Talley's Folly Study Guide

Talley's Folly by Lanford Wilson

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Lanford Wilson's romantic comedy *Talley's Folly* is the second of three plays in what came to be known as Wilson's Talley Family series. The first play in the saga, *5th of July* (later renamed *Fifth of July*), takes place in 1977, as members of the Talley family struggle with capitalism and the Vietnam War. Among the characters is the recently widowed Aunt Sally, who values the family home more than she values money. When the actress playing Sally in the original production of *Fifth of July* asked Wilson for help in understanding her character, he wrote *Talley's Folly* to show how Sally and her husband Matt became a couple in 1944. Two years later Wilson added a third episode to the story, *Talley & Son*, first produced in 1981.

Talley's Folly shows one evening in the courtship of two unlikely lovers, Sally Talley and Matt Friedman. Sally is from a conservative, small-town, wealthy family of bigoted Protestants, and Matt is a Jewish accountant twelve years older than Sally. The story of how they become brave enough to reveal their most painful secrets touched audiences and critics, and the play's Broadway run was a great success. First produced in 1979, the play was nominated for several Tony Awards and won the Pulitzer Prize and other awards in 1980. More than two decades after its first production, *Talley's Folly* is frequently staged and is considered one of Wilson's most hopeful and affirming plays.

Author Biography

Lanford Wilson was born on April 13, 1937, in Lebanon, Missouri, the town in which he set *Talley's Folly* and two other plays. His parents divorced when he was five years old, and he moved from place to place within Missouri with his mother and grandmother until he was a teenager. Although he has described his youth as a happy time, he never had what he created for the Talley family: a permanent home with a stable extended family.

At an early age, Wilson discovered a love for films, and then for the theater. He went to the movies as often as he could, and began acting in high school plays. As he became more involved with theater, he came to feel that plays had more potential than films to create magic and to touch an audience deeply. He attended Southwest Missouri State College for a few years, exploring his interests in art, but left without a degree and without a plan for his life. Finally he moved to Chicago, and experienced city life for the first time.

In Chicago, Wilson worked for a time as a prostitute, immersed himself in the city's night life, and met people who were unlike those back in Lebanon, Missouri. Later, he would turn many of these experiences into material for his urban plays. Wilson became a graphic designer and continued to write short stories, finally turning one story into a play and finding his true calling.

He moved in 1962 to Greenwich Village in New York, determined to make his way in the theater. Joseph Cino, an important figure in the Off-Off Broadway movement, became Wilson's mentor, critiquing his scripts and eventually staging the first production of a Wilson play, *So Long at the Fair*. The one-act play, about a young man from the Midwest struggling to become an artist, was wellreceived, and was soon followed by other successes.

By 1967, Wilson had seen several of his plays reach the stage in New York and London and throughout Europe. Then Cino committed suicide, and Wilson suffered a depression that lasted more than a year. When he emerged in 1969, he joined three other artists in founding the Circle Repertory Company, dedicated to building a collaborative community of actors, directors, writers, and designers. Over the next three decades, Circle Repertory produced many of Wilson's most important works. The company earned an international reputation for excellence, and Wilson won several national awards for his work.

In 1978, "Circle Rep" produced Wilson's *Fifth of July*, the first in what has come to be known as the Talley Series. The second play in the series was *Talley's Folly*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1980. Wilson continued to write plays for Circle Rep and to work closely with promising new playwrights.

Plot Summary

Talley's Folly opens with the frank revelation that this is a play: the set, which under the proper lighting represents a boathouse surrounded by weeds and trees, is here illuminated by work lights and the house lights, so that the artificiality of the set is obvious. Matt speaks directly to the audience, announcing that the play will run for ninety-seven minutes with no intermission, and that the story will unfold as a waltz, a valentine. If all goes well, he says, the play will end with a romance. He is somewhat nervous as he reveals that one year earlier he met Sally at a dance and the two were together in this same boathouse; he has returned to ask for her hand. Matt points up the hill to the Talley family home and explains that, even in this remote small town, world events including the Great Depression and the Second World War have their influence. He also describes Sally, whom he calls a "terrible embarrassment to her family." As Sally approaches the boathouse and calls Matt's name, the lights dim, the stage takes on its conventional theatrical appearance, and Matt steps into his character. For nearly the rest of the play, Sally and Matt will speak only to each other.

From their first moment on stage together, there is tension between Matt and Sally. She has just come home from work to find her family upset about the "communist traitor infidel" Matt—who came to the door asking for Sally. Although Sally's brother believes he has run Matt off with his shotgun, Sally has guessed that Matt is waiting for her in the boathouse. Matt has come to claim Sally for his own, but she insists she has no intention of encouraging his courtship. As the two squabble and Sally demands that Matt leave, several things are revealed: Matt has written Sally a letter every day since he last saw her a year ago; Sally has responded only once, asking him to stop writing. Matt tried to visit Sally at the hospital where she is a nurse's aide, but she refused to see him. Matt mocks the Talley family for their accent, their narrow-mindedness, and their bigotry, and although Sally tries to defend them she is clearly disgusted with them herself.

Matt is determined to keep the conversation going so Sally will not leave or send him back to St. Louis, where he works as an accountant. He senses, as the audience does, that beneath her scolding she does truly love him. He admires the beauty of the Talley land, and Sally also expresses appreciation for its beauty. He coaxes from Sally the story of Uncle Whistler, who built the whimsical boathouse in 1870. Like Sally, he was odd, a misfit, and Sally calls him "the healthiest member of the family."

Finding an old pair of ice skates in the boathouse, Matt tries them on. He and Sally share a brief moment of intimacy as they hold hands and pretend to skate across the floor, but Matt spoils it by referring to Sally as his "girl," and she backs off again. She almost leaves the boathouse and ends the encounter, but Matt falls through the rotting floor and Sally comes back to be sure that he is not hurt. Now Matt urges Sally to remember their "affair" of last summer, when they were together every day for a week. Sally remembers, but claims to attach no importance to their time together. Matt begs her not to let fear keep them apart. He knows that the fact that he is Jewish and older is a scandal for her family, but he is sure she loves him in spite of their differences. He

points out that although she claims to have come to send him away, she has put on a pretty new dress to do it. Why won't she admit that she loves him?

Now Matt reveals that he has learned quite a bit about Sally's past by talking with her patients in the hospital and with her Aunt Charlotte. Matt knows that Sally is not in sympathy with her capitalist family, and that they consider her an "old maid." Charlotte is apparently the only spirited member of the family, and she has encouraged Matt to pursue Sally. Charlotte's approval intrigues Sally, who tries to turn the conversation to Matt's past, which he has refused to talk about. In the play's most wrenching episode, Matt hesitatingly, through a series of jokes and indirections, tells the story of his family's torture and murder in Europe when he was a child, before World War I. He was smuggled into the United States by an uncle, and has never recovered from the trauma of his childhood. Although he is forty-two years old, he has never dared love a woman before, because he has vowed never to bring children into this cruel world, and he has not thought any woman would want to marry him under those conditions. Sally, he is sure, is a woman who thinks and feels as he does, and he is confident of her love for him.

When Sally hears Matt's story, she is not swept away with passion, but instead becomes angry with him. She believes that he has made up his horrible story only to trick her into loving him, and that Aunt Charlotte has told Matt Sally's secret: an illness has left her unable to bear children. Sally was engaged to be married after high school to the handsome son in the town's other leading family, which would have created a merger of the town's richest empires. Her infertility made the marriage—and Sally—no longer useful to the families, and the engagement was broken.

Matt convinces Sally that he did not know her secret, that his story is true. They are a perfect couple, he says, because they love each other, they think alike, and they want the same things. At last, Sally agrees. Matt and Sally kiss and agree to leave for St. Louis right away. Matt speaks directly to the audience once more, pointing out that the waltz of love has ended exactly as he promised.

Summary

"Talley's Folly" is the story of one night in the lives of two unlikely sweethearts, Matt Friedman and Sally Talley. The one-act play takes place in a dilapidated boathouse on the Talley farm in Missouri. It is the Fourth of July in 1944.

The play opens with Matt directly addressing the audience, telling them that the play will take 97 minutes and he hopes to capture and relate his story properly in that amount of time. Taking the time to point out some staging elements, he tells the audience that the gazebo-like structure next to him is called a folly, a Victorian boathouse, which has unfortunately fallen into disrepair.

While on vacation in Lebanon, Missouri the previous summer, Matt met Sally and has sent her a letter every day since. Replies from Sally gave him no hope for romantic encouragement, but he has bravely returned to ask her to marry him.

At first Sally is in disbelief that Matt has shown up uninvited, even though he had written her that he planned to come for the holiday. When Sally arrives home from work, her aunt tells her that Matt is waiting for her in the boathouse. Matt's arrival has created quite a stir at the white Protestant household, where a Jewish man is not welcomed easily, especially when his intentions are to court their daughter, twelve years younger than he.

Matt's interest in Sally had never waned and Matt would drive from his home in St. Louis to the hospital where she works and wait hours for her, even after being informed that she was not available.

Uncomfortable with Matt's sudden appearance, Sally is at a loss for words. Matt, however, can talk to fill any space and comments on the boathouse structure. Sally tells him it was constructed by her uncle, who built follies all over town. Her uncle did only what he wanted to do and Sally considers him the healthiest member of the family for his courage.

Spotting some abandoned ice skates lying on the floor, Matt puts them on and engages Sally in an imaginary ice-skating waltz. True to his clumsiness, Matt falls and crashes through the weakened floor boards. He manages to crawl out, spurred on by Sally's warning of snakes in the water below.

After determining that Matt is not injured, the couple begins to reminisce about the night they met and the time they spent together last summer. Sally's conservative parents did not approve of the relationship, which she consequently has not encouraged. Matt takes it as a positive sign that she has changed into a nice dress before coming to see him tonight. Sally's protests do not match her behavior and he pushes forward; she is the most mysterious and intriguing girl he has ever met and he determined quite a while ago to make her his wife.

Admitting that he has called Sally's aunt every two weeks during the past year, Matt reveals that he knows Sally was fired from a Sunday school teaching job. Apparently, she had been encouraging the students to read Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in addition to the Methodist reader. The rise of labor unions was affecting the families of the children in her class and she felt obligated to help educate them. Her unorthodox methods earned her the consternation of the church elders as well as her own family members, who own the garment factory around which the labor issue centered.

Turning the tables, Sally tries to glean some information about Matt's background, a subject about which he is very guarded. Not able to face her, he tells Sally that he was probably born in Kaunas, Lithuania. His father had been an engineer who concealed his Jewish religion in order to continue working in Germany. In 1911, his father was overheard in a French cafy discussing his work on the nitrogen bomb and was immediately arrested.

Matt's father and little sister were tortured until the French finally admitted that the father had no information of any value to them. In the meantime, the sister had fallen into a coma from which she never awoke. Released to the Germans, the family was detained, except for Matt who eventually escaped to America through the help of some relatives.

Haunted by his childhood grief, Matt vowed never to bring another child into a world that is filled with so much pain. He decided to have a vasectomy and live a solitary life as part of the bargain. Going about his daily routines, Matt was content until he met Sally. Now he feels forever changed and hopeful for possibly the first time in his life.

Having risked the vulnerability of revealing his background, Matt feels more confident in pressing Sally to share why she, a beautiful woman of 31 years, has never married. She characteristically diverts the conversation to economics, which frustrates Matt beyond bearing. Sally finally reveals her disappointment in love many years ago, which makes her reticent to fall in love again.

Sally's family had partnered her with Harley Campbell, whose family was also wealthy. Theirs was to be a match made in heaven, especially for the business interests of the two families. Sally had been a cheerleader and Harley a basketball star. The family capitalized on their wholesome good looks to squelch any labor union rumbles in the town. The couple was meant to represent prosperity for the area, and the implication was that no one should vote against the status quo.

Unfortunately, the families' fortunes waned during the Depression. In addition, Sally was struck with tuberculosis and was sequestered for a long time. Eventually, she reveals to Matt that a pelvic infection has left her barren and Harley's family would no longer condone their marriage.

Matt can't help but comment on the irony of their situation. All last winter he lamented over the fact that he was in love with a girl but could never have children, and now this same girl presents him with the same situation. He believes that an angel has guided

his path to her. Sally agrees to marry him and move to the city, and they vow to return to the boathouse every year so they don't ever forget the place where they fell in love.

Analysis

The themes of isolation and alienation are key to this play, although the actual reasons are not revealed until the end when the barriers between the characters have fallen and their vulnerabilities have emerged. Matt's childhood of religious persecution in pre-World War I Germany set him on a self-imposed course of seclusion. Sally's personal and public humiliation have confined her to a solitary life in which she rebels the only way she knows, by teaching independent thought related to the destruction of the wealthy class that has symbolically ruined her life.

Shared alienation forges a bond between Matt and Sally but they will have obstacles to overcome in the form of religious differences. However, Matt's admiration for Sally's disregard for the capitalism that formed her is equal to her respect for his overcoming the persecutions of his childhood. Each of them is healed enough to take the calculated risk of loving again.

By setting the play during World War II, the author shows that the human atrocities occurring in Europe at the time were also in place before the first World War and that man's inhumanity to man knows no time limitations.

Interestingly, Matt and Sally declare their liberation from their restrictive lives on July 4, the date known in America for the celebration of independence.

The play's title, "Talley's Folly," has a double meaning: the boathouse that was one of the unnecessary structures built by Sally's uncle and where the action takes place, and Sally's resistance to new love for so many years. The spirit in which her uncle built the boathouse, simply because it would be beautiful, has sparked in Sally and she is able to see the beauty of love with Matt in spite of the conventional objections.

Analysis

The themes of isolation and alienation are key to this play, although the actual reasons are not revealed until the end when the barriers between the characters have fallen and their vulnerabilities have emerged. Matt's childhood of religious persecution in pre-World War I Germany set him on a self-imposed course of seclusion. Sally's personal and public humiliation have confined her to a solitary life in which she rebels the only way she knows, by teaching independent thought related to the destruction of the wealthy class that has symbolically ruined her life.

Shared alienation forges a bond between Matt and Sally but they will have obstacles to overcome in the form of religious differences. However, Matt's admiration for Sally's disregard for the capitalism that formed her is equal to her respect for his overcoming the persecutions of his childhood. Each of them is healed enough to take the calculated risk of loving again.

By setting the play during World War II, the author shows that the human atrocities occurring in Europe at the time were also in place before the first World War and that man's inhumanity to man knows no time limitations.

Interestingly, Matt and Sally declare their liberation from their restrictive lives on July 4, the date known in America for the celebration of independence.

The play's title, "Talley's Folly," has a double meaning: the boathouse that was one of the unnecessary structures built by Sally's uncle and where the action takes place, and Sally's resistance to new love for so many years. The spirit in which her uncle built the boathouse, simply because it would be beautiful, has sparked in Sally and she is able to see the beauty of love with Matt in spite of the conventional objections.

Characters

Matt Friedman

Matt is an accountant from St. Louis who met and fell in love with Sally a year before the play opens, when he came to Lebanon, Missouri, on vacation. He has been writing to her every day for a year, but her only reply has been to tell him to stop writing. Now Matt has come to Lebanon to propose to Sally in person. Jewish and forty-two years old, Matt seems all wrong for Sally, who is part of a wealthy Methodist family in a conservative, small Midwest town. Still, he is sure that he and Sally share true love, and that together they will have a chance at the happiness that has eluded them both. As the two talk in the old Talley boathouse, Sally denies that she loves Matt, but he refuses to leave. Finally, haltingly, he tells her the story of his family's persecution and murder in Europe, and of his decision never to father children, never to bring another soul into this world. He has never before dared to believe that any woman could love him enough to marry a man who will not father children, but he is sure enough of Sally to declare himself. His admission frees Sally to reveal her own secret, and the two discover a common ground. They agree to elope.

Sally Talley

Sally Talley is a lonely thirty-one-year-old woman who lives with her extended family in Lebanon, Missouri. The Talley family is wealthy and dedicated to conservative capitalism. Sally has let down the family by embracing socialist beliefs and by not marrying into another wealthy family and thereby increasing the family fortune. She works as a nurse's aide in a hospital in Springfield, Missouri, and dreams of getting away from her family. Still, when she meets Matt and falls in love with him, she spends a year denying her feelings. When Matt comes back to Lebanon and meets with her in the old boathouse, she reveals her affection for him but refuses to consider his proposal. She shows herself to be intelligent and quick-witted, but surprisingly lacking in self-confidence. When Matt declares his unwillingness to father children, she reveals her own secret: an illness in her late teens has left her infertile. Sure that no man would ever want to marry her, she has grown content as a single woman, but she learns that Matt will not resent her inability to bear children. Knowing that her family will not accept Matt, she agrees to elope that night and goes up to the house to pack.

Themes

Prejudice and Tolerance

One of the hurdles Sally and Matt have to overcome if they are to be a couple is the intolerance of those around them. Sally, although she is white, Methodist, wealthy, and reasonably attractive, does not fit in with her family or community because she does not embrace the capitalism that has secured her family's fortune. She has been fired as a Sunday school teacher for encouraging her students to think positively about labor unions. Perhaps most scandalous to her family, Sally is still unmarried at thirty-one, and rather than being disgraced by this she has grown content to be alone. Because of the unwillingness of her family to embrace different ways of thinking, Sally's only pleasures come outside her home, when she is at work or with friends. At home, she is lonely, an outcast.

But in the minds of Sally's relatives, Matt's eccentricities are far worse. He is older, he has a beard, he believes in socialism, he is an immigrant, and he is Jewish. While marriage between people of different religions is not uncommon today, during the 1940s it was practically unheard of, and Jews were excluded from many social interactions with Christians. When Matt comes to the door to ask Sally's father for permission to marry her, it is only the second time he has met the family. A year ago he had dinner with them, and they immediately disliked him for his religion, his socialist ideas, and his beard. Without even asking what Matt wants on the night of *Talley's Folly*, Buddy gets a shotgun and runs Matt off the property.

Matt has allowed himself to fall in love with Sally because she does not share the prejudices of her community. She loves Matt for himself and does not fear his religion, his accent, or his political beliefs. But if Sally is going to be with Matt, she will have to cut herself off from her family, for they will not consider permitting her to marry a Jew. To them the shame of her marrying a Jew would be greater than the shame of her remaining an "old maid."

Gender Roles

While Matt's struggles have come from a political system that rejects him for his religion and his ideas, Sally's greatest suffering is the result of her not fulfilling the narrowly defined role demanded of a woman. As the daughter of a successful capitalist family, she was expected to marry Harley Campbell, the son of another successful family. They did not love each other; Sally says, "It was more of a financial arrangement than anything." Sally did not object to the role she was to play, but enjoyed being the "Golden Girl," the head cheerleader engaged to the basketball star. It was not until she became ill and then infertile that she learned the truth: even her family did not love her for herself, but only for the gender role she could no longer play. Once she was "no longer

of value to the merger," even her father rejected her, looking at her in the hospital "like I was a broken swing."

In the decade since her broken engagement, Sally has tried to define a new role for herself. It is an uphill battle: even though she is an adult of thirtyone, her brother still feels he has a right and duty to approve of Sally's choice of a man. But she has a job she enjoys, she knows how to change a tire, and she has worked to be content as a single woman. She smokes cigarettes and does not cook. She encourages socialist ideas, even though she knows that "unmarried daughters are supposed to help the menfolks keep the social status quo." By the time she meets Matt, he can see that she "actually thinks of herself as a human being rather than a featherbed." Married to Matt, Sally will not have pressure to become a mother or to fit into any other traditional female role.

Family

More than anything else, Matt and Sally are longing for a family, although it will be a new kind of family. Matt's parents and sister were tortured and killed in Europe for political reasons. He escaped to America with the help of an uncle, but does not seem to have a relationship with that uncle now. He is alone. Ironically, Sally, who shares a house with three generations of Talleys, is also alone. She draws no comfort from her family, who have rejected her because of her political beliefs and because she has let them all down by not marrying Harley Campbell.

For both characters, the loss of family is their deepest sorrow, and both Matt and Sally have resigned themselves to never being part of a family again. Matt's experiences have convinced him that it would be wrong to father a child, and he is sure no woman would marry a man who has made that decision. Sally is physically unable to bear children, and she is sure no man would want to marry an infertile woman. What the two realize at the end of the play is that they are perfectly suited to each other, and that two people can be a family.

Capitalism and Socialism

An important theme in much of Lanford Wilson's work is the nature of work and profit. The Talley family has acquired its wealth by owning a large portion of a garment factory that now has a large contract to make army uniforms. For Wilson, the money they have accumulated is twice tainted: they are profiting from a war in which many thousands are dying, and they are profiting from the hard work of the laborers who do not earn decent wages and whom they will not permit to unionize. The Talleys do not produce anything of value with their own hands, and for Matt and Sally and Wilson this is an ignoble way to earn money.

Sally's Uncle Whistler did make things with his own hands, including the boathouse where the play takes place. "He made toys. Tap-dancing babies and whirligigs. He got pleasure out of making things for people." According to Sally, "He was the healthiest

member of the family." Sally has chosen to follow Uncle Whistler's example. Although she could live off her family's wealth, she works as a nurse's aide in a hospital, providing a real service for wounded soldiers. Sally disapproves of her family's way of earning money and even encourages the students in her Sunday School class to push for labor unions in her family's factory. The fact that Sally and Matt share a disdain for capitalism makes them, in Wilson's eye, not only well-suited for each other, but also morally superior to the others.

Style

Setting

Talley's Folly takes place on the evening of July 4, 1944, in the old boathouse on the Talley property just outside the small Ozark town of Lebanon, Missouri. The boathouse, dripping with Victorian curlicues and gingerbread, was built in 1870 by Sally's eccentric uncle, Everett "Whistler" Talley, who also built the town bandstand and other fanciful structures, or "follies," all over town. By 1944, the boathouse has fallen out of use. It is surrounded by waist-high weeds and full of old fishing equipment, skates, and boats. The floor is so rotten that Matt falls through it. Sally sometimes comes here to get away from her family—or to be alone with Matt, as she did a year before.

The set is important to Wilson, and he describes it clearly in the text. The boathouse is meant to be lacy and ornamental as a valentine, the perfect setting for a romantic story. But Wilson also wants the audience to remember that it is a set, not a real boathouse. As the audience enters, the work lights and house lights are turned up so that the "artificiality of the theatrical set" is "quite apparent." Matt shows the audience the set and describes how the lighting will work. The audience, he points out, is sitting where the river would be. He acknowledges that there will not be much action, and says, "We could do it on a couple of folding chairs, but it isn't bare, it isn't bombed out, it's run-down, and the difference is all the difference."

The date, July 4, 1944, is also significant. The United States is heavily involved in World War II, and D-Day was just a month earlier. Matt has not enlisted in the Army, though he could, and Sally's family is profiting from the war, though Sally disapproves. In Europe, Jews are dying by the millions, and though Sally and Matt may not yet know that, the reader does. The backdrop of the war helps raise issues of patriotism, capitalism, and anti-Semitism.

The Fourth Wall

A convention of the theater is that there is an invisible wall at the front of the stage through which the audience watches the action. The audience is supposed to suspend disbelief, to go along with the notion that the world on stage is a complete world. In the "real world," the boathouse in which Matt and Sally meet would not be open along the river side. It would have four walls, not three, and the audience would not be sitting—as Matt points out— in the river. In a traditional theater experience, the audience would understand all of this without being told, and they would become thoroughly engaged in watching and believing the action on stage.

Wilson, however, makes it a point to break down the "fourth wall" of the theater, to call attention to the fact that this is a play, not reality. Matt opens and closes the play by speaking directly to the audience about the play. He tells them how long the play will run

("we have ninety-seven minutes here tonight—without intermission"), how the lighting will work, and how he hopes the story will turn out. He invites the audience to get a drink before the play starts. At one point he stops and delivers "this first part all over again for the latecomers." Matt addresses the audience again in the last line of the play, when he turns again to the seats to show the audience his watch, and assure them that the play is finished "right on the button."

Irony

Irony is a term used to describe a disjunction between what appears to be true and what actually is true. Often, in drama, the disjunction occurs when the audience has information that a character does not have, and the irony is in the character's not realizing the full meaning of what they say. *Talley's Folly*, however, is a textbook example of irony coming from the situation, from things that have happened before the play begins. Matt has decided not to father children, and he believes that no woman will have him because of this decision. Sally cannot bear children, and believes that no man will have her because of it. The irony is in the wonderful coincidence, in the way that Sally and Matt are both wrong in what they have believed. The reader has no special knowledge, but discovers the irony along with the characters.

Prior Knowledge

Although the play can stand on its own, many readers of *Talley's Folly* begin with some knowledge of Sally and Matt and the Talley family. When *Talley's Folly* opened, many in the audience had already seen the popular *Fifth of July*, which Wilson wrote before *Talley's Folly* but which takes place thirty-three years later. Many readers today have also encountered the third Talley play, *Talley & Son*, which takes place up at the Talley house on the same evening that Matt and Sally are in the boathouse.

A reader approaching *Talley's Folly* hopes and perhaps expects that Matt and Sally will come together in the end, but those who have experienced the other plays know it will happen. During *Talley & Son*, Sally comes up to the house to pack before eloping. Aunt Charlotte speaks with Sally, and persuades her to try to leave without telling anyone, but Sally and her father, Eldon Talley, do see each other before she leaves. Eldon, surprisingly, allows Sally to leave with Matt, telling her that he hopes she is not making a mistake. Years later, Sally reappears in *Fifth of July*, preparing to bury Matt's ashes. She and Matt were married and were happy together until death parted them.

Those coming to *Talley's Folly* without the benefit of the other Talley plays enjoy watching two fragile "eggs" find strength in each other. For those who have met the Talleys before, the pleasure is of a different kind: it is the pleasure of hearing old stories about old friends.

Historical Context

Examining Vietnam

Although the United States had withdrawn its last troops from Southeast Asia seven years before *Talley's Folly* opened in 1979, America was still trying to come to terms with the war. In 1979, Vietnam invaded Cambodia, and the mass graves of as many as three million Cambodians killed by the U.S.-supported Khmer Rouge were found, raising new questions about U.S. involvement in other countries.

Many American artists, including Lanford Wilson, explored the conflict in their work. The year 1978 saw the first production of Wilson's *Fifth of July*, about a man who has lost both legs in Vietnam, and the release of two Academy Awardwinning movies about the war, *Coming Home* and *The Deer Hunter*. In 1979, as thousands of Americans were flocking to movie theaters to see another Vietnam film, *Apocalypse Now*, Wilson turned his attention to Sally Talley, one of the characters in *Fifth of July*, to show how she came to be who she was. Significantly, he placed his play about the younger Sally, *Talley's Folly*, in 1944, just as the United States was nearing the end of World War II.

Although he set *Talley's Folly* many years before the war in Vietnam, Wilson uses the play to examine issues raised by that war—and by all wars. During the late 1970s, some people questioned the role of the United States in Southeast Asia, asking whether Cold War fear of communism had caused the United States to make a dishonorable pact with the Khmer Rouge and unwise military decisions in Vietnam. Similarly, the character of Matt, who seems to speak for Wilson on political matters, raises questions about the things the Talleys fear. The Talley's have a narrow range of beliefs and behaviors that they consider patriotic, and they are suspicious of socialists, Jews, Emma Goldman, even Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Wilson believes that war is harmful to the psyches of individuals and of nations. In *Fifth of July* he shows how the Vietnam War eroded the humanity of the Talleys. In *Talley's Folly*, Matt's horrible experiences in Europe and the immoral profit the Talleys realize from World War II demonstrate the same erosion.

Feminism

Equality for women was another major social issue in the United States during the 1970s. Fifty years after the U.S. Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, giving women the right to vote, the National Women's Strike for Equality in 1970 began a decade of publicity over the rights of women. In 1972, the never-ratified Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution was passed by both houses of Congress, the first issue of *Ms.* magazine was published, and Title IX of the Higher Education Act banned gender bias in athletics and other activities in all institutions receiving federal funds.

The rest of the decade saw the Supreme Court protecting abortion rights with the *Roe v. Wade* decision (1973), the U.S. Tennis Association deciding to award equal prize money to men and women (1973), Little League Baseball being opened to girls (1974), and Margaret Thatcher becoming the Prime Minister of Great Britain (1979).

Not everyone welcomed changes in gender roles and attitudes. For example, Phyllis Schlafly, one of *Good Housekeeping* magazine's ten most admired women in the world for 1977, campaigned vigorously against the Equal Rights Amendment and is credited with stopping its ratification.

Against this backdrop, Wilson examined the expectations for women and for male-female relationships in many of his plays. In *Talley's Folly*, he creates two feminists in Matt and Sally, who each expect that a woman will work and be productive and that she will think of herself "as a human being rather than a featherbed."

Critical Overview

Talley's Folly has been well-received by critics and by audiences since its first performance at the Circle Repertory Theatre on May 3, 1979. Tickets to the production sold unusually well, and the play would have run longer but for the fact that Judd Hirsch, the actor playing Matt, had another commitment. The play won several important awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play, and the Brandeis University Creative Arts Award. After moving to Broadway on February 20, 1980, the play ran for 227 performances and was nominated for several Tony Awards. In 1983 the text was included in the volume *Best American Plays: New York*. The text has remained in print since its first publication in 1980, and the play is often performed on college campuses and in community theaters.

When *Talley's Folly* opened on Broadway, it was reviewed in important New York and national publications, and early reviewers were almost unanimous in praising the play. The performances of actors Judd Hirsch and Trish Hawkins were much admired, as were the direction, the set, the lighting, and the costumes; but Wilson's script and vision also received great credit. Several reviewers noted that *Talley's Folly* was refreshingly optimistic about humans' capabilities for love and happiness, in contrast with many gloomy plays of the day. Veteran New Yorker reviewer John Simon called the play "enchanting: a small, elegantly composed study of two interesting people." Jack Kroll, writing for *Newsweek*, called it a "sweet, tender, funny, life-embracing play."

A few reviewers, however, were troubled by the play's lack of plot. For these critics, two characters talking and doing little else was simply not enough. A tepid review was written by Catharine Hughes in the magazine *America*. Although she respected the actors' performances, she found the play "too fragile for Broadway even in this dismal season." She believed the play had been "much more at home at the Circle Repertory, where it originated." Harold Clurman, writing for *The Nation*, also had reservations. While he declared the play "charming and gay," and "a breath of fresh air on Broadway," he also felt that at times "a touch of cuteness, a kind of decorative archness, threatens to mar the fundamental humanity of what is being said." He concluded that *Talley's Folly* "may not be Wilson's best play, though it is his most engaging."

The print version of *Talley's Folly* was published in April 1980, shortly after the Broadway opening. In a brief review for *Library Journal*, Gerard M. Molyneaux commented, "It is not the plot that holds the reader's interest, but Wilson's craftsmanship, his sense of timing and humor, his sensitive use of language. The result is a charming theater piece whose strengths are retained on the printed page." Molyneaux recommended the text for "all libraries with drama collections."

Wilson himself was surprised by the success of his play. In a 1981 article by Scott Haller in the *Saturday Review* Wilson commented, "I thought it was going to be the most unpopular thing I'd ever written. There was nothing compromised in the writing. I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I couldn't believe it when people liked it."

The play was popular enough in the United States to be produced in other countries, but the reception abroad was not as positive. *New Statesman* reviewer Benedict Nightingale, who saw the play at its London opening at the Lyric Theatre in 1982, was not captivated by the play's charms. He found it "not hard to nod off" during the play, because Wilson "is so in love with naturalistic detail that nothing can actually happen—nothing, that is, except these two people going on and on and on." By the end of the play, however, he found it "increasingly easy to stay awake."

The academic community has accepted Lanford Wilson as one of the most important American playwrights of the twentieth century, and *Talley's Folly* as one of his most important plays. More critical attention has been given to Wilson's socalled urban plays, which are somewhat edgier and less optimistic. Additionally, most formal criticism of the Talley plays deals with all three of them together and explores relationships and dynamics that carry over from one play to another. An example is Robert Cooperman's essay "The Talley Plays and the Evolution of the American Family." Cooperman discusses *Talley's Folly* as the story of Sally and Matt, "victims of a corrupt and dying institution"—that is, the traditional American family —who make an "active decision to repair the damage that has already been done to themselves in particular, and to the family in general." His analysis is best understood if one sees *Talley's Folly*, as Cooperman does, as an answer to Wilson's later play *Talley & Son.*

Mark Busby, author of a small book on Wilson for the Boise State University Western Writers Series, also draws on information learned in the other Talley plays when he discusses Matt and Sally. Unlike most reviewers of performances of *Talley's Folly*, Busby emphasizes the play's treatment of the theme of "the nature of work and prosperity," which he finds in several other Wilson plays. The fact that the Talley family is making a profit from World War II is troubling to Matt and Sally and to Wilson, and Busby points out that "work dedicated singly to profit, although it has often been glorified in American experience, does not belong in Wilson's pastoral Midwest."

In the only book-length study of Wilson, Gene A. Barnett's *Lanford Wilson, Talley's Folly* is given a brief chapter of its own. Barnett examines the simple plot and the effective "impressionist structure, in which the plot seems to flow naturally, very much like 'real life.'" He also calls attention to Matt's direct address to the audience and suggests, "Wilson deliberately calls attention to the contrivance and artificiality of his play to force the audience to recognize the unreality of some things that it might recognize the intense reality of others." Barnett considers *Talley's Folly* "a major achievement."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5
- Critical Essay #6
- Critical Essay #7
- Critical Essay #8
- Critical Essay #9

Critical Essay #1

Bily teaches English at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan. In the following essay she examines the character of Sally in Talley's Folly, *celebrating her oddness and drawing on insights gained from Lanford Wilson's other Talley family plays.*

Talley's Folly was first staged in 1979, a year after audiences had come to know one of its characters, Sally Talley Friedman, from her appearance in Lanford Wilson's *Fifth of July*. In *Fifth of July*, Sally is the family matriarch, the oldest and wittiest member of the extended family that shares the Talley home. Though she is not the most important character in the play, she is easily the most likeable. Sally has just been widowed, losing her husband, Matt, with whom she shared three decades of happiness; and she recently attended the funeral of an old friend, Harley Campbell, with whom she went to high school. Through a series of family conflicts and sorrows, Sally draws on her inner strength and her sense of humor to support herself and her family.

In some ways, *Talley's Folly* is the story of how Sally gained her strength and humor. Though the main character of *Talley's Folly* may appear to be Matt—after all, he has most of the best lines—it is actually Sally who most grows and develops during the encounter in the boathouse. Though he does not know exactly what he will say, Matt has already decided before he drives to Lebanon that he will "once in [his] life *risk* something" and declare himself to Sally. Sally, on the other hand, gathers her courage as the play goes on, through a series of starts and stops.

Set in 1944, the play begins with Sally an eccentric outcast in her own home, an unconventional woman in a conventional, male-centered household. She is a "terrible embarrassment to her family," who see her as a "crazy old-maid Emma Goldman." Her mother, Netta, reveals herself in *Talley & Son* to be neurotic and weak, no real support for her oddball daughter. Eldon, Sally's father, is unscrupulous and unfaithful. Also sharing the home are Sally's senile grandfather, Calvin Stuart Talley; her brother Buddy and his wife Olive; her other brother Timmy, who is off fighting in World War II; and Aunt Charlotte "Lottie" Talley. Buddy and Olive meet Matt at the door when he comes to ask for Sally's hand. All Olive can do when she sees Matt is stand with her mouth open, "doing her imitation of a fish." Buddy is more direct: He asks Matt, "You're Sally's Jewish friend, ain't ya? What do you think you want here? Did you ever hear that trespassing was against the law?"

Sally's only support comes from Aunt Lottie, who is also Matt's only ally in the Talley home. When Buddy tries to run Matt off the property, Lottie steps in, yelling, "This man came to see me." She is lying to protect Matt, of course, but the truth is that Lottie and Matt have formed a friendship over the past year, talking on the phone "every few weeks during the winter." Sally at first speaks as though she has no respect for Lottie's judgment about people ("Aunt Lottie would invite the devil into the parlor for hot cocoa"), but as she begins to consider Matt more seriously she also comes to realize that Lottie is one member of her family who can be trusted, saying, "She doesn't gossip about me. She didn't tell you anything." Although *Talley's Folly* shows Lottie to be physically weak,

lacking in confidence, and not respected by the others, she is the one of Sally's clan who is not anti-Semitic, and who gives Matt a chance to prove himself a good man.

Both Matt and Sally seem to enjoy their own madness and comment frequently on it. Matt admits, "It was crazy to come down here," but says he could not help himself. "You've got a wire crossed or something," Sally says, and Matt agrees, "A screw loose." "You are one total, living loose screw," Sally repeats. Later, Matt tells Sally, "Sally has decided she is an eccentric old maid, and she is going to be one." Sally replies, "I'm looking forward to it." She calls him "goofy," and he calls her "a crazy woman." Matt is right when he comments, "We are a lot alike, you know?"

Sally, Lottie, and Matt are all alienated from the others, but the reader's fondness for them does not grow out of sympathy. Instead, their oddness has taught them a kind of inner strength and an engaging, humorous detachment. We like them because they are not like everyone else—and because everyone else is boring, selfish, and cruel.

There is another relative from whom Sally draws courage: Uncle Everett "Whistler" Talley, the creator of the folly. Uncle Whistler is really the brother of Calvin, Sally's now-senile grandfather. While Calvin was building up the family business, Whistler was building follies, or elaborate, fanciful buildings, "all over town." Like Matt, Sally, and Lottie, Whistler was misunderstood by those around him. He built the boathouse because his brother would not let him build a gazebo, a "frivolity," near the house, and when he wanted to build the bandstand in the park, "The town didn't want it, but he'd seen it in a picture somewhere so he went right over and built it." Sally seems to be the only one who understands Uncle Whistler, as she says:

He was not in the least frustrated. He was a happily married man with seven kids. He made toys. Tapdancing babies and whirligigs. He got pleasure out of making things for people. He did exactly what he wanted to do. He was the healthiest member of the family. Everybody in town knew him.

It was another one of Everett Talley's oddities that earned him the nickname "Whistler": "he sang and whistled" everywhere he went. "He used to go stomping through the woods singing *'Una furtiva lagrima'* [a secret sorrow] at the top of his lungs; nobody knew what he was singing, so they all said he was crazy." If Sally could only see it, an appreciation for music is another quality that Uncle Everett shares with Sally and Matt, and another clue that Sally and Matt are suited for each other.

Music plays a symbolic role in *Talley's Folly* from the beginning, when Matt repeats insistently to the audience, "This is a waltz, remember, one-twothree, one-two-three." Matt is "not a romantic type," but he needs the play to turn out as "a noholds-barred romantic story," and the music is an essential ingredient for him. It was, after all, at a dance that Matt and Sally first met, and they went back to the Shriners' mosque every night for seven nights to dance and be together. This evening in the boathouse, Matt tries several humorous approaches to break down Sally's resistance, but at first has little success. As he tries to skate, Sally is impatient with him, until he "has taken hold of her and let go of the wall" and at the same time has begun to sing "'Over the Waves,'

waltz-tempo, low at first, gaining in confidence." The music makes him more confident, and also draws her closer; it is their first moment of real intimacy, and it lasts until Matt stops singing to say, "I'm having an old-fashioned skate with my girl."

A bit later, when Matt has fallen through the floor and Sally has coldly wiped away the blood, Matt draws her in again by recalling the memory of "Poor Uncle Whistler. He should see what is happening to his boathouse. He'd sing '*Una furtiva lagrima.*'" Matt's appreciation of Whistler, the boathouse, and the music turn Sally toward him again. She tells Matt how much she has loved the place, and how "nobody else would come here and discover the magic of the place except me." The fact that Sally has brought Matt here, and that he has passed the test by admiring the folly, should tell her, as it tells the reader, that he is meant for her.

Matt sings to Sally again after he has told the story of his past and she has pushed him away. This time he sings "Lindy Lou," a song the Lebanon band played as they danced the year before. Again the music weakens Sally's resistance, and again Matt spoils the moment by mentioning marriage. But finally she gives in, and agrees to elope. The two people who fit nowhere else are going to start a life together. As they sit in eccentric Uncle Whistler's boathouse, they can hear the band playing "Lindy Lou" in Uncle Whistler's bandstand across the river. As Matt says, it is just like a Valentine.

Sally has been resisting marriage, because her inability to bear children makes her feel unsuitable or inadequate for her conventional role. What she only begins to understand by the end of *Talley's Folly* is that there are different ways to be a family. Sally's parents have primarily thought of her more as a bargaining chip than a daughter worthy of love, and withdrew from her when she was "no longer of value to the merger." The fact of her oddness makes her less appealing to her family, even as it makes her more appealing to Matt and to the reader. In her own life, Sally has looked up to and drawn love from the odd ones—her grandfather's brother Whistler and her father's sister Lottie—not from her immediate family.

Thirty-three years later, the Sally of *Fifth of July* knows what it takes to make a family. Matt is gone, but they lived together happily until the day he died. In many ways, Sally has followed in her Aunt Lottie's footsteps. Lottie did not share the politics or the anti-Semitism of the rest of the Talleys, and was able to bless the love between Sally and Matt. Now Sally blesses the love between her nephew Ken and his partner Jed—an attitude which puts her in a small minority in 1979. Just as the childless Aunt Lottie supplied Sally with the love that the ineffectual Netta could not, Sally loves and guides her own niece's daughter Shirley, whose parents are not up to the task.

In an article entitled "The Talley Plays and the Evolution of the American Family," Robert Cooperman describes two sociological models of the American family, the "family of security" and the "family of freedom," and he concludes that in pairing Matt and Sally, Wilson rejects both models in favor of something newer. Matt and Sally are both unconventional, and, "Their dissimilar backgrounds and decision not to have children to impose a hierarchy on . . . leaves them in a non-traditional, but ultimately workable, family situation." I have more hope for these two than Cooperman does. To me, the

union of these unconventional people looks not just "workable," but delightful, "constructed of louvers, and lattice and geegaws."

Source: Cynthia A. Bily, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Korb has a Master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the theme of identity in Talley's Folly.

In his critical study *Lanford Wilson*, Gene Barnett writes of *Talley's Folly*, "The familiar motif of the impact of the past on the present underlies the . . . theme of spiritual isolation making real communication difficult." *Talley's Folly*, one of a trilogy about the Talley family, focuses on the union of two people, both of whom must break free from their solitude in order to join their lives.

On the surface, Matt and Sally seem to have little in common. He is a forty-two-year-old European Jew who works as an accountant in St. Louis. She is a thirty-one-year-old self-described spinster who still lives in her family home in the small town of Lebanon, Missouri. However, both are harboring past traumas and what they consider to be their own inadequacies—Matt's refusal to father children and Sally's inability to bear children. They have developed into adults cut off from all other people. That they have found each other in the first place is almost miraculous, the work of a "mischievous angel [who] has looked down and saw us." However, on the evening of July 4, 1944, a challenge still remains, and it is what drives forward *Talley's Folly*: How will these two people open up to each other?

Indeed, at the heart of *Talley's Folly* is the issue of identity: how people are imprisoned by it as well as how they must actively work to change the way they see themselves. Throughout the play, Matt and Sally are invited to break free from their long-held roles. The story takes place a year after Matt and Sally's first meeting at a dance. At that time, they were able to step beyond their boundaries because of the short nature of their love affair. Sally, for instance, daringly brought Matt home for dinner. After Matt's vacation ended, however, their individual progress took very different turns. Sally returned to her closed self, ignoring Matt's many letters, refusing to see him when he came down for a visit, and denying her feelings for him. Matt, however, chose to reject the man he once was. As he recalls, "I said, Matt, go down, tell Sally who you are. Once in your life *risk* something. At least you will know that you did what you could. What do you think she is going to do, bite you?" Matt gives up his identity in order to gain a better one—that of Sally's husband.

The importance of identity drives the play. It is referenced consistently up until the moment when Matt proposes marriage to Sally.

SALLY: Don't sing to me, it's ridiculous. And my name is not Lindy Lou. It's Sally Talley. (*They both smile.*)

MATT: I know, I came down to talk to you about that.

Through the eyes of others, as a European immigrant Matt's identity derives from being an outsider in the United States. Physically, he is different from those people who surround him. Unlike Sally, described as "light," Matt is "dark" and wears a beard. He speaks with "a trace of a German-Jewish accent, of which he is probably unaware." In Sally's provincial town of Lebanon, he is viewed primarily in light of his religious background. Sally's brother Buddy meets him with the words, "You're Sally's Jewish friend, ain't ya? What do you think you want here? Did you ever hear that trespassing was against the law?" On the whole, Sally's family, with the exception of Aunt Charlotte, wants Matt to have nothing to do with Sally. When Matt comes to the Talley house, Sally's mother and sister-in-law "stayed up there on the screened-in porch, protected from the mosquitoes and Communists and infidels." He is a man whom Sally's father even calls "more dangerous than Roosevelt himself."

Matt, however, does not place much emphasis on his foreignness. Tellingly, he is blindingly unaware of certain truths about himself, such as his "pronounced accent," which he does not believe exists. His claims that "I have no accent. I worked very hard and have completely lost any trace of accent" could be interpreted in two different ways: either he truly is unaware of his accent or he subconsciously denies it, realizing that it will set him apart.

Matt's own perception of his identity derives from his lack of interest in taking on the typical role of the adult male in American society. He sees himself as inherently unmarriageable because of his unwillingness to have children. Sally gives voice to the opinions society holds on such an anomaly: "Only something is wrong. Something is goofy, isn't it? A single man, forty-two years old. It doesn't make sense that a good man hasn't made a fool of himself at least once by your age."

By contrast, Sally comes from a traditional small-town family. Before the Great Depression, her family was one of the richest in Lebanon. Her brother, Buddy, has managed to hold on to the family factory despite the economic troubles of the mid-1900s. Sally, however, is the black sheep of the family. According to Sally, "Everyone is always saying what a crazy old maid Emma Goldman I'm becoming." Her words, immediately contradicted by Matt, show her negative self-perception. Although she demonstrates her independence and financial capability by working as a nurse and accumulating significant savings, she only dreams of escaping the confines of her family home. As Aunt Charlotte tells Matt, Sally "didn't have much courage [to do it]."

Even the play's minor characters—none of whom ever appears on stage—are presented through the narrow lens of how they are perceived by others and what they represent. The insignificant sister-in-law Olive is something "on a relish tray." Brother Buddy's real name is Kenny; according to Matt, both of these names are "absurd," not proper names "for a grown man." Sally's aunt, Charlotte, is the most important of this supporting cast. She helps engineer and actively encourages the reunion between Matt and Sally. Matt also learns about Sally's past from Charlotte; her age, for example, and her firing from Sunday school. As he tells Sally, "I've become great friends with your Aunt Charlotte. There's a counterspy in your home. You're infiltrated. I didn't tell you. You're ambushed. I've come up on you from behind." His words show that Charlotte's

role is greater than that of a mere conduit of information. Sally would never anticipate Charlotte's spy-like actions. Thus Charlotte also functions symbolically to remind Matt and Sally, along with the audience, that people have multiple layers to their personalities and their identities.

As the play begins, Matt is attempting to step outside of his self-constructed identity. However, he finds it difficult to share the real Matt with Sally. He continuously relies on other personalities and voices to share his concerns. To find out the answer to the Sally "puzzle"—why she is avoiding him— he speaks in different accents. He even declares that he will become one of the Ozark "hillbillies": "I won't be Matt Friedman anymore. I'll join the throng. Call myself . . . August Hedgepeth. Sip moonshine over the back of my elbow. Wheat straw in the gap in my teeth." Matt's easy assumption of other personalities shows his unwillingness to let Sally see his true personality—he thinks she won't like the real him. This creates an interesting duality, as Matt hides behind the personae of others even while he is readying himself to share his biggest secret with Sally.

The importance of a person's speech patterns is further emphasized when Sally questions Matt about his background. "English wasn't your first language. What was?" she asks, as opposed to the more standard question, "Where were you born?" At first, Matt tries to avoid answering. When he finally does, he refers to himself in the third person, showing his need to distance himself from the past.

What was Matthew's first language? It doesn't come out funny. What does it matter; he can't talk to the old man at the cafeteria in Lithuanian any more. Not the way he would like to . . .

When Sally insists on learning his family history, Matt submits by refusing to draw the characters of his father, mother, sister, and himself, and instead dubs them with nondescript labels: "A Prussian and a Uke and a Lat and a Probable Lit." The ensuing story of the death of his family, his parents (the Prussian and the Ukrainian) "indefinitely detained" by the Germans, after his older sister (born in Latvia) was murdered by the French, is also told from the third-person point of view. Only at its very end, after Matt has revealed his secret—that he has resolved "never to be responsible for bringing into such a world another living soul. . . . not bring into this world another child to be killed for political purpose"—does he revert back to the first person. He asks Sally,

And what woman would be interested in such a grown Probable Lit with such a resolve? . . . Anyway, he doesn't think about it. The day is over in a second. I spend my life adding figures. It breaks my head.

SALLY: (*Very level*) He does. The Lit.

MATT: Does what?

SALLY: You said "I." You mean the Lit. The Lit spends his life adding figures.

MATT: Yes, well, I do too. We are much alike. We work together.

Although Matt and "the Lit" are alike, unlike the Lit, Matt decides to step out of the world of logic, as represented by numbers, and risk being hurt. Sally, however, resists such a change. Indeed, Matt almost constantly urges her to get her to rethink her situation. Her tenacity and her reticence is represented physically as well as verbally. Matt is wearing skates, but Sally turns to leave the folly.

MATT: Sally? Hey, I can't run after you in these.

SALLY: Good. I'm good and sick of you running after me, Matt. (*She is gone.*)

MATT: Come on. (*He tries to run after her.*) Where do you think you are going—

Sally's personality is best symbolized by her actions the previous February. Matt drove down from St. Louis to visit her at the hospital where she works. Matt claims that she hid from him in the closet; Sally claims that she was working in the kitchen, where visitors were not allowed. Whoever is more correct, the essential point remains the same: Sally kept herself from Matt, as she keeps herself hidden from the world. After being rejected by her fiancé and her father because of her inability to have children, Sally has come to believe that the rest of the world will reject her for this supposed defect as well. She has constructed her life around this physical disorder; it has become her most important characteristic. After Matt tells her that he will not have children, she does not even believe the sincerity of his story. "You've been talking to Aunt Lotttie?" she says. "Who else have you talked to? People in town? Have you looked in the Lebanon newspaper? The old files? I don't know how detectives work." Her choice of words, particularly her likening of Matt to a detective, shows just how much a secret she views her infertility. In her mind, her inability to bear a child defines her and renders her valueless. She has some valid reasons for feeling this way. Not only did her fiance replace her, "Dad was looking at me like I was a broken swing." These men, members of the two most important families in Lebanon, surely voice the feelings of many in their community. The stigma they visit upon Sally results in her having lived the past ten years of her life under the assumption that no one would want to marry her because she cannot have children.

Although neither Matt nor Sally can give birth to new life, there still could be "a life for the two of us." Keeping this in mind, it seems hardly coincidental that one of the primary images in the play is eggs. Matt shares with Sally the belief of a man he knows.

"He said people are eggs. Said we had to be careful not to bang up against each other too hard. Crack our shells, never be any use again. Said we were eggs. Individuals. We had to keep separate, private. He was very protective of his shell. He said nobody ever knows what the other guy is thinking. We all got about ten tracks going at once, nobody ever knows what's going down any given track at any given moment. So we never can really communicate."

At the time, Matt told the man "he ought not to [be] too afraid of gettin' his yolk broke." Now he stands before Sally, despite the "Humpty Dumpty complex," to "take a big chance" and tell her he loves her. For Matt has learned that in order to have any chance

at forging a fulfilling life with another, he must learn to reveal his secrets. After Sally follows his lead and reveals her own secret, they both come to understand that their perceptions about the world are wrong. Even worse, these perceptions have developed into misapprehensions about their own self-worth.

After Sally becomes convinced of Matt's sincerity, she accepts his proposal. However, although Sally no longer sees herself as valueless to a man, she does not completely drop her habit of judging herself through the eyes of others. Matt wants to drive to St. Louis that evening, but she responds, "Oh, Matt, it's absurd to be talking like that; we're practically middle-aged." Matt's answer—"So"— demonstrates that he is reaching beyond himself. Yet, the play ends on a high note of optimism. Both Matt and Sally have demonstrated their willingness to try something new—he in his new tie and she in her new dress. Sally quickly agrees to go with him that night, and the two take the first steps of what will begin a long, successful marriage.

Source: Rena Korb, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

In the following study of Wilson's Talley's Folly, *Gene Barnett presents reasons for its critical success and popular appeal.*

When Wilson began to draft the Talley family history in preparation for work on *Fifth of July*, he became fascinated with a Talley daughter named Sally. So reversing the order of creation, he made her a mate and began to imagine their middle-age romance. "I liked the two characters," he says simply, "and I wanted to see the play." Remembering the wounds, both physical and emotional, that lacerated his fictional family, he decided that, for this love story, he "should go all the way and make it the sweet valentine it should be."

When *Fifth of July* was completed and in rehearsal, Wilson made up a biography of Aunt Sally Friedman in order to help the actress playing the role to understand her, "a history for her to draw on." He also devised a biography for Matt Friedman, finding in the process that the character was assuming the form of Circle Repertory Company actor Judd Hirsch. The playwright told Helen Stenborg (Aunt Sally) that if she found it helpful, she could think of Hirsch as her deceased husband whose ashes she had brought back to Lebanon. Wilson remembers that when Hirsch came to see a rehearsal of *Fifth*, he told the actor, "You're in the box" (i.e., the urn), and so the central role of the second Talley play had been cast before the first play was even in previews.

Talley's Folly opened in May 1979 and received almost unanimous critical raves. Harold Clurman thought it the playwright's "most engaging play," and the two reviewers for the *New York Times* called it "a treasure," "a lovely play," "a charmer," and "a play to savour and to cheer." The playwright himself, normally modest and objective about his own work, admits it is a "personal favorite" and "more perfect than anything I've ever written." It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for drama in the spring of 1980.

Critical Essay #4

In discussing his approach to the play, Wilson continually returns to the word "simple." ("I wanted to write a simple story.") The word is apt. Matt Friedman, a forty-two-year-old Jewish accountant from Saint Louis, has driven down to the central-southern Missouri town of Lebanon for the Fourth of July weekend in 1944 intent on resolving his romance with Sally Talley, thirty-one (she says) and turning spinsterish, whom he had met the previous year. After an unpleasant showdown with her family that afternoon, he woos her and wins her that night in the folly, the decaying boathouse down on the river from the Talley family home. That is the action of the play, hence the label "simple."

But as with other Wilson plays, the present action depends to a great extent on the past. Matt Friedman had come to the Lebanon area on vacation in the summer of 1943, met Sally Talley at a dance at the Shrine Mosque in Springfield (a landmark still there), and had driven her home to Lebanon that night and the other six nights of his vacation. At her urging, he met her family over dinner; they disliked him for his Jewishness, his lack of patriotism, and his beard. Sally's father denounced him as "more dangerous than Roosevelt himself."

Since then, he has written her almost daily from Saint Louis, but she has responded only once and has not seen him since the preceding summer. He has, however, spoken by phone to Charlotte Talley (Aunt Lottie), who has encouraged his suit. As the play opens, he means to propose to Sally, the first proposal he has risked in his forty-two years. While waiting for her in the boathouse, he turns master of ceremonies and stage director, welcoming the audience and explaining the setting, lighting, sound effects, and the mood of a nation at the end of a world war.

Critical Essay #5

A "folly" in the architectural sense of the term is an elaborate structure, unusual and unique in design, quite expensive, and often built out of whim rather than purpose. As they pass the ninety-seven minutes of the play in the structure that gives the work its title, Matt elicits from Sally a bit of family history: that the builder was called "Whistler" because he whistled and sang a lot. (His signature piece was "Una furtiva lagrima" from Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*, but since none of the locals knew much about Italian opera, they merely thought him daft.) Uncle Whistler had built the boathouse and, in addition, the bandstand from which music drifts across the river on this Fourth of July evening.

The title of the play also refers to Sally's choice of a husband. Matt, a good ten years older than she and rather alien with his faint German-Jewish accent and Semitic background, was not considered a suitable husband by her provincial and bigoted family. Yet, she and Matt go on to have a very happy marriage, and Matt does so well financially that his brother-in-law, Buddy, envies him. Since we know from information given in *Fifth of July* how well the marriage turned out, reference in this play to the union as "Sally Talley's folly" is ironic and meant to be.

But in 1944, the boathouse is rotting and decrepit and in need of restoration—like the family. At the same time its ruined state is a part of the romance of the place. Wilson describes it as Victorian in style, with "louvers, lattice in decorative panels, and a good deal of Gothic Revival gingerbread." The wood has weathered to a pale gray, and the boathouse is overhung with maples and a weeping willow.

The lighting and sound are to be very romantic, with watery reflections of sunset and moonlight on the boathouse walls. ("The water runs right through here," Matt tells the audience, "so you're all out in the river—sorry about that.") In addition, there are the sounds of the land and the river at dusk: water, frogs, bees, dogs, and crickets. The band, playing across the river in Whistler's bandstand, strikes up a fanfare just as Sally explains why she has not married, and a lightly swinging rendition of "Lindy Lou" concludes the play. To complete a nearly perfect romantic scene, Wilson conjures up the sweet odor of honeysuckle.

"You live in such a beautiful country," Matt tells Sally, and he promises that he will bring her back every year. The Talleys may live in a Garden, even though the race has fallen, but it is people like Sally and Matt who will bring restoration through love. The sense of evil, never strong in a Wilson play, is embodied by some of those in the house on the hill. Greed and bigotry lurk there, and evil is latent in the landscape, for snakes may be nesting under the boathouse. But the only serpents who materialize are some of the Talleys, for this is Eden after the Fall.

The folly has all the romantic atmosphere of a setting for opera or operetta. Was there a real model? No, Wilson says, "I've never seen the folly in Missouri or anywhere else until John Lee [Beatty, the principal designer for the Circle Repertory Company] built it

for me." Wilson has implied that it was partly owing to the inspired stage design that he decided to write a play about Whistler Talley.

Critical Essay #6

The playwright is aware that his work is often not strongly plotted. It may be that he is most comfortable with an impressionistic structure in which the plot seems to flow naturally, very much like "real life." This method proved effective for *Talley's Folly*, which seems indeed very natural yet demonstrates on inspection a structural rhythm. Generally, it might be said that the conversation of Sally and Matt goes back and forth between the past, always important to Wilson's characters, and the present, interrupted by several tangential episodes and observations. "The past" covers her family history, his early family background in Europe, and the beginning of their courtship the preceding summer. "The present" dramatizes the final stage of their courtship and their plans to elope that same evening. "Tangential episodes" include, for example, a scene in which Matt "ice skates" on the bare floor of the folly. Also woven into the play are Matt's observations on American labor, the greed of business, and the dangers of prosperity in the postwar era. These references set the love story against the larger, darker background of social, political, and cultural issues of the mid-1940s.

Structurally, the notable feature of the play is Wilson's use of Matt as chorus in the manner both of Wilder's Stage Manager (*Our Town*) or Williams's Tom (*The Glass Menagerie*). Matt addresses the audience in a three-page monologue as the play begins and briefly at its conclusion, in this way "framing" the evening. He immediately tells the audience that he has only ninety-seven minutes ("without intermission") for the story and points out "some of the facilities." About halfway through his long introduction, he replays very rapidly much of what he has already said for the benefit of latecomers. He comments on the "rotating gismo in the footlights," which provides the effect of moonlight on water ("valentines need frou-frou"). He calls attention to the night sounds to be heard throughout the evening. He describes post-Depression America, comparing it to 1944 when the country, like the Talleys, is "in grave danger of prosperity." And he tells the audience that the play they are about to see "should be a waltz, one-two-three, one-two-three; a no-holds-barred romantic story."

Yet, the play begins with the houselights up, and the set is seen in the hard, white glare of the "worklight" that intensifies the artificiality of stage scenery. Perhaps Wilson deliberately calls attention to the contrivance and artificiality of his play to force the audience to acknowledge the unreality of some things that it might recognize the intense reality of others. Much more to the point is the suggestion that this alienation of the audience from stage "reality" is to cause it to be "intellectually on its guard against the snares of romantic love, and then, in spite of ourselves to force us into believing in its truth." This is going to be an easy, comfortable love story with a happy ending, he seems to be warning us, so beware of sentimentality. Then as though to show his manipulative powers, he warms us with his characters and draws us into their problems so that our belief is won.

Critical Essay #7

Of the two roles, Matt's is the more complex, for he is a many-sided character. Basically, his is a tragic conception of life because of the personal horrors attendant on his youth in prewar Europe. Yet, he can encourage Sally to take a risk and "live for today." He believes in reason and communication. "I have great powers of ratiocination", he tells her, and this helps him to see not only that she is in love with him, but that there is "something to tell" that only she can tell. He can take "no" for an answer but not evasions.

Matt knows he is not a "romantic type," but his mathematical mind (he knows the multiplication table up to seventy-five times seventy-five) tells him his own worth, and hers. He is a mimic, attempting a comic German accent with the same confidence as he "does" Humphrey Bogart or a Missouri farmer. Although he makes fun of Sally's Ozark accent, he denies his own English is accented. He is also very witty and droll ("Olive! Olive! I could not think of your sister-in-law's darn name! . . . I knew she was on a relish tray."

Matt's most important scene comes when Sally asks him if he has ever been married. In answering, he tells the story of his life, almost as a fable, in the third person, perhaps to distance himself from the wounds of his youth. Briefly he explains how his parents, one Prussian and the other Ukrainian, were "indefinitely detained" by the Germans, after his older sister, born in Latvia, was murdered by the French. He himself, born in Lithuania, came via Norway and Caracas to America. Because of the loss of his family through war, no allegiances or causes can make any claims on him. He resolved "never to be responsible for bringing into such a world another living soul . . . to be killed for a political purpose." He has grown to middle age, thinking no woman would be interested in marrying a man who would never sire children, not because he could not but because he would not. Thus, Matt's resolution has kept him in a shell.

The most important image associated with Matt is found in a story he tells Sally: "This guy told me we were eggs," he begins, and we must not knock against each other or we will crack our shells and be of no use. Since we are isolated in our shells, we never really communicate. "I told him he ought not to be too afraid of gettin' his yolk broke."

Matt returns to the egg metaphor in his proposal to Sally: "We all have a Humpty Dumpty complex." When he takes the risk and proposes, Sally puts him off. With only two or three of his ninety-seven minutes to go, he looks to the sky exclaiming, "Eggs! Eggs! Eggs!" He is annoyed at their terror of cracking the shell but hoping they both will find courage to do just that. In the minutes that follow, both of these curious "eggs" crack, and their marriage lasts thirty-two years, ending with Matt's death in 1976.

Critical Essay #8

In his courtship of Sally, Matt has one factor very much in his favor: she does not like living at home, for she considers most of her family to be "hypocrites and fools." But she would never consider marrying Matt just to get away and has given him no encouragement. She answered only one of his many letters and then only to tell him not to write. Apparently she accepts what people are saying about her, that she is turning into "a crazy old-maid Emma Goldman."

Nevertheless, Sally manages to escape the stereotype of the lonely, frigid spinster who secretly yearns for romance and sexual fulfillment by genuinely trying to put off Matt, while, at the same time, revealing in unintentional and subtle ways that she is attracted to him. Second, there is the pathos, even tragedy, of a revelation made approximately a decade before that she must face again in order to give Matt the explanation he insists on and deserves: that she is barren and therefore cannot imagine that Matt or anyone else would want to marry her. This most painful moment is the emotional climax of the play. We are touched by her personal tragedy, but we also know that paradoxically her sterility is the key to a long and loving relationship with Matt. Because she is inadequate in a way that is unimportant to him, they seem indeed made for each other. When she realizes he has not deliberately tailored his story to conform to hers, she is ready to accept him.

Talley's Folly is a notable achievement for Wilson. The dramatic structure is compact although the plot is not very strong. The characters are two of his best, one coming from the playwright's Missouri background and the other created from an entirely different social and cultural context. The setting is functional to the story. The familiar motif of the impact of the past on the present underlies the deeper theme of spiritual isolation making real communication difficult. *Talley's Folly* has been truthfully described as Wilson's "best crafted work," and with its wide audience appeal, it has been his most popular play. It is a major achievement and falls short of matching *Fifth of July* only in the modesty of its aims.

Source: Gene A. Barnett, "*Talley's Folly*," in *Lanford Wilson*, edited by Warren French, Twayne Publishers, 1987, pp. 118-24.

Critical Essay #9

Steven Gale's critique of Talley's Folly *praises the production's cast and staging for presenting a unique insight into Wilson's view of human nature.*

As part of its fifteenth annual tour, the Missouri Repertory Theatre's staging of Lanford Wilson's *Talley's Folly* was crisply directed by James Assad, a former MRT member who returned from a teaching stint in New York City, and starred Jeannine Hutchings as Sally Talley and David Schuster as Matt Friedman. The high quality of the cast did full credit to Wilson's 1980 Pulitzer Prize winning play. Set in the Talley family's Victorian boathouse in Lebanon, Missouri on July 4, 1944, the romance begins with Matt walking into the auditorium while the house lights are still up, as though to make an announcement. He sits on the pit apron and conversationally begins filling in the drama's background in a casual, neighborly tone. Soon his dialogue becomes tinged with a Yiddish accent (later we learn that he was born in Lithuania) and suddenly we find ourselves in the middle of the action of the play.

The plot is simple. On a trip to St. Louis Sally met Matt and they were attracted to one another. Now Matt, a forty-two-year-old Jewish accountant from the big city, has come to a small, reactionary rural community to ask the thirty-one-year-old spinster to marry him. There are problems, the least of which is the resistance by Sally's family. More important is what is expressed as the eggs metaphor —the "Humpty Dumpty Complex"—they are both "afraid to be cracked." Matt's family has been destroyed in European warfare and in the world that he sees around he finds no place for children. Sally has had a bad experience in love and is unable to bring herself to take another chance.

Matt and Sally attempt to communicate, but both are fearful of the pain that might result from a relationship and, therefore, are hesitant to divulge information that might pinpoint their areas of vulnerability. Ultimately Sally reveals the details of her unhappy love affair, culminating in the exposure of her vital secret: her fiance broke their engagement when it was determined that a disease had left her unable to bear children. She had been unwilling to admit this to Matt, at least in part because she did not want to disappoint his desire for children. Since he does not want children, their needs and desires can mesh, and the play ends with them running off to get married.

Interestingly, *5th of July*, which takes place during the Vietnam War era, was written before *Talley's Folly*. In telling the story of Sally as a sixtyseven-year-old widow, Wilson became interested in the character to whom she had been married, and Matt (patterned after actor Judd Hirsh) and *Talley's Folly* resulted. It is only natural, then, that the stronger character is Matt, and Schuster's portrayal was just right. His accent conveyed a sense of foreignness, but it was not intrusive; his timing and his subtle combination of intelligence and emotion made Matt an attractive character. As Sally, Hutchings had a less demanding role, but she played it adroitly, never overshadowing Matt, yet letting the sensuality, humor, and intellect of her character show through her plainness.

The set, which arrived in a truck on the afternoon of the performance, was excellent. The boathouse, supposedly built by Sally's uncle in 1870, was typically Victorian in construction, with lattice and gables, but now fallen into disrepair. Capturing the freedom and independence of the two lovers who meet there to work out their lives, it also reflected their fragility and strangeness in a world of conservative, prejudiced rednecks whose off-stage presence is constantly felt.

Talley's Folly is particularly attractive to a southwest Missouri audience, and those who walked out of a production of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* last year raved over this play, the second of a projected series of works tracing the Talley family history. Two other plays in *The War in Lebanon* series, *5th of July* (the first segment) and *A Tale Told*, have already been mounted, but audience reaction to *Talley's Folly* indicates that for mid-westerners Wilson has successfully returned to his Missouri roots to "tell . . . what this country is really all about." Wilson once claimed that he "set out to write a valentine," and this love story appeals to the kind of people about whom it was written—individuals with great strength and integrity who are involved in day-to-day human relationships, not in solving abstract, intellectual problems. The questioning of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern makes no sense to an audience secure in their beliefs and established in their world, while the familiarity of Wilson's characters and situation makes his play appealing.

Talley's Folly is a good theatrical vehicle, not great drama. In many ways it illustrates the typical strengths and weaknesses present in the rest of Wilson's canon: it reveals insight into human nature, yet it is not meant to be anything other than entertaining. Unlike Harold Pinter or David Mamet, Wilson rarely goes below the surface to determine what meanings underlie his characters' actions; he is satisfied with presenting predictable, emotional, character-based melodramas.

Recent criticism has claimed that plays such as *Talley's Folly, Crimes of the Heart, The Great Grandson of Jedediah Kohler*, and *The Dining Room* fail because they are nothing more than "regional romanticism." In the long history of the theatre there is no doubt that this is an accurate assessment. However, it is also a shortsighted one, for the history of the theatre contains more plays like *Talley's Folly* than it does plays like *Old Times*. And this is as it should be. We savor the great plays when they appear, but in middle America it is perhaps the lesser works that keep the theatre alive. On aesthetic grounds Pinter may be preferable to Wilson, but Wilson is better than no theatre at all.

Source: Steven H. Gale, Review in *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 1, March 1983, pp. 124-6.

Topics for Further Study

Research Lithuania, Latvia, Prussia, and the Ukraine, particularly their political status during and just after World War I. Why does Matt, speaking in 1944, feel so bitter about his family's homelands?

Who was Emma Goldman? In what ways would Sally's family think Sally and Emma Goldman are alike?

Matt makes a casual reference to a "Negro private" with whom he played checkers. Trace the history of the word "Negro" through the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century in the United States. What emotional and political weight did the term carry when Matt used it in 1944, and when Lanford Wilson wrote the play in 1979?

How important is religious heritage in the community in which you live? How would parents in your community feel about Sally and Matt, or any other two people of different religions, getting married?

Why does Lanford Wilson set this play on the Fourth of July? What difference does the date make in your understanding of what he is trying to convey?

Compare and Contrast

1940: Laclede County, Missouri, which includes the town of Lebanon, is a mostly rural area in the wooded Ozark Mountains. Although the fictional Talley family owns an important garment factory, only about one-seventh of the work force is in manufacturing. A much larger portion, almost half, works in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. About one-tenth work in retail.

1980: Factories are more important to the economy of Laclede County. More than one-fourth of the county's workers are in manufacturing, while less than one-tenth work in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. About one-fifth work in retail.

1990: The trend away from agriculture and toward manufacturing and retail jobs continues in Laclede County. Agriculture, forestry, and fisheries account for only one-twentieth of the jobs, while manufacturing accounts for one-third and retail for one-fifth.

1940s: Anti-communism is one of the most important issues in United States domestic politics. Although the American Communist Party attracted some middle-class support in the 1930s, especially among those who favored labor unions, by the 1940s most of the appeal had waned. Although the United States and Russia were allies in World War II, communism was seen by most Americans as a "menace."

1970s: In large part due to the influence of the Civil Rights Movement and opposition to the Vietnam War, liberal thought is widely, but not universally, respected in the United States. Communism is associated in most people's minds with the political structures of the U.S.S.R., not with a social theory, and it is still suspect. At the end of the decade, Ronald Reagan mounts a successful run for the presidency by promising to stamp out communism.

Today: With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the U.S.S.R., communism has come to be seen by the general American population as an outdated and failed political philosophy. Those who call themselves communists are met more with amusement than with anger.

1944: Vietnam, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, declares its independence from France.

1961 to 1975: The United States sends troops to Vietnam to help South Vietnam defeat communists in North Vietnam, in America's most unpopular military action. More than 55,000 Americans are killed, and many thousands more are wounded.

Today: The Vietnam War is considered a humiliating defeat for the United States. Politicians look to the legacy of the war whenever they consider sending U.S. troops abroad; among their greatest fears is creating "another Vietnam."

What Do I Read Next?

Talley & Son, written by Wilson in 1981, shows what the rest of the Talley family is doing up at the house while Matt and Sally are talking in the boathouse on July 4, 1944. As the family copes with the death of a relative in World War II and with the probable dissolution of the family business, Sally returns to the house to pack for her elopement.

Fifth of July (1978) was the first of Wilson's Talley family plays to be produced, but it is set in 1977, the most recent in terms of the family's history. It focuses on Ken Talley, Jr., a Vietnam veteran who has lost both legs in the war, and on his decision to sell the Talley property where Aunt Sally—after a long and happy marriage to Matt—has recently scattered her dead husband's ashes.

Beast on the Moon (1998) is a play by Richard Kalinoski. Like Matt Friedman, this play's Aram Tomasian is a refugee from persecution in Europe. Determined to keep his past hidden, he learns that an important part of opening himself up to the love of another person is revealing his secret past.

A Doll's House (1879), by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, is another play about a woman who, like Sally Talley, must ultimately leave her home to claim her individuality and personhood.

American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) describes how social relations are transformed by the influences of industrialization. Veblen believed that the leisure class is a class of parasites whose conspicuous consumption increases demand for goods, thereby increasing production.

A People Apart: The Jews in Europe, 1789-1939 (1999), by David Vital, traces the history of European Jews like Matt Friedman's family up until the beginning of the Holocaust.

Further Study

Dean, Anne M., *Discovery and Invention: The Urban Plays of Lanford Wilson*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, pp. 15-29.

As the title indicates, this book-length study focuses on Wilson's plays that take place in cities, not on the Talley plays set in Lebanon, Missouri. However, Dean's first chapter is a brief biography of the playwright, written with his cooperation and the help of several of his close colleagues. This chapter is the best source for insight into Wilson's reliance on mentors and colleagues in his creative process.

Ryzuk, Mary S., *The Circle Repertory Company: The First Fifteen Years*, Iowa State University Press.

A straightforward history of the theater company founded in New York by Lanford Wilson and the director Marshall W. Mason. The "Circle Rep" was the site of the first production of *Talley's Folly* and the other Talley plays.

Savran, David, "Lanford Wilson," in *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights*, Theatre Communications Group, pp. 306-20.

In this interview Wilson discusses the years he studied the "well-made play," a tightly constructed form of drama first produced in nineteenth-century France. Wilson used the structure of the well-made play in the writing of several of his own plays, including *Talley's Folley*.

Williams, Philip Middleton, *The Comfortable House: Lanford Wilson, Marshall W. Mason and the Circle Repertory Theatre*, McFarland.

Examines the collaboration between Wilson and Mason, who directed almost forty productions of Wilson's plays. Through interviews, drama reviews, and analysis of scripts in various stages of revision, this book demonstrates how playwright and director working together can enrich a production beyond the capabilities of either alone.

Bibliography

Barnett, Gene A., *Lanford Wilson*, Twayne, 1987, pp. 121-22.

Busby, Mark, *Lanford Wilson*, Boise State University, 1987, pp. 38-39.

Clurman, Harold, Review in *The Nation*, March 15, 1980, p. 316.

Cooperman, Robert, "The Talley Plays and the Evolution of the American Family," in *Lanford Wilson: A Casebook*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer, Garland, 1994, pp. 67, 72, 75.

Haller, Scott, "The Dramatic Rise of Lanford Wilson," in *Saturday Review*, August 1981, p. 26.

Hughes, Catharine, "Four Uppers," in *America*, March 22, 1980, p. 247.

Kroll, Jack, "Love in a Folly," in *Newsweek*, March 3, 1980, p. 53.

Molyneaux, Gerard M., Review in *Library Journal*, April 1, 1980, p. 874.

Nightingale, Benedict, "Wound Up," in *New Statesman*, June 11, 1982, p. 34.

Simon, John, Review in *The New Yorker*, March 3, 1980, p. 62.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Drama for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

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

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

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

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

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

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

□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:

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