The Subject Was Roses Study Guide

The Subject Was Roses by Frank D. Gilroy

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Introduction

The Subject Was Roses was first presented at the Royale Theatre, New York City, on May 15, 1964. It was an outstanding success with critics and the public alike and it won many awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for drama. The play belongs to the category of domestic realism and has a cast of only three characters. John and Nettie Cleary live unhappily together in a middle-class apartment in the Bronx, New York. Their twenty-one-year-old son Timmy has just returned home after serving three years in the army during World War II. As the drama unfolds, the tensions in the family become apparent. Husband and wife squabble; Nettie is overprotective toward her grown son; John tries to overcome years of neglect and make an affectionate connection with Timmy, but that path proves stormy. Eventually, Timmy, who has more awareness of the effect of the negative family dynamics than his parents, decides he must leave home. The play achieves its effects in part through effective use of dialogue. The dialogue conveys the long-standing hostility between John and Nettie, their doomed efforts to recapture their lost love, and their failure to understand that their old ways of behavior alienate Timmy and drive him away. They manage to achieve the very opposite of what they intend.

Author Biography

Frank Daniel Gilroy was born on October 13, 1925, to Bettina Vasti and Frank B. Gilroy in the Bronx, New York. He was educated in the Bronx and graduated from De Witt Clinton High School in 1943, after which he joined the U.S. Army. During World War II, he served for two and a half years with the eighty-ninth infantry division, including eighteen months in Europe. After leaving the army, he received his bachelor of arts degree (magna cum laude) from Dartmouth College in 1950. With a grant from Dartmouth, he spent the following year at Yale Drama School.

Gilroy soon began writing for television. During the 1950s, he wrote for *Playhouse 90* (CBS), *Studio One* (CBS), *U.S. Steel Hour* (ABC), *Omnibus* (CBS), *Kraft Theatre* (NBC), and *Lux Video Theatre* (NBC). Gilroy's first staged play was *Who'll Save the Plowboy?*, performed at New York's Phoenix Theatre in 1962. It won the Obie Award as the best American play produced off-Broadway. Gilroy followed this with his biggest success, *The Subject Was Roses*, which won the Outer Critics Circle Award, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, a Tony Award for best play, and the Pulitzer Prize for drama. Gilroy's next play, *That Summer, That Fall* (1967), was a reworking of the ancient Greek story of Hippolytus and Phaedra. This was followed by *The Only Game in Town*, produced in 1968. In 1972, four one-act plays by Gilroy were produced off-Broadway under the collective title *Present Tense*.

During the 1970s, Gilroy turned his attention to films. In 1971, his screen adaptation of his own play, *Desperate Characters*, which he also directed, won the Berlin Film Festival Silver Bear. He also wrote, directed, and produced *From Noon till Three* (1976), *Once in Paris* (1978), and *The Gig* (1985). Gilroy also directed television films, including the Gibbsville series (1976) and *Nero Wolfe* (1979). He also wrote two novels, *Private* (1970) and *From Noon till Three: The Possibly True and Certainly Tragic Story of an Outlaw and a Lady Whose Love Knew No Bounds* (1973).

Gilroy returned to stage plays in 1979, when *Last Licks* was produced. It featured a man and his son who were reminiscent of John and Timmy in *The Subject Was Roses*. However, the play ran for less than a month at New York's Longacre Theatre.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Gilroy concentrated on one-act plays. *Real to Reel* was produced off-Broadway in 1987, as was *Match Point* (1990), *A Way with Words* (five one-act plays, 1991), and *Give the Bishop My Faint Regards* (1992). Gilroy returned to Broadway for the first time in fourteen years with a two-act play, *Any Given Day*, which was produced at Longacre Theatre in 1993. Set in the Bronx, in 1941, it featured characters similar to those that Gilroy had explored in *The Subject Was Roses*.

Gilroy's most recent work was another one-act play, *Getting In*, first produced at Ensemble Studio Theatre, 1997.

Gilroy married Ruth Dorothy Gaydos in 1954. They have three children: Anthony, Daniel, and John.

Plot Summary

Act 1, Scene 1

The Subject Was Roses takes place in a middle-class apartment in the Bronx, New York, in May, 1946. The play begins on a Saturday afternoon. John Cleary is alone in the kitchen, gazing at an army jacket that hangs on the wall. On an impulse he takes the jacket down and puts it on. When he hears Nettie's key in the door he puts the jacket back and sits at the kitchen table. They discuss their son Timmy, who has just returned from World War II duty and who is still asleep. As they bicker over the breakfast table, it becomes clear that John and Nettie have a strained relationship. Nettie says that John should have stopped Timmy from drinking so much at the party the previous night, and John replies that Nettie is still treating their son like a baby. It also comes out that John and his son are not close and that there have been misunderstandings in the past.

Timmy enters and after greetings are exchanged, John says he must leave for a business appointment. Timmy wants to go to a Giants game, but that will have to wait. After John leaves, Nettie is disappointed when Timmy cannot remember that his favorite breakfast is waffles, and she gets upset about a remark Timmy makes about a neighbor. It is clear that Timmy has changed after his three years in the army. Nettie then cries because the waffles stick to the griddle, but Timmy cheers her up by dancing with her to a tune on the radio. John returns, having decided that they can go to the ball game after all. But Nettie is disappointed because she had told his developmentally challenged cousin Willis that Timmy would visit that day.

Act 1, Scene 2

It is later the same day. While Nettie is out, John and Timmy return, having enjoyed the game. Timmy carries a bouquet of red roses. The subject turns to war and Timmy says that he was no hero. He did what he was asked to do but never volunteered. John regrets that he did not fight in World War I and apologizes to his son after admitting that he did not think he would last in the army. He offers to help with Timmy's college expenses. To John's annoyance, Timmy quizzes him about how much money he has. When Nettie enters, she is delighted with the roses, especially because John, following Timmy's suggestion, says that the roses were his idea. He and Nettie reminisce about old times, and then John decides they will all go downtown for dinner.

Act 1, Scene 3

They return at 2 A.M. the next morning. John and Timmy are slightly drunk. John recalls the first song he and Nettie ever danced to. Timmy plays the clown for a while and then goes to bed. In the living room, John makes a sexual advance on Nettie, but she does not respond. He refuses to back off and in frustration, Nettie throws the vase of roses on the floor. Timmy emerges and Nettie tells him that the broken vase was an accident.

Timmy goes back to bed after which Nettie tells John she was moved by the gift of roses, but the gift has now turned sour. John confesses that the roses were Timmy's idea.

Act 2, Scene 1

It is 9:15 on Sunday morning and John and Nettie sit at the breakfast table. John is in a bad mood and after he fails to get a response from Nettie, he takes it out on Timmy, who arrives at the table late. Timmy is bewildered but tries to remain agreeable. Then John tells him that mass is in twenty minutes. Timmy replies that he has not been to mass for over two years and no longer considers himself a Catholic. This angers John, who accuses Timmy of being an atheist. Timmy denies this, but John says that if he wants to go on living at home, he must obey his father. Nettie tries to defend Timmy. Timmy then agrees to go to church, but John no longer wants him to. John storms out and Timmy regrets making an issue of it. Timmy realizes that for twenty years, he and his mother have been ganging up on his father and says it must stop. They then squabble over her attitude toward the lake house that John owns and the fact that Nettie wants him to visit his cousin Willis. Timmy becomes angry and gives full vent to his feelings. Nettie puts her coat on, collects some cash savings, and moves to the door, ignoring Timmy's questions about what she is doing.

Act 2, Scene 2

It is ten o'clock that evening and Nettie has not returned. Timmy, who has been drinking, sits on the sofa while John paces the room. Timmy recalls how he sat in the same place at age six when Nettie had a child, John, who died. His father, who is worried about Nettie, is not listening. Timmy starts to recall unsavory memories of his father's womanizing and drinking and John tells him he has had too much to drink. They continue to talk across each other. Timmy says that although he always looked forward to his father coming home, he dreaded it too, because he knew his parents would fight. John quizzes him about why Nettie walked out, but all Timmy knows is that they had an argument. Then Timmy finds out why John told Nettie that the roses were not from him. Timmy insults his father, who strikes him on the side of the face. Nettie returns. John asks where she has been and Nettie replies that she went to the movies and stayed for several shows. Timmy and John do not believe her. She says that the last twelve hours are the only real freedom she has ever known. As John continues to confront her, she claims that the argument she had with Timmy was not about his drinking, as John assumes, but about him, John.

Act 2, Scene 3

It is two o'clock the following morning. Timmy is awake and goes to the living room, where Nettie sits on the sofa. Neither has been able to sleep and Timmy tells her he has decided to move out next morning. Nettie reminisces about when she first met John.

She knew they were not suited but also knew they would become involved with each other. She was attracted to him because of his energy and his promising career. She thought he would give her what her other suitors, who were more kind but not as successful, could not. Timmy realizes that, although he used to blame his father for the family situation, then his mother, now he suspects that no one is to blame.

Act 2, Scene 4

At nine o'clock that morning, John and Nettie talk over breakfast. John fails to persuade Nettie to talk Timmy into staying. He says that if Timmy leaves he never wants to see him again. When Timmy enters the kitchen, John tries to apologize for hitting him, but Timmy says that is not the reason he is leaving, that he always intended to leave. John tries to be conciliatory and asks Timmy to stay another few days. He admits he had been wrong in his dealings with his son. They start to quarrel again, but then Timmy points out that they have never said that they love each other. He says, "I love you," and the two men embrace in tears. After Nettie enters, Timmy says he has changed his mind and will stay a few more days. But John says that it is impossible because he has arranged for Timmy's room to be painted the next day. The play ends with John complaining once again about the coffee.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

There are three characters in this play: John Cleary, Nettie Cleary and Timmy Cleary

It is a Saturday morning in 1946 and the stage is set in a kitchen and living room of a middle class apartment in the West Bronx in New York. There is evidence of a party the night before; we see a beer keg, a stack of chairs and a sagging banner that reads "Welcome Home, Timmy."

John Cleary stands in the kitchen examining the army jacket hanging on the door. He touches the jacket and all the bars and medals and then impulsively puts it on—and then removes it as he hears someone coming. He quickly moves to the kitchen table and pretends as if he has been engrossed in the newspaper.

His wife, Nettie, enters with groceries and asks if Timmy is still asleep. They had had a welcome home party for him the night before and he had too much to drink and was sick in the night. Nettie chastises John for drinking too much too because she thinks Timmy was following his lead. John contests that Timmy was in the army for three years and was no longer a boy, and that if he drank too much it was his own decision.

John has an appointment downtown, even though it is a Saturday, and he will stop off at St. Francis church to say a prayer of thanksgiving that Timmy has returned safely when so many local boys were killed or badly injured. John cautions Nettie not to coddle Timmy because he is now a man, but she is getting new curtains for his room and is preparing his favorite breakfast.

Timmy is finally awake, enters the kitchen and interrupts their arguing. He wants to know if he and his father could go to the Giants game that afternoon but John has a meeting, which will mean a sure sale. He promises that they can go next week with box seats and everything. He also tells him to meet him in town on Monday and they will buy him some new clothes since his old ones no longer fit.

John leaves for his appointment and Nettie and Timmy have a chance to talk alone. He is concerned about his father, and thinks he does not look well. Nettie tells him that the coffee market has been off and keeps changing the subject to breakfast when he tries to probe about his father. She is hurt when Timmy cannot guess what she is making for him—waffles—supposedly his favorite breakfast.

They talk about the changes that have taken place in the neighborhood in the three years since he has been gone. She wishes the house had been nicer for the party last night but now that he is back, she will get it fixed up. She is just so happy to have him home that she grabs his hand and holds it just a little too long. He jerks away from her; the waffles have burned; and she is in tears from both.

He asks her if she wants to dance, he switches on the radio and they fox trot easily together. The song ends, a polka begins, and they whirl into a breathless state, ending up on the floor laughing, when John reenters the apartment. He has decided to skip his appointment in favor of taking Timmy to the Giants game. He got to thinking about all the fathers who would give anything to have the chance to go to a ballgame with their sons today, but will never have that chance again. Timmy gets dressed and the two men leave with Nettie standing alone.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

Timmy Cleary has come home from the war. His parents are joyful; yet, they show it in different ways. His mother wants to do all the things they did when he was a boy—dance as they used to, cook his favorite foods, etc. His Father realizes that Timmy left as a boy but has come home as a man, and is grateful for his son's return. His Father is also somewhat in awe over his son's accomplishments as evidenced by his lingering over his army jacket with his medals. When he tries it on, it is as if he were wishing he were a hero to someone as well.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

John and Timmy enter the apartment laughing. They have had a good time at the ballgame even though the Giants lost. Timmy has a bouquet of red roses for his mother but tells his father to tell her they are from him. John agrees to. Their talk turns to the fact that John wonders what kind of soldier he might have been. He wanted to go during WWI but could not because he was head of the household. He wonders if he would have had the courage when it got right down to it. Timmy confirms that he knows his father to be the wisest and bravest man he has ever known. They continue telling stories and more beer when Nettie enters the apartment.

She sees the flowers, cries, and thanks her husband. She is pleased but also a bit sad because her own father had sent her red roses on her birthday every year until he died a couple years ago. The two men are uncomfortable with her display and change the subject to old friend, old girlfriends and the story of how John and Nettie met. They are having a good time together and decide to go into the city for dinner and make a whole night of it… their night to howl. John and Timmy take turns howling, each one louder than the last as the curtain falls.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

This afternoon has been a chance for John and Timmy to be reacquainted, and in a way, to meet each other for the first time. John always considered Timmy a little sickly, coddled by his mother and did not think he would make it in the army. In addition, Timmy gets the chance to tell his father how he admires him; something that he never did as a boy, but is now mature enough to do. We also see that Timmy can has a little more sensitivity toward his mother's needs when he brings the roses; yet also senses that maybe his parents' marriage could benefit from a bit of attention and tells his father to say that he brought them for her. The father has spent his life teaching his son and now the son is bringing some new things to his father's attention and we sense that the roles are a bit reversed now.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

The trio returns from their night on the town, John and Timmy obviously drunk, and Nettie tries to quiet them. The two men are singing silly songs and telling stories and Nettie is losing patience with their behavior, telling them they will wake the neighbors. She wants them both to go to bed but they continue with their tipsy theatrics. Finally, Timmy goes to bed and Nettie comments that he has only been home two nights and he has gone to bed drunk both times. John tells her to ease up a bit, that their son has seen some horrible things in the war and deserves a little down time.

Nettie goes to the kitchen to get an aspirin, not for a headache, but to drop into the vase of roses so that it will help preserve them. She tells John again that it was a nice thing for him to have done. He passes it off but comments that he likes her dress. She fends off all his advances. He tells her that now that Timmy's home; they will have many good times. She tells him that what is wrong between the two of them has nothing to do with Timmy; that they have to solve their own problems. He tries to embrace her, but she breaks away, disgusted, and grabs the vase of roses and throws them to the floor, shattering the vase.

The noise wakes Timmy who comes out of his room to see what has happened; and offers to clean up the mess. Nettie sends him back to bed and tells John that the gift of the roses earlier that day had really moved her; that she felt something stir in her that she thought had died a long time ago… and now he has ruined it all with his behavior tonight.

Without turning to face her, John admits that he had nothing to do with the roses. They were Timmy's idea. Nettie continues to clean up the mess.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

Nettie seems to be the odd one out in the household. The two men have bonded in their revelry and story telling and she is left out. Her relationship with her husband is obviously strained and she has not reconnected with Timmy in a way that she had hoped yet. She wants to be with them but she wants it on her terms. John seems incapable of reaching her in any way and she shatters the vase of roses in a symbolic display of the state of their marriage. Only when he tells her that they were really from Timmy does she begin to pick them up from the floor.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

It is now Sunday morning and John and Nettie are having breakfast. They are arguing about the strength of the coffee and he tells her that he is thinking of renting out the lake house for the summer because they could use the money. She is unfazed by his remarks. Timmy enters and it is clear that his father is short tempered with him also. The party atmosphere from the last two days is now gone. He asks for cream for his coffee and his father tells him the coffee is too weak and does not need it. However, obviously, since Timmy has been to war he is now an expert on everything. Timmy ignores his father's continuing antagonism and his mother gives him cream and some toast.

Then the subject of Sunday mass arises and Timmy announces that he no longer goes to church. His mother knew of his stance but his father is outraged; it is a blemish on the Cleary name. Timmy believes in a higher power but not all the Catholic trappings. Then his father launches into more haranguing by telling him that the GIs have it made; home loans, school loans, discharge bonus, unemployment insurance, GI bill, etc.

Timmy relents and tells his father that he will go to Mass with him but his father tells him not to bother; that the Lord does not want anybody there who does not want to be. John rises to leave and Nettie reminds him of the noon meal at her mother's house. He retorts that he will not be there, stomps out and slams the door.

When Nettie and Timmy are alone, she admits that she will never understand her husband. Timmy says that John calls the two of them an alliance: always Nettie and Timmy against him. He wonders why that is. Nettie ignores his pushing the concept. Timmy challenges her, asking why she has never really taken the time to understand her husband. Why does she always knock the lake house? Perhaps it is because he bought it without consulting her.

Apparently, John had bought the lake house without consulting her, drove her out to the country one day and announced that this is where they would be spending their summers. Her idea of a vacation is to travel. Timmy reminds her that she had the chance to see Brazil with her husband on trips for the coffee business. Although she does not like the Bronx either, she had her mother move there as well.

Timmy wonders why she cannot go two days without seeing her mother. She tells him it is only because of Willis, her crippled retarded brother. In addition, she admonishes Timmy that he has to be there today because she promised Willis. Timmy decides that he has given up enough Sundays for Willis and hurries to get dressed to get to church and apologize to his father for this morning.

Nettie puts on her coat and reaches for her purse at the same time that Timmy does in an attempt to keep her from leaving. When he grabs it, he realizes that it is as heavy as lead. He looks inside to see that she has all her coins in it. He gives the bag back to her and asks her why; will she say something? She thanks him for the roses and leaves.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

Nettie's rejection of John the previous night has turned breakfast into a battleground. He does not understand her apathy toward him and he is no longer enamored of his war hero son. He has worked at the same company for 35 years and no one appreciates him, let alone gives him loans and special benefits afforded to returning GIs. His foundation seems to be crumbling, including his religion as Timmy declares his disinterest in the Church. He has reached a point where he is no longer willing to do things just to please everyone else, as evidenced by his refusal to attend lunch at Nettie's mother's house as they do every Sunday. There is an impasse in the house. John is headed to church for help; Timmy wants to make amends with his father; and it is not clear yet where Nettie is headed with her purse full of coins.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

It is now 10 p.m. Sunday evening. Timmy is drunk and John is pacing the floor; Nettie has not come home all day. John is wondering what to do; he guesses he will wait until 11:00 and if she is not back by then, he will call the police. John cautions Timmy to stop drinking, that he has had enough, and that the police will want to question him since he was the last one to see her that day.

Timmy is not fazed by this and launches into a monologue about how he had to call around the local bars looking for his father; and then wanting him to come home, but not really, because then he and his mother would fight again.

The phone interrupts him and it is Nettie's mother asking John if they had heard anything from her yet. He promises to let her know as soon as they do. John is baffled, especially because Nettie did not have any money. That is when Timmy tells him about the purse loaded down with coins. Did he think that was peculiar, and why had he not said something sooner? To Timmy, everything is peculiar.

John just wants to know why she left and Timmy told him they had had an argument. That is something John had never expected to hear. Timmy said they argued about his drinking too much. John now reasons that a person does not take all those coins if they are going to do something drastic. Then Timmy interjects that she thanked him for the roses. His father is hurt by his callous remark. He is hurt even more because Timmy denied him the chance to show him off at church and the local bar afterwards… his son, the war hero.

John cannot understand Timmy; he had a nice home, nice clothes, a nice life, yet he behaves badly. Compared to how John grew up, Timmy has had life made. Timmy reminds him that they were discussing the subject of roses. He still wants to know why his father spilled the secret about who really bought them. He tells him that he and his mother were having an argument and it just slipped out. The two men continue in their verbal altercation when suddenly the door opens and Nettie walks in.

She is evasive about where she has been for twelve hours and will only say that she has been to the movies and dinner. However, it has been the most freeing experience she has had for years and only came back because she is too cowardly to stay gone.

Timmy leaves because he is about to be sick. John tells Nettie that his drinking is a problem… that if she and Timmy had not argued about it that morning, this whole day would have turned out differently. Nettie is incredulous… the argument had not been about Timmy's drinking at all. It had been about him; Timmy feels that she does not give her husband enough credit, that he is a great guy and that the two of them need to stop ganging up on him. John says nothing and turns away.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

The old family dynamic is in place again; yet, the roles have reversed. Timmy is now the drunk and John is the sober one waiting for someone to come home. The only element that has not changed is Nettie. She still wants the close relationship she has had with her son, a relationship born out of the indifference from her husband. She wants to shake up the dynamic and does the only drastic thing she knows how to do… leave them both for a full day to indulge herself. Timmy senses what his mother needs: how the roses made her feel loved. John wants to care for his wife but really does not know how to begin.

Act 2, Scene 3

Act 2, Scene 3 Summary

It is 2 a.m. Monday morning and the apartment is dark except a sliver of light from underneath Timmy's bedroom door. He enters the living room to find Nettie sitting on the couch in the dark.

She knows there is something he wants to tell her. Yes, he will be leaving. A friend of his needs a roommate and he will be moving in with him in the morning. She does not react and he can tell she is deep in thought and asks her what she is thinking.

She is thinking about an apple core. She had just landed a new job to type at a law firm and was to start on a Monday morning, but on the Sunday before, a boy she thought was cute threw an apple core at her and she had a bruise on her face and called in sick on that Monday morning. She lost that job and then met John at the job she eventually took. She wonders what her life would have been like had that boy not hit her with that apple core.

She remembers seeing John for the first time. She knew he was not meant for her but there was an intensity about him that pulled her. She had had other marriage proposals but she accepted his because of his energy and drive and she was a girl who wanted things. He was social; he was good in business; everybody wanted to be his friend. He was the very best in all those impersonal situations but did not have any idea how to manage a home and family.

Timmy admits that when he left home, he had blamed his father for the trouble in their house. When he had come home, he had blamed his mother. Now, he suspects that no one is to blame, not even him.

Act 2, Scene 3 Analysis

After her Sunday escapade, Nettie cannot sleep for reviewing the events of her life. How would it have been different if she had married someone else? There is no way to know for sure. We just make the best choices as the people we are when those choices are presented to us. She was a young girl who wanted things and excitement when she chose to marry John Cleary. He provided exactly that. How was she to know that at mid life she would want something entirely different? How do you blame someone for giving you exactly what you wanted?

Act 2, Scene 4

Act 2, Scene 4 Summary

It is now 9 a.m. Monday morning and John and Nettie are in the kitchen. He tells her that she could convince Timmy to stay: that he would listen to her. She brushes off his comments and he feels that she is being insensitive. She does not want him to leave but he has made his decision. Timmy comes out for breakfast and his father demands to know why he is leaving, why he will not stay for a couple more weeks. His mother was counting on having him home. He tells him that he can do what he pleases; say anything he wants; drink what he wants, anything.

However, Timmy is fixed on leaving and finally he tells his father why. He has a recurring dream that someone has told him that his father is dead, and he cries because his father has never told him that he loves him. Now Timmy realizes that he has never told his father those three words either and does so now. John's whole body stiffens; his eyes clamp shut as he tries to repress what he feels. Finally, his emotions overwhelm him, he extends his arms to his son and they embrace in tears.

They hear Nettie coming back into the room and compose themselves and if she notices anything, she keeps it to herself. She tells Timmy that his bags are packed and he says that he is going to stay for a little while longer. John surprises the two of them by saying that that is out of the question. He has hired painters to come in today to paint his room, it is too hard to get them and if they do not come today, who knows how long it will be before they are free again.

Timmy agrees then, that it is time for him to go. Nettie hesitantly agrees and John drinks his coffee.

Act 2, Scene 4 Analysis

Finally, there is a breakthrough in the emotional standoff with father and son. John thinks he can keep his son by demanding as he has always done. In fact, just the opposite will draw the two together. Timmy is the brave one now and tells his father that he loves him and it breaks the barrier that has been separating them forever. Now certain of his son's love, John gives him permission to leave. We think that the man who has repressed his emotions for so long is now capable of venturing into life and loving his wife and son, and that soon, he will bring roses to his wife on his own accord.

Characters

John Cleary

John Cleary is Nettie's husband and Timmy's father. He is of Irish descent and is staunchly Catholic. His father was probably an Irish immigrant who came to the Bronx in the late nineteenth century and had to struggle to make a life for himself in America. John had a deprived childhood and recalls being so hungry he had to beg for food. The family's furniture was thrown out on the street because the Clearys failed to pay their rent and they were always hiding from debt collectors. John had to quit school after fourth grade to support his father who had been crippled for life. He entered the coffee trade, and when he was seventeen his employer sent him to Brazil for three months. John thinks of this as the time he grew up, just as Timmy grew up through his years in the army.

According to Nettie, as a young man, John was full of energy, ambitious, charming, and sociable. He wanted to be a millionaire by the time he was forty. But the stock market crash of 1929 ended that ambition. John's relative failure left him embittered and Nettie disappointed. He has been able to give his family a middle-class lifestyle—he owns a car and a vacation house by a lake in New Jersey—but he is concerned about his financial affairs. The coffee business is in decline and he is considering renting out his lake house.

John's marriage to Nettie deteriorated long ago. He had affairs with other women and often stayed out late drinking. He and Nettie now maintain an antagonistic relationship. Although they do still have feelings for each other, those feelings are overlaid by years of bickering and resentments on both sides. Nettie, for example, has never forgotten that John bought the lake house without consulting her.

John has been unable to forge a close relationship with his son whom he regarded as a sickly boy who would not last in the army. During the play he tries to make amends, but it is difficult. He is irascible, defensive, stubborn, and set in his ways and beliefs.

Nettie Cleary

Nettie came from a family that was higher on the economic and social scale than the man she married. Nettie recalls that although they were not wealthy, they were never short of nice clothes or tickets to the opera. John's family used to refer to her derisively as "The Lady." As a young woman, Nettie had many suitors, but she chose John because he was witty and charming and looked as if he were going places in his career. She thought he would be able to give her the finer things in life. Although she had an intuition all along that they were not suited to each other, she married him anyway. But she now feels trapped in a bad marriage. When she returns home after having walked out and been on her own for twelve hours, she says it was the most complete freedom

she has ever known. Although Nettie must have suffered much because of John's infidelities, drinking, and bad temper, she is also capable of small cruelties and rejections of her own, as when she rebuffs John's crude attempt to seduce her after their night out.

Nettie is a disappointed woman who has lost much of her enthusiasm for life. She wonders what her life might have been like had she made different choices, but it is too late for that now. She has compensated for her bad marriage by being over-protective towards her son, perhaps seeing in him the potential to become what she had hoped John would be. But even that emotional investment has backfired on her, as the twenty-one-year-old Timmy is no longer the boy she knew and has many resentments about how he was raised.

Timmy Cleary

Timmy is the twenty-one-year-old son of John and Nettie. He has just returned home after having served three years in the army during World War II. As a boy, he was sickly and often missed school. But he has acquitted himself well in the army, doing everything he was asked to do, although he made a point of not volunteering for anything.

Timmy has never been close to his father and has tended to blame him for the things that were wrong in their family. But when Timmy returns home, it is his mother, who insists on treating him like a child, that sparks his resentment. Timmy has grown up through being in the army and no longer wants decisions about how he will spend his time to be made by his mother. He is more independent now, with a sense of humor that his mother does not understand.

During the course of the play, Timmy has to come to terms with the family's problems. He realizes that part of the difficulty is that he and his mother used to side with each other against his father. He is now able to see things more from his father's point of view. To an extent, he takes after his father, since, like John, he reveals a fondness for alcohol. Witty and charming, Timmy must, in some respects, resemble his father as a young man.

By the end of the play, Timmy realizes that the destructive ways in which the family members relate to each other are so deeply entrenched that he must leave home if he is ever to escape them.

Themes

Over the years, the emotional life of the Cleary family has formed itself into a triangle that functions only to frustrate and disappoint all three members. Love is thwarted or destroyed; good intentions go haywire. The underlying pattern that has created this is the fact that Nettie and Timmy have in the past sided with each other against John. Since love has not been freely exchanged between husband and wife, Nettie has transferred her love into an excessive attachment to her son. She confesses to Timmy late in the play that she was disappointed with John from the beginning; he was never going to make a good family man, although she did not know this when she married him. Left without a channel for her love to flow through, she poured it into their son. John contributed to the triangle by alienating his own son through his frequent absences and his propensity to quarrel with Nettie.

The family triangle is made apparent from the argument that Nettie and John have in the opening scene. It comes out that the previous evening, Nettie was overly concerned when Timmy was sick after drinking too much at the homecoming party, and she held his head. John comments icily, "No one held his head in the army." As John observes, Nettie is jealous because at the party, father and son spent most of the time drinking and paid no attention to her or anyone else. John is resentful of Nettie's jealousy and sarcastically remarks that she and Timmy will have a "charming little breakfast. . . together," since he is going out. This shows that he knows very well that Timmy and Nettie form what he calls (according to Timmy later) "the alliance." A few moments later, after Nettie requests money for new curtains for Timmy's room because Timmy will want to bring friends home, John refers to the alliance as "the old squeeze play."

This has been the pattern that has operated throughout Timmy's boyhood. But Timmy's long absence and new maturity mean that he is no longer content to be under the thumb of his mother, always overindulged and he seems to be willing to develop a better relationship with his father. But Nettie is unwilling to let go. She cannot allow Timmy to grow up and be independent because that would be a threat to her happiness. It would leave her with no one to love and thrust her back into dependence on an unsatisfactory, claustrophobic marriage. The fact that the old pattern is no longer holding is shown in the first scene of the play when there is a dispute over whether Timmy will go with his father to the ball game or visit his disabled cousin, Willis, as Nettie desires. Nettie is used to having control over what Timmy does, and she does not like the fact that father and son are willing to spend time together that excludes her. But his mother's refusal to acknowledge Timmy's independence succeeds only in provoking Timmy and making the situation worse.

Timmy, who is good-natured and loves both his parents, does not know how to react to the tense situation. The strife between his parents has always upset him, although neither parent appears to realize this. Timmy is the only character in the play who grows. This can be seen in act 2, scene 1, in the dispute over going to mass. Nettie sides with Timmy and John says, "Now there's a familiar alliance." After John storms out in anger, Timmy shows an understanding of what his father means, and he tells Nettie

that they must stop ganging up on John. Timmy is beginning to see the pattern that has dominated their lives, and he is trying to do something about it. For a while, he blames his mother instead of his father, but then he realizes that no one is really to blame. By the end of the play, he also realizes that the only positive step he can take to ease the situation is to leave home.

Style

Setting

The play is a realistic drama, and the set makes an important contribution to the theme. The stage directions describe it as a middle-class apartment but point out that the heavily upholstered sofa and chairs, equipped with antimacassars (small covers on the backs and sides to prevent soiling) are of the type that was fashionable in the 1920s and 1930s. This suggests that the Clearys are not well off and have to make do with what they have. In the play, Nettie brings attention to the sofa when she says it is on its last legs, and she also points to the poor condition of the rugs. The shabby genteel setting helps to reinforce the theme of lack of money that emerges in the first scene. Nettie makes it clear that she needs ten dollars to replace the worn-out curtains in Timmy's room and then another five dollars for her housekeeping. John hands the money over reluctantly.

Dialogue

Since this is a family that has difficulty talking openly with each other, Gilroy uses a technique whereby in conversations they talk completely across each other. That is, one person is barely listening to the other and carries on his own line of thought. This occurs in the beginning of act 2, scene 2, for example, when Timmy recalls his feelings when he was six and his baby brother died in infancy, but John does not hear him because he keeps wondering aloud where Nettie is and why she left. John has a similar habit when the conversation with Nettie turns awkward. He refuses to respond directly, reciting instead nonsense phrases like "Bless us and save us said Mrs. O'Davis." The dialogue is also extremely effective in conveying the festering influence of old quarrels between John and Nettie. Act 1, scene 1 is a good example of this. Both characters are masters of the sarcastic, niggling remark that reveals their contempt for each other and hides the love that may still be buried far beneath the surface.

Dramatic Conflict

The nature of drama is conflict; characters in a scene will want, expect, or demand different things, and they will clash. The skilled dramatist uses these differing expectations and needs to create tension and climaxes. He or she will control the rhythm of the buildup, both in individual scenes and in the drama as a whole, to create the right dramatic effect. In this play, most of the scenes build to an explosion of anger or frustration between either husband and wife, mother and son, or father and son.

The first part of the first scene deftly reveals the tension between husband and wife, for example, but without any raised voices. The impression is more of resignation, of things that started a long time ago and have acquired the nature of habit. The second half of the scene shows mother and son struggling to adapt to each other. The tension erupts

in Nettie's outbursts and crying and is resolved physically through their dance, before erupting again at the end of the scene over the visit to Willis.

The next scene is quieter and more hopeful, as a necessary contrast to the previous one. The tension here is more in the audience, since they are aware of the deception over who bought the roses and know that the deception will have consequences. But the consequences do not come until the following scene, in which the intensity of the drama is ratcheted up again. The family's evening out has been a success, but Nettie's unease with the two men's drinking introduces an ominous note. John's unwelcome sexual advance and Nettie's deliberate smashing of the vase, which is followed by a few moments of silence, is the climax of the first act (husband-wife conflict). It has been carefully prepared for. As in most of the moments when the conflict flares up directly instead of being hidden like an iceberg beneath the surface, it is accompanied by physical movement or some other action on the stage that makes a strong visual impact.

The second act proceeds in similar fashion. In scene 1, John's bad mood builds inexorably to a full-scale explosion over Timmy's refusal to attend mass (father-son conflict) and then builds again to a mother-son conflict over how Timmy was always forced to do things he did not want to do on Sunday. Scene 2 builds slowly to a father-son conflict that results in an act of physical violence. The following scene is necessarily quieter, more reflective, and the final scene brings the changes. Instead of conflict, there is reconciliation (father-son), culminating in the physical embrace, before the old pattern of suppressed tensions reasserts itself at the end.

Historical Context

American Realistic Drama

Realistic drama attempts to give the audience the illusion that what they are watching is true to life. It will usually feature ordinary, average characters experiencing the everyday ups and downs and challenges of living. Realism began to dominate American theater in the 1930s. Playwrights of that period discovered that the middle-class domestic play, set in the present, was a useful vehicle for the exploration of psychological themes. Such plays were often set in living rooms and were about the personal lives of members of a family as they dealt with matters such as money, careers, and marriage. Some dramatists used this small-scale work as an opportunity to comment on wider social issues, such as the Great Depression, but others felt that domestic affairs were in themselves valid material for drama.

Realism continued its hold on the theater right up to the early 1960s. By that time, Broadway was losing some of the prestige it had enjoyed during its so-called golden age in the 1950s. This was due in part to the growing importance of new venues such as off-Broadway for the production of plays in New York. The theaters that made up off-Broadway, and later off off-Broadway, were less tied to the need for large commercial success, and they gave young dramatists such as Edward Albee and Sam Shepard the opportunity to experiment with new dramatic forms and content.

The Subject Was Roses, however, was not part of this new wave of American drama that began during the 1960s. Very much in the earlier tradition of domestic realism, it continued a form of drama that was familiar to audiences and did not challenge their basic ideas about what a stage play might attempt to do.

Irish and Jews in the Bronx

Although the play gives no indication of when John Cleary's Irish father immigrated to the Bronx, which is one of the boroughs that make up New York City, it may have been during the boom years that began around 1890. From then until 1925, the Bronx developed from being a mosaic of small villages and farms into a city of over one million people. Cleary might have come earlier, however. The Bronx had long been a destination for the Irish, who in the early and mid-nineteenth century were fleeing famine in Ireland. Many of these early Irish immigrants worked as laborers, and they helped to construct such landmarks as the High Bridge over the Harlem River, the New York and Harlem Railroad, and the Croton Aqueduct.

Other ethnic groups were part of the influx of people who settled in the Bronx in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Many came to escape poor living conditions in nearby Manhattan, including Yugoslavians, Armenians, and Italians. But the largest group was Jews from central and eastern Europe. There were sometimes tensions,

misunderstandings, and violence between the Jewish newcomers and the more established Irish.

This is the background against which John Cleary's anti-Semitism in the play can be understood. He uses an ethnic slur to describe Jews and claims that they were responsible for World War II. Later, he retracts his remark and tells Timmy that he helped a Jewish man who was being attacked by a gang of Irish hoodlums in the neighborhood. (John actually refers to the gang as "those bums from St. Matthew's," which may be a name of a parish and suggests Irish origins.)

Critical Overview

The Subject Was Roses was enthusiastically received by New York theater critics, who heaped unanimous praise on the play after the opening night. Walter Kerr in the *New York Herald Tribune* (May 26, 1964) called it "quite the most interesting new American play to be offered on Broadway this season." (The review is reprinted, as are all the quoted first-night reviews by New York critics, in Gilroy's *About Those Roses or How Not To Do a Play and Succeed,* and the text of *The Subject Was Roses*.) Describing it as a play of "alienation," Kerr admired how the lifetime of frustration that characterizes the parents come out in small incidents. Both in the writing and the staging, "there is an economy of effect, a directness of tongue, together with a simplicity of gesture, that very nearly opens the door to an unexpected—but most plausible—poetry." He also had high praise for all three members of the cast: Jack Albertson (John), Irene Dailey (Nettie), and Martin Sheen (Timmy).

Howard Taubman, in the *New York Times* (May 26, 1964), called the play "an honest and touching work. . . . With simplicity, humor and integrity [Gilroy] has looked into the hearts of three decent people and discovered, by letting them discover, the feelings that divide and join them." Taubman particularly appreciated the careful way that Gilroy builds up the mood and the conflict.

For Richard Watts, Jr. in the *New York Post* (May 26, 1964), said the play was a "harsh and relentless story." He praised Gilroy's "unfailing ear for dialogue," and his only reservation was that the resolution of the drama was "ineffectual." This meant that the play was better in its details than as a whole.

The first-night reaction of the critics proved accurate. *The Subject Was Roses* won many awards, including the Outer Critics Circle Award, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, a Tony Award for best play, and the Pulitzer Prize for drama.

Two of the play's three original actors, Jack Albertson and Martin Sheen, starred in the film version that was released in 1968. (Nettie is played by Patricia Neal.) Gilroy wrote the screenplay, and Albertson won an Oscar for best supporting actor.

The Subject Was Roses has been revived several times at regional theaters over the last decade or so. Sometimes there has been a feeling amongst critics that the play has become a little dated. Peter Filichiahe in the *Star-Ledger,* reviewing a production at Bickford Theatre, had doubts about the relevance of the play's climax, centering as it does around Timmy's decision to leave home: "Today that sounds awfully small-minded, but in 1964, when kids frequently lived at home until they married, it was a big issue." Filichiahe did, however, acknowledge that the play was still valuable for the insights it provided into the awkward triangle of mother, son, and father.

Sandra Brooks-Dillard, reviewing a production at Germinal Stage in Denver, wrote in the *Denver Post* that although the performance was a competent revival, "In light of some of

the excruciating issues today's families have to deal with . . . the domestic drama set in 1946 lacks the punch it probably had when it opened in 1964."

John Simon, writing in *New York* magazine on a 1991 production by the Roundabout Theater Company in New York, was equally unenthusiastic about the play, which "cannot avoid the aroma of sitcom." But no such flaw was noted by Jana J. Monji, reviewing a 2001 production at the Celebration Theatre, Hollywood, for the *Los Angeles Times.* Monji commented that "the anger, the pain and the complexity of family ties are shown with nuanced performances under [Suzanne] Bachner's sensitive direction."

Criticism

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- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century literature. In this essay, Aubrey shows how the writings of John Bradshaw on the dysfunctional family can shed light on the play.

In his book *Family, Drama, and American Dreams,* Tom Scanlon observes that the decline of the extended family in modern times and the rise of the smaller nuclear family has made the family the source of intense hope and also of disappointment: "We demand much of the family, making it the focus of our dreams of harmony and the chief obstacle to their realization, the nightmare to be escaped." Scanlon points out that twentieth-century drama in America has been largely concerned with the problems of family life, and he names dramatists including Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, and others as having made major contributions to this theme. Many of the plays that deal with family life are about failure and destruction. Gilroy's *The Subject Was Roses* should be added to the list.

But it is not only dramatists who have been concerned with the modern family. Sociologists and psychologists have also studied the dynamics of families. In the jargon of social science, the Clearys would be labeled a dysfunctional family. One of the most eloquent and practical of writers on this topic has been researcher and lecturer John Bradshaw. His best-selling book *Bradshaw On: The Family* has many insights into the way dysfunctional families operate, insights that shed much light on *The Subject Was Roses*.

A dysfunctional family is one that does not function in a psychologically healthy way. The parents are unable to relate constructively to each other, and they get locked into repetitive negative patterns. Their children get sucked into the destructive family system and end up damaged, sometimes seriously and even permanently, by the warped behaviors that have been imposed on them. Bradshaw quotes from Merle A. Fossum and Marilyn J. Mason's book *Facing Shame: Families in Recovery* (1989):

These people hold tenaciously and unconsciously to a
narrow range of repetitive responses or games that
serve to conceal, rather than reveal themselves to each
other. After years everyone in the family knows each
other's next line in the relational dialogue, and yet
they remain imprisoned by the patterns.

This is a clear description of the dynamics of the Cleary family. John and Nettie have enmeshed themselves in a decades-long pattern of mistrust, blame, and shared resentments. Nothing is ever forgotten. For example, it comes out in Nettie's conversation with Timmy that she is always disparaging the lake house because her husband did not consult her before he bought it—never mind the fact that the house must have been purchased many, many years ago. This accumulation of petty hurts has built up over the years into an impenetrable wall between them. For his part, John

keeps secrets—he does not tell Nettie how much money he has in savings. (When he finally gives Timmy the information, it is with strict instructions not to tell Nettie.) Nettie admits to Timmy that she does not understand her husband and believes she never will. When he goes into one of his moods, as when he berates Timmy for losing his religious faith, there is no possibility of dealing with him.

It is very difficult, as Bradshaw notes of dysfunctional families, to get out of patterns such as this. Act 2, for example, which is the crucial act as far as the possibility of meaningful change is concerned, ends exactly as it began, with John complaining about the coffee. This is no coincidence; the dramatist is clearly giving us a clue that John has learned nothing from the turbulent events of the previous two days.

One of the consequences of a breakdown in love and affection between the parents is that one or both parents will lavish love in an inappropriate way on one of the children. As Bradshaw puts it, "If Dad is a workaholic and never home, one of the children will be Mom's Emotional Spouse since the system needs a marriage for balance." Bradshaw refers to this as "emotional sexual abuse" that results from what he calls "cross-generational bonding." The parents use the child to meet their own needs; the son may become "Mom's Little Man," for example. Emotional sexual abuse, according to Bradshaw, occurs when the parent's relationship with the child becomes more important than the relationship with the spouse.

This is exactly what happens in *The Subject Was Roses*. As a result of her husband's emotional and physical absence (during the earlier part of the marriage he seems to have spent most of his evenings in a bar drinking), Nettie has transferred her love to her son in a way that has become stifling for Timmy. She looks to Timmy for her emotional fulfillment and is upset when she discovers that he is no longer willing to play the game. The nature of their relationship is revealed in the first scene of the play. She takes hold of his hand in an affectionate gesture and will not release it, even though Timmy is embarrassed and uneasy about the gesture. But when they start dancing the polka, Timmy is no longer embarrassed, and there is something almost sexual about the dance, as mother and son move faster and faster, laughing hysterically and then fall to the floor together, breathing in a labored fashion.

There could hardly be a greater contrast than with Nettie's relations with John. Whereas she is physically affectionate to her son, she is the opposite with her husband. She is sexually frigid. After their night out downtown, when John squeezes her in a harmless amorous gesture, she gives him a disapproving look. Then when he persists, telling her that he wants her like he has never wanted anything in his life, she tells him he is drunk and rejects him absolutely.

Of course, Nettie has her reasons. She taunts John that she is not "one of [his] hotel whores," alluding to the many sexual affairs that John has had on his business travels. It is obvious that Nettie knows exactly what her husband does, and she is happy to wreak her vengeance when the moment presents itself.

And in the middle of it all is Timmy. As Bradshaw makes clear, the children of a dysfunctional marriage suffer severely, and the effect on Timmy was indeed devastating. Frequent sickness is one symptom that a child may develop, and Timmy was frequently absent from school with one ailment or another. He was simply absorbing the stress generated by his parents. So persistent were these illnesses that his father gave up on his son as a hopeless case and believed that he would not last in the army. The family doctor agreed and was amazed that the army had even taken Timmy. Timmy reports that after he went into the army, and thus got away from his family, he did not have a day's sickness. But it was a while before he realized the causal link between his family and his illnesses.

As a boy, Timmy also had to deal with the frequent absence of his father. In a poignant moment, Timmy tells his father exactly what he used to feel as a child:

All those nights I lay in bed waiting for your key to
turn in the door. Part of me praying you'd come home
safe, part of me dreading the sound of that key
because I knew there'd be a fight.

The continuing tragedy of the Cleary family is caught in this moment because John's mind is on something else, and he does not even hear this confession of a boy's love, his unmet needs, and his fear.

Now listen to Bradshaw, who himself grew up in a dysfunctional family with an alcoholic father. This is Bradshaw's description of his own experience, and it is uncannily similar to Timmy's in the play:

I cried myself to sleep many a night because of my
father's drinking and his abandonment. I laid in bed
frozen with fear waiting for him to come home at
night, never knowing exactly what would happen.

The adult Timmy shows clear signs of his dysfunctional background. This can be seen in his excessive drinking, in which he follows his father's example (as did Bradshaw). Overindulgence in alcohol is often a way of dealing with difficult situations because it can mask a person's real feelings. For example, in act 2, scene 2, when Nettie is missing and neither John nor Timmy knows where she is, Timmy numbs himself emotionally by drinking. He does not allow himself to feel, and so he comes across as callous and uncaring.

But Timmy is also fortunate because he is blessed with intelligence and a desire to break out of old family patterns. Although he is hampered by his drinking, he does come to realize what he must do to forge a new path for himself and his parents.

First, Timmy must grasp and then articulate for himself and his parents the situation in which he has been raised. He must confront the problem head on and, in doing so, get beyond the conspiracy of silence in which many dysfunctional families operate. Since

Nettie and John both lack the ability to alter their habitual responses to each other, it is left to Timmy to act as a parent to his parents.

Timmy makes a brave attempt at it. He makes it clear to his mother that he cannot tolerate the way in which they have related to each other in the past—he is no longer a child. Timmy is also perceptive enough to see the pattern whereby he and his mother form an alliance against his father. He tells her bluntly that this must stop. A little later in the same scene (act 2, scene 1), he confronts his mother about how she would always pressure him to visit his cousin. It reached a point at which Timmy felt so guilty when he did not visit his cousin on Sundays that he was unable to enjoy whatever else he was doing. This pattern, persisting over years, has led him to hate Sundays, and he thinks that he always will. But at least he is now able to give expression to his anger, to say how he really feels.

Timmy also finds the courage to talk about the past, to reach back and feel again what he felt as a child. It is axiomatic in the "recovery" movement that a person must first re-experience the pain he or she suffered as a child, which may have been blocked out as a defense mechanism. Timmy is able to go back to how he felt as a boy, not only when his father came home late but also when he was six years old and his infant brother John was dying. In that incident, the young Timmy revealed his deep insecurity regarding the relationship between his father and mother. This is how he describes the incident to his father: "I asked you if you loved her. You nodded. I asked you to say it. You hesitated. I got hysterical. To quiet me you finally said, 'I love her.'" Thus did the father persuade the son to participate in a charade in which they must both pretend to believe what they both know is untrue.

But at some point in the recovery process there must be forgiveness. As Bradshaw puts it, "We are forgiving ourselves and we are forgiving our parents." Timmy shows that he can take the first step in that direction, too. He tells his mother in act 2 that when he came home from the army, he started blaming her for everything that was wrong, whereas before he had always blamed his father. Now, he says, "I suspect that no one's to blame. . . . Not even me." Timmy can now see that there is no point in blaming; both his parents are damaged people, too, and could hardly do anything else but unwittingly pass along their troubles to their son.

Even with forgiveness, however, it may well be that the child must leave his family in order to heal. If he does not do this physically, he must do it psychologically. "Leaving home means separating from our family system," writes Bradshaw. "Only by leaving and becoming separate can we have the choice of having a relationship with our parents. Relationship demands separation and detachment." And this is the decision that Timmy makes. He knows that if he does not leave home quickly, he will get pulled into the dysfunctional family dynamic to such an extent that he will never be able to leave. Although his parents may not yet realize it, sometimes a goodbye may also be an act of love.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on *The Subject Was Roses,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Trudell is a freelance writer with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In the following essay, Trudell takes a close look at the language of Gilroy's play to reveal some important psychological subtext. The Subject Was Roses follows the conventions of a realist play; it is intensely focused on very lifelike characters in a familiar and immediately believable situation. The dialogue sounds like it has been transcribed from real conversation, and the audience gets the sense that they are peering into an actual household. As Howard Taubman writes in his 1964 *New York Times* review that hails the reemergence of realist drama: "Mr. Gilroy's realism is not cluttered. He writes with spareness and simplicity. With shrewd prudence he lays the groundwork for some of his most amusing and touching lines like a trapper setting out his snares." By the end of the play, there emerges a very coherent sense of the Cleary family dynamic because of the "shrewd prudence" of Gilroy's carefully woven story. The snapshot of the West Bronx household provides a wider understanding of how the family has always worked. Taubman's phrases, "shrewd prudence" and "trapper setting out his snares" are subtle indications of the possibility that Gilroy may be hinting at a more complex world than what might have been expected—one not altogether "amusing and touching." Indeed, closely analyzing the language of the play suggests that Gilroy plants a great deal of psychological trauma beneath the surface of what is heard.

Very soon in the play, it becomes apparent that Gilroy's most common and important linguistic device is verbal repetition. Although this does contribute to the realism of the dialogue, since people repeat many words in actual speech, it is so pronounced that one begins to wonder whether Gilroy is hinting at something by it. At the beginning of the first scene, for example, after John says, "*You* sound ready to repeat the old mistakes," he and Nettie repeat "mistakes" three more times in the next several lines. Gilroy is foreshadowing; he is subtly communicating to the audience that John and Nettie are repeating the same mistakes, in both language and action. Throughout the play, repetition will underscore this sense of being stuck and contained in some kind of pattern.

After a while, linguistic devices such as repetition begin to make the audience wonder why certain words are emphasized. In scene 1, "exceptional," "jealous," "curtains," and other words are repeated at least three times within a short space. Immediately after the "mistakes" repetition, Gilroy employs the similar linguistic device of rhyme: "protégé," "prodigy," "army," and three instances of "baby" all rhyme and draw attention to these words. In the middle of the first scene, Nettie repeats "guess" four times in as many lines, and then she and her son say "waffles" six times in ten lines. Is the author trying to drill something into the audiences' brains? Why do certain words receive so much emphasis?

Gilroy is careful not to answer these questions directly; the best one can do is make some informed guesses about the complex issues lurking beneath the surface of the language. He may be leaving them purposefully ambiguous, in part, so the director of a production of the play has artistic freedom enough to give the play a particular slant.

The production that the critic Howard Taubman saw, for example, seems as though it had a fairly tame portrait of characters who, he writes in the *New York Times Theater Reviews, 1920-1970. Vol. 7* "are described delicately, honestly and humorously and they emerge as honest enough to be more than ordinary." It does not sound like it exposed any disturbing psychological trauma.

But, the subtext of Gilroy's language suggests that such a production would have ignored some of the most important issues in the play. In the case of the repetition of "waffles," for example, the ensuing interaction between Timmy and his mother suggests, first, that he is stuck in some way. While the waffles are burning and sticking to the waffle iron, Timmy is becoming increasingly uncomfortable with his mother's touch. He repeats most of his phrases and, when Nettie starts to cry she uses "stuck," "stick," and "stuck" in her next three lines. Then they repeat "forget" four times in four lines, after Nettie once again (out of nowhere) brings up being upset that Timmy forgot waffles were his favorite.

At this point, Gilroy has his audience exactly where he wants them: guessing wildly at why Timmy is avoiding Nettie, why she holds his hand for so long, why things are awkward, and why Timmy seems somehow stuck. Then, at the point of the highest tension and confusion about what is under the surface of their words, Timmy shouts that they were supposed to have a dance, and that "It's been on my mind all along." This wild and physical interaction must somehow explain all of the tension that has been building up. They have a long dance, during which Timmy repeats "Hang on" five times, with stage directions that become increasingly wilder. Finally, when they "*breathe laboredly*" on the floor, Timmy says, "I'm dead . . . absolutely dead."

Since death is a very old pun on a sexual orgasm, Nettie and Timmy have such an intimate and unexplained connection, and Nettie has previously repeated that she is jealous of Timmy's time with John, it would not be out of line to consider the possibility that some incestuous desire lurks beneath the surface of the language. In fact, given the large amount of psychologically traumatic subtext in the play, Gilroy is very likely to be thinking of the theories of Sigmund Freud, a psychoanalyst famously interested in the process by which a son is attracted to his mother and must eventually detach himself from her to emerge as a healthy adult. Freud believed this desire takes place in the subconscious mind, so it is appropriate that manifestations of his thinking (which was still very important at the time Gilroy wrote his play) appear in the subtext of the playwright's dramatic language.

Gilroy's main plot, that of Timmy detaching himself from his parents, is in many ways reminiscent of a Freudian psychological case study. For Freud, the first step in the process of emerging from the home is a young man's identification with his father. Gilroy's linguistic repetition frequently links father and son. For example, Timmy repeats John's phrase "Bless us and save us," and John insistently repeats Timmy's "Abra ka dabra." Timmy and John also mirror each other in their heavy drinking and their interest in the army—and the father and son are in a sort of competition for possession of the mother, which is the key to Freudian psychoanalysis. Ultimately, in Freud's understanding of an emergence from psychological trauma, the son must detach

himself from the mother and embrace the father. After Timmy says he loves John, this embrace is precisely what happens at the end of *The Subject Was Roses*.

A Freudian interpretation of Gilroy's subtext sheds light on a variety of subplots in the play. For example, one can understand much better Nettie's lines at the end of act 2, scene 3: "'Who loves you, Nettie?' . . . 'You do, Papa . . . 'Why, Nettie? 'Because I'm a nice girl, Papa.'" We can imagine that the traumatic situation with Timmy has, for a brief moment, caused her to regress to the Freudian stage of desire for her father. She seems to handle Timmy's departure slightly better, but nevertheless remains rather unhappy and stuck at the end of the play, and Gilroy is able to suggest this by showing her at the opposite point of emergence from infantile desire. The playwright signals that both she and John are caught in the pattern from which Timmy will finally emerge. This theme is underscored by John's final repetition of his familiar monologue about coffee, because repetition is, still, a primary sign of being stuck.

Perhaps the best emblem of Freudian psychology in *The Subject Was Roses*, however, is that of the roses themselves. If one takes the title literally, one has the most overt clue as to the meaning of the play's subtext. Gilroy must expect his audience to consider that the subject of the play is the meaning of the bouquet of roses, which is a symbol of devotion and love that is variously misunderstood and misplaced until it can no longer hold the family together. Beginning as Timmy's idea, the roses make Nettie cry with happiness because they are falsely placed as the gift of the father. This act symbolizes Timmy taking his father's place as the male who desires the mother. Indeed, the end of the scene in which Nettie receives the roses consists of a howling competition between John and Timmy; Gilroy is once again linking the men by repetition. Then, the happiest family scene of the play occurs, but it is shortly followed by Nettie's climactic disillusionment about the roses after the vase bursts. Here, the playwright subtly alludes to the war and its changing effect on Timmy, who says, "Sounded like a bomb." Once the family reaches this climax, and Timmy is no longer able to be fixated on his mother, Gilroy begins act 2's downward spiral to Nettie's breakdown and Timmy's departure from the family. The war, like the shattering of the vase of roses, forces Timmy away from his psychologically traumatic childhood and into the emergence from being stuck at home that the playwright symbolizes with Freudian psychology.

Again, Gilroy's subtext is ambiguous enough that such a Freudian interpretation should not be considered the only way to understand the play. There is little doubt that Gilroy wants his audience to be guessing at some kind of psychological conflict beneath the surface. This is especially clear when Timmy mysteriously addresses the audience after John says, "*Will somebody tell me what's going on*?" in act 3, scene 2: "You heard the question. (*He peers out into the theatre, points.*)" Such a technique draws the audience into the action and does not allow them to have a superficial view of the realist play they are watching. The playwright is directly asking the audience to guess why there are so many hints of trauma in his play and fill in the blanks themselves.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on *The Subject Was Roses,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

DeFrees has a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Virginia as well as a law degree from the University of Texas, and she is a published writer and an editor. In the following essay, DeFrees discusses Gilroy's simple but devastating creation of cyclical patterns that spin a family into emotional ruin.

The sting of *The Subject Was Roses* is that there is no crescendo in the plot, no chase scene, no block-buster action, but the emotion evinced through the dialogue is so terrifically raw that the reader can palpably feel the texture of the sofa in the middle-class living room, the satin of the roses, the consternation edging each of the characters' faces. In subtly using a very domestic scene, in which no huge event overwhelms the plot, playwright Frank Gilroy deftly and devastatingly examines the cyclical nature of pain within familial bonds. By the end of the play, the audience is gasping, not out of surprise or due to any huge plot twist, but from having to face the totality of familial strife: it is pervasive, hurtful, and, as seen through the eyes of Gilroy, unavoidable.

The play opens with John Cleary contemplating an army jacket hanging from his kitchen door. The jacket belongs to his son, who has just returned home the previous evening from a three-year tour of duty in the United States Army during World War II. The father examines the jacket with rapt attention, and furtively begins to try it on when he hears his wife, Nettie, returning home from grocery shopping. John scrambles to return the jacket to the hanger and sit down at the table, where he pretends to be engrossed in the newspaper. Immediately, it is clear that the character feels that he has something to hide from his wife, although it is not clear just how much.

Nettie enters the house and pronounces, "It's a lovely day . . . is Timmy still asleep?" In playwright Gilroy's excerpted notes from his diary on May 24, 1965, written while *The Subject Was Roses* was in rehearsal, Gilroy wrote, "I gave Irene (the actor playing Nettie) a new line to say at her first entrance: 'It's a lovely day.' It sets her mood." Through that line, the mood opens with the possibility of celebration—a "lovely" day, the memories of a party, a fond examination of the jacket. But, within one page of dialogue, the language settles into an all-too-familiar cadence of emotional war. Nettie muses about the party the previous night and wonders if Timmy, their son, had a good time. John mentions that it was the first time he had seen his son "take a drink," and an argument begins that threads through the remainder of the play. Though the mood occasionally lifts, it is always a lingering specter, rushing back into the conversations between the characters with a constancy that only deeply ingrained patterns allow. John emphasizes this point a few lines later. He states, "It was a boy that walked out of this house three years ago. It's a man that's come back in." Nettie tells him he "sounds like a recruiting poster," and John retorts, "*You* sound ready to repeat the old mistakes." She presses him to know what mistakes he is referring to, but he tries to skirt the issue, as he does repeatedly during the course of the play. In fact, all three of the characters habitually avoid answering questions posed by the other characters, to the point that the characters will be talking to one another but having completely different conversations.

It is rather funny, but in a deeply pathetic way. For instance, when Timmy first enters the breakfast room, he tries to talk to his mother about his father, but she reverts back to talking about breakfast, and will do anything not to talk about her husband with her son, such as in the dialogue that follows:

Nettie: How did you sleep?
Timmy: Fine . . . How's he feeling?
Nettie: All right.
Timmy: He looks a lot older.
Nettie: It's been two years . . . It must have seemed
strange. Sleeping in your own bed.
Timmy: Yes . . . How's his business?
Nettie: Who knows?
Timmy: The coffee market's off.
Nettie: I hope you're hungry.
Timmy: I can't get over the change in him.
Nettie: Guess what we're having for breakfast.
Timmy: It's not just the way he looks.
Nettie: *Guess what we're having for breakfast.* Guess
what we're having.

Italics in the written script indicate yelling; Nettie is so desperate to not talk about her husband with her son, that she finally yells at him about something as unimportant as breakfast, just to force him back to the immediate and away from his thoughts. The play's characters again show an inability, or unwillingness, to hear one another when John and Nettie are alone in the kitchen, the morning after they have had a searing fight. John states that his "[c]offee's weak," and Nellie replies, "Add water." John says, "I said *weak,*" and launches into a series of taunts to try to draw Nettie into an argument. They fail to hear even the simplest comments made to one another. And earlier, when Timmy and John are discussing the possibility of college for Timmy, and Timmy tries to find out his father's financial situation, John refuses to answer his questions. John says he will help Timmy out financially if college costs more than a G.I. Bill covers, and then asks Timmy not to tell anyone—including his wife—that he said that, because "I don't want people getting wrong notions." When Timmy asks what wrong notions, John answers, "That I'm loaded." When Timmy point-blank asks if indeed he is "loaded," John refuses to answer. Timmy continues, relentlessly, to try to pry out of John his net worth, but John refuses to budge. Even after John threatens to leave the house if Timmy asks him again whether he is "loaded," Timmy's subtle interrogation continues. He wants to know how much his father makes; he simply wants to know more about his father, but John continually cuts him off. In the next lines, Timmy prods John into talking about how John met Nettie. John starts to talk about Nettie, and how he met her on the subway, but when Timmy tells him that it "sounds like an ordinary pick-up to me," John shuts down, claiming, "I *Well, it wasn't* . . . I left some things out (of the story)." Timmy prods him on, asking what he left out, but John wants to retreat, and says only, "I don't remember . . . It was twenty-five years ago." John does start to recall more events regarding his meeting Nettie for the first time, but when he begins to recall the tension between his middle class family and Nettie's evident higher-class upbringing, he eyes

Timmy and grows embarrassed, silencing himself in the midst of his recollection. As quickly as the storytelling began to bring the men together, it ended.

The Subject Was Roses presents a family that has never learned how to tell stories to one another or how to share memories. Memories are the keystones to familial bonding—the stories family members tell one another bond them together and help an individual to understand why he sees the world as he does. Often, it is the way a story is told that introduces a truce or reminds individuals why they remain in their relationships. When the ability to hear and understand one another's stories breaks down, a communication gap builds until it is nearly impossible to relate to one another. John, Nettie, and Timmy reached this breaking point before Timmy left for the war. In the interim, John and Nettie have continued the vicious emotional cycle of isolation and distrust. When Timmy returns, John and Nettie are prepared to return to their habitual use of their son as both a weapon and a shield against one another. However, while they have stagnated, Timmy has changed, and he is no longer willing to be a pawn in his parents' games. After he has a painful argument with his father one morning, Timmy immediately regrets the fight. Furious with himself, he asks, "I should have gone with him. . . . Why didn't I just go? Why did I have to make an issue?" Nettie tries to comfort him by telling him that it is not his fault, to which he responds, "It never *is.*" Nettie continues by telling him that when John is "in one of those moods," there is nothing to be done, and when Timmy recalls that John referred to Timmy and Nettie as "the alliance," Nettie prattles on with a cold retort, "Everyone's entitled to their own beliefs." But, something clicks in Timmy; he hears the real anguish—of loneliness—causing his father's anger. In a flash, Timmy imagines what it might have been like to have been his father, and a rush of compassion sweeps through him. When he tries to make his mother see what has been wrong in their relationship, in the way that she has always pitted herself and Timmy against John, she refuses to see his point of view. Timmy explains to her, "[t]hat's what we must seem like to him—an alliance. Always two against one. Always us against him. . . . Why?" Nettie ignores his question completely, saying, "If you're through eating, I'll clear the table." But, Timmy will not be ignored. "Didn't you hear me?" he asks. She ignores him again, and he resorts, much like his father, to shouting:

Timmy: *I'm not talking about this morning.*
Nettie: There's no need to shout.
Timmy: You, and him, and me, and what's been going
on here for twenty years. . . . It's got to stop.
Nettie: What's got to stop?
Timmy: We've got to stop ganging up on him.
Nettie: Is that what we've been doing?
Timmy: You said you've never understood him.
Nettie: And never will.
Timmy: Have you ever really tried? . . .
Nettie: Go on.
Timmy: Have you ever tried to see things from his
point of view?
Netie: What things?

Timmy finally makes her discuss the situation, but the ensuing conversation is an exercise in ingrained opinion. Either she cannot or will not move beyond her version of the story she tells herself about her relationship with her husband. Finally, her son, like her husband, resorts to cruelty to shock her out of her opinions. For the first time, Timmy sees his father's side of the story, and the only way he can defend his father is by attacking his mother. Timmy tells his mother that he is leaving to meet up with John, and that he will only go to dinner at Nettie's mother's house if John goes, as well. When Nettie tries to play the guilt card by telling Timmy that he is disappointing his handicapped cousin by not making an appearance, it is too much. Timmy launches a full attack, telling his mother how cruel she had been in dragging him to his cousin's house every Sunday during his childhood, filling him with guilt whenever he did not go. He tells her, "I hate Sunday, and I don't think I'll ever get over it. But I'm going to try." He tried to work with his mother on reconciling things with his father; this failing, he returned to the familiar cycle of answering hate with hate, only regretting his actions after it was too late —the verbal assault has been unleashed, his relationship with his mother irrevocably altered. Nettie exits the room after Timmy's attack on her, her hurt evident. Timmy immediately regrets his actions and tries to find a way to reconcile with her, but she goes to her room, gathers her purse full of coins, and moves toward the front door. Timmy begs her to say something, to which she responds, "Thank you for the roses," and exits. She has shattered any hope in Timmy of his parents' reconciliation. The roses line makes clear to him that his father has told his mother that the roses she received the day before were from Timmy, and not John's idea at all. The fact that the gift of the roses was the first act in a long time that warmed Nettie toward John becomes a cruel joke, when she discovers that that one thing to which she had pinned her hopes with regard to her relationship with her husband was a lie. At the moment she utters this line, it is clear to Timmy that the circumstances that led he and his parents into their cycle of hatred cannot be blamed on one particular person—rather, it was a confluence of events, and of each character's personal history, that led to the way things are. As Timmy later explains to Nettie, "When I left this house three years ago, I blamed him for everything that was wrong here. . . . When I came home, I blamed you. . . . Now I suspect that no one's to blame . . . Not even me. Good night." It is a conciliatory gesture, one that lets everyone off the hook. When Timmy moves out of the house the next day, it is without blame and with an acceptance that he has the power to change his own mind, but neither the power nor the desire to will his parents from their stubborn states.

There is a ring of horror that pervades the almost sanguine story in *The Subject Was Roses*. It seems to be the thesis of the play that no one escapes unharmed from family life, that it does not matter who, in the end, is to blame—every member of a family suffers from the indignities of emotional distance and the intuitive, predatory human habit to attack before being attacked. Jealousy comes round to jealously, compassion to compassion, love to love, hate to hate, and life, in the end, is an endless loop out of which an individual must step on his own.

Source: Allison Leigh DeFrees, Critical Essay on *The Subject Was Roses,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

Adaptations

The Subject Was Roses was made into a movie by MGM in 1968, starring Patricia Neal, Jack Albertson, and Martin Sheen. It was directed by Ulu Grosbard with a screenplay by Gilroy. It is currently available on VHS videotape.

Topics for Further Study

Research the history of the family in U.S. society over the last one hundred years. What are the main changes that have taken place? Are these changes for the better or worse? Explain your viewpoint.

Describe some of the main differences between a functional family and a dysfunctional one. What kinds of behaviors occur in each?

Is it better for parents who are always fighting to get divorced or should they stay together for the sake of the children? Are the children better or worse off if their quarreling parents divorce? Explain your viewpoint.

How are the conflicts between parents and children today similar to and different from those in the play, which takes place in 1946? Why is it often difficult for families to communicate with each other about the issues that divide them?

Compare and Contrast

1940s: Automobile production was suspended during World War II and as a result, stocks are low. In 1945, there are 25 million registered vehicles in the United States, but over half of these are more than ten years old. But immediately after the war, there is a boom in production and by 1950, U.S. production of automobiles accounts for two-thirds of the world total.

1960s: Studebaker Packard introduces seat belts as standard equipment on all models, the first U.S. auto manufacturer to do so. Ford introduces the Mustang at a base price of $2,300. But the U.S. auto industry is losing ground to world competition. By 1965, the United States is producing only 45 percent of world output.

Today: Whereas in 1946 in America owning a car was a sign of success, today owning a car is considered a necessity. Today's automobiles are far superior in terms of safety, reliability, and performance, to those of a generation ago. In addition, they cost a smaller percentage of most workers' incomes than they did in 1964. (The base retail price of a 2002 Ford Mustang is $17,475 to $28,645.) However, the United States is no longer the leading manufacturer of automobiles, running second to Japan.

1940s: After World War II, religion in America undergoes a resurgence. This includes Catholicism as well as Protestant Christianity. The notion of church and family as the fundamental pillars of society becomes established.

1960s: As the social changes of the 1960s begin to make themselves felt, traditional Christian religious beliefs and practices are called into question. The number of young men in the United States who enter the Catholic priesthood begins to decline. The decline will continue for thirty years, until 1997.

Today: There are 63 million Catholics in the United States. This is the largest religious group in the country. The Catholic Church is also the nation's largest provider of private education, with 2.7 million students attending Catholic schools. However, in 2001 and 2002, the Church is shaken by a series of scandals involving sexual abuse by Catholic priests.

1940s: World War II is over, and America is prosperous. Having developed and used the atom bomb to end Japanese resistance, the United States is the sole nuclear power in the world, but the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union is looming on the horizon.

1960s: The buildup of U.S. forces in Vietnam begins after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, in which North Vietnamese patrol boats are alleged to have fired on U.S. ships.

Today: Following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, the United States is engaged in a war very different from either World War II or Vietnam. The enemy is not a nation but a terrorist organization that transcends national borders.

What Do I Read Next?

Gilroy's *I Wake Up Screening!: Everything You Need to Know about Making Independent Films, Including a Thousand Reasons Not To* (1993) is a less-than-rosy picture of the independent film industry. Gilroy wrote it while directing, producing, and distributing four independent feature films.

Gilroy's *Plays: Selections,* Vol. 1, *Complete Full-Length Plays, 1962-1999* (2000), contains seven full-length plays: *The Subject Was Roses, Who'll Save the Plowboy*? (1962), *That Summer—That Fall* (1967), *The Only Game in Town* (1968), *Last Licks* (1979), *Any Given Day* (1993), and *Contact with the Enemy* (1999).

Useful for anyone in an intimate relationship, *How Can I Get Through to You: Reconnecting Men and Women* (2002) by psychotherapist Terrence Real is an analysis of what is wrong with contemporary marriages and provides a prescription for improving them.

Produced on Broadway only two years before *The Subject Was Roses,* Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962) is also a domestic drama that portrays a bad marriage. Considered to be Albee's best play, it is more harrowing and vicious than Gilroy's. The husband and wife create fabrications about their lives and play devious mental games with each other in order to cope with the pain of existence.

Further Study

Lewis, Allan, *American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre,* rev. ed., Crown, 1970.

This is a readable survey of plays and playwrights from 1957 to the late 1960s. Lewis intends it as a guide to the complex diversity of the theatre of his day. Gilroy is briefly mentioned.

Murphy, Brenda, *American Realism and American Drama, 1880-1940,* Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Although this survey ends well before Gilroy's era, it is a valuable study of how domestic realism came to be the dominant form of American theater.

Reynolds, Catherine, "Recommended: Frank D. Gilroy," in *English Journal,* Vol. 75, October 1986, pp. 71-72.

This is an appreciation of Gilroy's work as a whole, with particular reference to *The Subject Was Roses,* the one-act *Present Tense,* and the novel, *Private.*

Roudané, Matthew C., *American Drama since 1960: A Critical History,* Twayne, 1996.

Roudané concentrates on about two-dozen dramatists who have shaped American drama since 1960. He pays particular attention to African-American and women playwrights as well as to prominent male figures such as Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, David Mamet, and Arthur Miller.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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