstone tenement. They are varied in racial background, in philosophy, in occupation, in social status and intellectual stature: Italians, Jews, Swedes, Irish, musicians, electricians, milkmen, teachers, radicals, conservatives, poets and peasants. Yet the audience is not conscious that a cross section has been selected and presented to it; what is more natural in the melting pot of New York than that such a mixture occupy one tenement and animate one plot?

The plot, what there is of it, is hackneyed. *Street Scene* is really a conversation piece centering on a love triangle. But adultery and murder are not the exclusive interests of the play. More important is the play's attempt to present a generalized picture of middle-class urban living, an attempt so successful on the whole that the playwright was called a "mere journalist," and other terms suggesting critical disapproval.

Street Scene is anything but journalism. It is actually a kind of domestic symphony, taking the details of life, each as accurately rendered as possible, and arranging them within a frame (or perhaps better, against a background) that is itself a familiar commonplace, to yield an interpretation of what this crowded communal life means in terms of the individual and the group. Unlike Awake and Sing! the play seems to have no propagandistic purpose, unless it is expressed by Mrs. Maurant:

I often think it's a shame that people don't get along better, together. People ought to be able to live together in peace and quiet; without making each other miserable.

Feeble as the sentiment is, it is characteristic of the speaker and pertains to every situation in the play. *Street Scene* is selective realism at its best.

Source: Alan S. Downer, "From Romance to Reality," in *Fifty Years of American Drama*, Henry Regnery Company, 1951, pp. 63-65.

Adaptations

Street Scene was adapted for film by Rice, who wrote the screenplay. The film was directed by King Vidor and starred Sylvia Sidney as Rose Maurrant. It was released by United Artists in 1931.

Topics for Further Study

Research paintings that are "street scenes," perhaps landscapes of Claude Lorrain, a French artist who influenced Rice when he wrote *Street Scene*. Pick one and compare it to the play.

Discuss *Street Scene* in terms of "realism," the artistic and literary movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In what ways could the Maurrants avoid their sad situation by the end of the play? Would better communication have prevented the murder?

Research trends in urbanization and suburbanization in this time period. Why does Rose believe that she and her family would have a better life outside of the city? Would their lives really be better in the suburbs?

Compare and Contrast

1929: The primary entertainment in the home is the radio. Over ten million households (about half of the country) have radios in 1929, where few had them in 1921.

Today: Television and computer-related technology have far surpassed radio as the primary forms of home entertainment.

1929: After a period of unheralded prosperity, the stock market crashes in October. The American economy is soon in turmoil. Warning signs about the economy had been ignored.

Today: There is unheralded prosperity in the United States, though there are some doubts about overvalued Internet-related stock. Procedures are in place to prevent a crash similar to that of 1929.

1929: In general, unions are not particularly powerful or respected, though they are growing a bit in manufacturing. Public opinion towards them is generally negative. A strike in a Tennessee textile mill ends in defeat for labor.

Today: After decades of power, unions are in decline. While some unions have power in certain industries, respect for them is generally declining.

1929: Because there is often no refrigeration in the home, milk and ice are delivered to homes on a daily basis.

Today: Refrigerators are commonly found in homes. Consumers buy dairy products in markets. The concept of daily delivery is alien.

What Do I Read Next?

The Adding Machine is a play by Rice that was first produced in 1923. The story focuses on how a wage slave, Zero, is affected by oppressive modern day society.

Romeo and Juliet, a play by William Shakespeare written in approximately 1597, concerns the effects of forbidden love.

Winterset, a play Maxwell Anderson (1935), comments on how socioeconomic forces effect common people.

The Subway, a play written by Rice in 1929, concerns how a woman reacts to an oppressive environment.

Bartholomew Fair, a play by Ben Jonson written in approximately 1614, is a sprawling story with a large cast of characters.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

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Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

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

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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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.

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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.

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