A Taste of Honey Study Guide

A Taste of Honey by Shelagh Delaney

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Introduction

When Shelagh Delaney began working on *A Taste of Honey,* she intended the material to be a novel; but instead, in what has become a very famous story, Delaney became disgusted at the lack of substance found in plays currently being produced for the stage and decided to rework her fledgling novel into a play. It took her two weeks. *A Taste of Honey* opened at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East in London on May 27, 1958. On February 10, 1959, Delaney's play moved to Wyndham's Theatre in London's West End, and on October 4, 1960, the play opened on Broadway at New York City's Lyceum Theatre. Delaney's play opened to mixed reviews. In many cases, her characters were praised for their honest, realistic voices. The play was also singled out for its accurate depictions of working class lives.

Yet there was also concern that too much praise for the play's nineteen-year-old author would make it difficult for her to ever create another hit play, the theory being that early success might prove so intimidating that she could never live up to her first accomplishment. In a sense, this is what happened, since Delaney never wrote another play that achieved the success of *A Taste of Honey*. However, this first play did earn several awards, including the Charles Henry Foyle New Play award in 1958 and the New York Drama Critics Award in 1961. The film version won the British Academy Award for best picture in 1961 and a best supporting actress award for Dora Bryan. The film also won two additional awards at the Cannes Film Festival in 1962 for best actor (Murray Melvin) and best actress (Rita Tushingham). Much of the credit for the play's success is attributed to Joan Littlewood, whose experimental Theatre Workshop first received and produced the play.

Author Biography

Shelagh Delaney was born November 25, 1939, in Salford, Lancashire, England. Her father, a bus inspector, and her mother were part of the English working class, the social group that informs of her writing. Delaney attended Broughton Secondary School but began writing even before she completed her education. She had no further interest in formal education, and after she left school, she held a number of jobs, including salesgirl, usherette, and clerk.

A Taste of Honey was produced when Delaney was eighteen-years-old. Although this play was originally being written as a novel, it was rewritten as a play in response to Delaney's dissatisfaction with contemporary theatre. Delaney felt that she could write a better play, with more realistic dialogue, than the plays that were currently being staged. *A Taste of Honey* became an unexpected hit, winning several awards both as a play and later as a film. Delaney followed with another play, *The Lion in Love*, two years later (1960). She did not write another play for nearly twenty years.

Instead, Delaney focused on short stories, *Sweetly Sings the Donkey* (1963); screenplays, *Charlie Bubbles* (1968) and *The Raging Moon* (1970); and television plays, *Did Your Nanny Come from Bergen?* (1970), *St. Martin's Summer* (1974), and *Find Me First* (1979). In 1979, Delaney again wrote for the theatre when she adapted *The House That Jack Built,* a BBC television script she had written in 1977. Delaney followed this stage work with two radio plays, *So Does the Nightingale* (1980) and *Don't Worry about Matilda* (1981). After another television play, *Rape* (1981), Delaney was asked to write a screenplay based on the true story of a women who was executed for murder. This work became the film *Dance with a Stranger* (1985). Delaney has also contributed articles for the *New York Times Magazine,* the *Saturday Evening Post, Cosmopolitan, and Evergreen Review*.

Delaney's first play proved a difficult act to follow, and none of her subsequent work received the same critical acclaim that greeted *A Taste of Honey,* although her collection of short, autobiographical stories, *Sweetly Sings the Donkey,* was considered a critical success. Delaney believes in social protest and has not been afraid to speak out on the need for a more realistic theatre, one that depicts the working class environment of many British citizens. Delaney lives in London, where she was made a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1985.

Plot Summary

Act I, scene i

The act opens with Helen and Jo in the process of moving into their new flat. It is cold, squalid, and damp. Helen is sick with a cold, but not too sick to engage in bickering conversation with her daughter, Jo. The two squabble effortlessly over minor issues, such where the heat is located, making coffee, or even how often to bathe. In the midst of this activity, Helen's boyfriend, Peter, enters. He is much younger than Helen. It becomes clear that Helen has moved to hide from Peter, who is very surprised to learn that Helen has a daughter. Failing to engage the older women in sex, Peter asks Helen to leave with him and get a drink. He also asks her to marry him, but is it unclear if he is actually serious about marriage or simply trying to get Helen to sleep with him. When Helen continues to insist that she is too ill to go out, Peter finally leaves. Helen tells Jo to leave the unpacking, since everything is best hidden in the dark. The scene ends with their exiting to go to bed.

Act I, scene ii

The scene opens on Jo and a young black man. He is walking her to her door and stops to kiss her. He asks her to marry him, and when she realizes he is serious, Jo says yes. The Boy pulls from his pocket a ring, but it is too large for Jo's finger, and so, she places the ring on a ribbon and ties it about her neck. The Boy is in the navy and will soon be leaving for six months at sea. After he leaves to go out with his friends, Helen begins to quiz Jo about why she looks so happy. Jo and Helen begin speaking of Jo's father, and the audience learns that many years earlier, Helen's husband had divorced her because he was not the father of the child (Jo) that Helen was expecting.

Helen tells Jo that she is going to marry Peter. At Jo's shocked exclamation that he is much younger, Helen reminds her daughter that at forty, she is scarcely old and dried up. Peter enters, and the moment Helen leaves to dress, he and Jo begin to argue. When Helen enters again, she tells Jo that Peter has bought a house in which they will live. As soon as Helen leaves again, Jo begins to go through the photos in Peter's wallet, accusing him of having many girlfriends. When Helen enters again, they all begin arguing, and finally Helen and Peter leave, and Jo begins to cry. The Boy enters and begins to sooth Jo. In her loneliness, she invites him to stay with her during the Christmas holidays.

The lights fade down and Helen enters with an assortment of boxes containing her wedding clothes. She finds the ring that The Boy gave Jo and seizes it, complaining that Jo is ruining her life in choosing marriage at such a young age. After Jo asks her, Helen begins to tell Jo about her father, whom Jo learns was an idiot. Jo immediately begins to worry that she has inherited her father's weak mind, and Helen recounts that Jo was the

result of one brief encounter with a man whom she really did not know. The act ends with Helen rushing out to her own wedding.

Act II, scene i

It is summer, about six months later. The scene opens with an obviously pregnant Jo entering with her friend Geof. He has been evicted from his apartment, probably because he is homosexual. He needs a place to stay, and Jo invites him to stay in the apartment. Geof wants to take care of her, and over the coming month, he does just that, cleaning and preparing for the coming baby. Jo is full of emotions, hating the idea of love and motherhood but at the same time needing someone to love her. She calls Geof her big sister, and he is very tolerant of her mood swings. He has also been supporting her, paying the rent and buying food.

Geof very much wants to be a father to Jo's coming child. He is genuinely fond of Jo and is even willing to accept a heterosexual lifestyle if it means he will have a place in Jo's and the baby's future. Goef tries to kiss Jo and asks her to marry him, but she rejects his advances, saying she hates sex. Geof tells Jo that he would sooner be dead than leave her, and they agree that he can stay; they will continue together as they have for the past month. Helen enters. Geof has sent for Helen, reasoning that Jo really needs her mother. But he fails to understand the sordid nature of their relationship. Helen is angry that Jo is pregnant and tells her that everyone is calling her a whore. After some angry, harsh, and accusatory words are exchanged, Jo threatens to jump out the window if Helen does not leave. In the silence that follows, Jo sends Geof to make coffee, and Helen continues to bully Jo.

Helen tries to leave Jo some money, and just as she is ready to leave, Peter enters. He is as loud and obnoxious as he was six months earlier, and he is drunk and abusive. He begins to berate Helen, saying he married his mother, an old bag, by mistake. A clearly embarrassed Helen tries to silence him, but Peter lets slip that he has been chasing young women. Helen is upset. Peter stumbles and passes out. In a few moments he is back on stage, looking slightly more sober. Peter refuses to allow Helen to bring Jo back to their home, and although Helen hesitates about leaving Jo, she runs out after Peter. As the scene ends, Jo is once again alone with Geof, and Peter has taken the money that Helen intended to leave for Jo.

Act II, scene ii

It is a few months later, and Jo's baby is due any day. Geof is cleaning, as Jo sits watching him. As they begin to talk, it becomes clear that Jo is worried that her child will be like her own father, the village idiot. But Geof tells her that Helen undoubtedly lied about Jo's father. Jo is once again emotional, and when Geof suggests that she begin preparing for the baby, Jo insists she intends to kill it. Geof has made a cake and as they prepare to celebrate the end of his schooling and exams and the coming baby, Helen walks in, loaded with packages. Jo and Helen immediately begin to argue over

whether Jo will go to the hospital to have the baby. Jo insists she will have her baby in the apartment.

Helen insults Geof, and he leaves. Jo chastises Helen for being rude to Geof, but she seems not to have noticed. Within moments, Helen is forced to admit that Peter has thrown her out and run off with a younger woman. Jo leaves to go lie down, and Geof enters with a bag of food. Helen is assuming a motherly role, insisting on cleaning and caring for Jo. Although she readily admits that she never remembers Jo when she's with a man, Helen's new single status has reminded her of her daughter and impending grandchild. Even though Jo wants Geof to be with her when the baby comes, Helen has sent him away. Jo finally tells her mother that the baby will be black, and a shocked Helen suggests they drown the child or give it away. The play ends with Helen rushing off stage to find a bar and a drink but promising that she will be back.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

The scene opens in a shabby apartment in Manchester, England, in 1956. Helen and her teenaged daughter, Jo, enter loaded with bags. Helen is described as a semi-prostitute, but her men are her only known source of financial support.

She and Jo start bickering immediately. Jo is angry that they are moving again and suspects that her mother is running from somebody or something. She hates the apartment and bitterly complains of how poorly they live on Helen's "immoral earnings."

Helen is suffering from a bad cold. She drinks whiskey while Jo inspects the apartment, which is freezing and has only one bedroom for the both of them. Helen offers Jo some whiskey to help her warm up, but Jo turns it down. When the roof begins leaking, Jo scolds her mother for not thinking when she makes choices. Jo speaks as though she were the adult, calling her mother by name. Helen's responses are witty, but immature and not motherly at all.

Jo tries in various ways to improve the apartment. She tries to use her scarf to decorate a bare light bulb that hangs from the ceiling. She also has some flower bulbs, stolen from the gardener at the park, and she wants to find a window box or pot in which to plant them. Helen's attitude is that there is no point in all this effort.

It comes up that Jo plans to quit school at Christmas. It is unclear why she chooses that date, although perhaps it is just that she will be old enough by law to drop out then. Jo says she wants to leave her mother as soon as she can put some money together. When Helen asks how she plans to make money, Jo says she plans to waitress at a bar or some similar job. Helen regales her with old songs she used to sing when Helen herself worked in bars as a young woman.

At first, Helen seems not to care about Jo's plans. She claims not to believe in interfering in people's lives, even her daughter's. However, when Jo leaves the room to see if her coffee is ready, Helen finds some drawings Jo has done. She is surprised and impressed by the drawings and tries to talk to Jo about going to art school. Helen even says she would pay for art school, but that only starts another round of bickering. From Jo's perspective, Helen's interest in Jo education is too little, too late. In the midst of this discussion, Jo tells Helen about a dream she had, in which some policemen found Helen's dead body under a rosebush.

Jo is just about to go down the hall to take a bath, while Helen complains that she bathes too much, when Peter enters. Peter is described as a brash car salesman. He is also another very heavy drinker, as well as a womanizer. He has asked around and followed Helen here. He is surprised to learn that Helen has a daughter, and he is very

crass in communicating that he wants Jo to leave so that he can have Helen, although Helen moved here to get away from him.

Things shift when Peter asks Helen to marry him. Jo, who has purposefully tried to annoy Peter to make him leave, now becomes truly alarmed. Helen, on the other hand, knows Peter has money, and it is clear she might marry him for it. For now, Helen sends Peter away, saying she and Jo need to unpack. As soon as he is gone, though, Helen tells Jo to leave the unpacking until morning and come to bed.

Jo postpones her bath, too, until the morning, because it has gotten dark. Helen teases her for being afraid of the dark at her age. Helen jokes that she prefers the dark, because she looks her best there. Jo explains that it is not the darkness outside of houses that bothers her, but the darkness inside.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

A Taste of Honey deals with family strife, prostitution, alcoholism, poverty, race, homosexuality and birth out of wedlock. Almost all of the topics explored in this play would have shocked and discomfited its middle class audience of the 1950s. The play became popular, however, because all these topics are dealt with in such a way that the play's audiences were forced to acknowledge their common humanity with all the characters.

The first scene introduces us to teenaged Jo and her mother, Helen. Jo and Helen are complex people. Jo clearly has the sensitivity and raw gifts of a visual artist. She shows this by using her scarf as a lampshade and by smuggling flower bulbs to plant in her new home. She symbolizes youthful hope, even in unlikely circumstances. Helen may or may not have had a genuine talent for music, but it is clear she never had the opportunity to explore that question. She married early, raised Jo alone, and has a drinking problem. Both women are gifted with words, but that gift is wasted in bickering. In fact, all of their gifts seem strained or wasted in the struggle for mere survival.

The relationship between the two women is also very complicated. On one hand, Helen clearly is the one who decides where they will live and when they will move. On the other, Jo scolds Helen as if Helen were the daughter and she the mother. Like any teenager, Jo wants to get away, but also has nightmares about her mother's death.

Something the reader must watch for, in studying this play, is that Helen, and later Jo, frequently say one thing and do another. For instance, she claims not to care enough to interfere in Jo's life, but when she sees that Jo has artistic talent, she tries to convince her to go to art school. At this point, it is not clear to the audience why she would pretend not to care, but this theme will be developed further in the play.

Peter Smith, Helen's boyfriend, is the only character in this play that is not fully human. He is presented as a rather two-dimensional character with nothing but sex and drinking on his mind. Helen is, of course, similar, but her relationship to Jo, as troubled as it is, gives her a dimension that Peter lacks.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

Jo's boyfriend, a sailor named Jimmie, walks her home from school. He asks her to marry him and has a ring for her. Jo accepts. Jimmie is worried about what Helen will say when she learns that he is black. Jo is worried that Helen will laugh at her and not take the engagement seriously due to their youth, but she is not worried about Helen's reaction to Jimmie. Whatever else Helen might be, Jo explains, she is not prejudiced about color.

The young couple plans to get married during Jimmie's next leave in six months. Until then, they will try to save some money. Jo tells her fiancée that she starts a part-time job in a bar this week, when she leaves school. Jimmie is sad that he is in the Navy, because they will not see each other much, but Jo is very philosophical. "Well, we can't be together all the time and all the time there is wouldn't be enough." They make plans to see each other tomorrow, and Jo goes inside her apartment.

She finds Helen stretched out on the couch, reading the paper. At Jo's request, Helen looks for a good movie listed, but finds nothing interesting. Helen complains that the cinema is as bad as the theater. She says that she cannot hear what they are saying half the time, and the half that she can hear is not worth it.

Her engagement on her mind, Jo asks Helen about the time she was married. However, Helen does not want to discuss her husband. When he found out Helen was pregnant, he threw her out, because Jo was not his baby.

Helen has decided to remarry, though. She has accepted Peter Smith's proposal. As soon as Helen makes this announcement, Peter arrives to take Helen to dinner. He has brought flowers for Helen and chocolates for Jo, but Jo is not pleased. She does not have a good feeling about Peter, and indeed, while Helen is getting dressed, Jo discovers that Peter has a wallet full of pictures of other women.

When Helen is dressed and ready to go out, she talks Peter into leaving Jo some money to live on, in case they are gone for several days. Jo asks her not to go, even as they bicker, but Helen is sure Jo can fend for herself. Jo, again being more motherly than her mother is, makes sure that Helen has her key, so she can get into the apartment, if Jo is gone to work when Helen gets back.

Later in the play, the reader will learn that Helen often leaves Jo alone for a few days during Christmas. In a final effort not to be abandoned again, Jo asks Helen and Peter if she can come with them, but Helen calls her jealous and leaves.

Jo is lying on the bed crying when Jimmie arrives. They dance toward each other. Many of the entrances and exits of this play are danced.

Jimmie passed Helen on his way in and was surprised to learn that was Jo's mother. Jo keeps asking him if he thinks her mother is beautiful, but he is not interested in that sort of conversation. He sees that Jo has been crying. He puts some sort of pill in a glass of milk, but she does not drink it. She does not want to be alone for another Christmas, and he agrees to stay.

A number of days later, after the holiday, Helen calls Jo into the living room. She wants Jo's help in getting ready for her wedding to Peter today. Jo, however, has caught Helen's cold and she is in no mood to be helpful. Helen is excited about her new wedding clothes, shoes and a fur coat, until she suddenly notices the ring hanging around Jo's neck. She is so upset by the idea of Jo's marrying young that she becomes a little violent. She is relieved when Jo says that her fiancé will not be back for six months, if at all.

Suddenly, Jo asks who her father was. Helen stalls a bit before telling Jo that he was a little retarded man that she fell in love with for an afternoon. This is quite upsetting to Jo, who wonders if being daft, as she calls it, is hereditary.

Jo refuses to kiss Helen goodbye when she leaves, but she wishes Helen luck. Helen replies that if the sailor does not show up, she will be back.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

Jimmie, the black sailor who is Jo's boyfriend, is introduced in this scene as a young man who is genuinely smitten with Jo. He is not a two-dimensional villain. Though he will not return for their wedding in six months as he promised, it is clear that when Jimmie proposes to Jo, he means it.

As mentioned above, the playwright has the characters dance on and off the stage throughout the play. The symbolism of the dance can be seen most clearly in Jo and Jimmie's dance toward each other when left alone over Christmas. There is something inevitable about the next step in a dance. The playwright seems to be saying that these human interactions are patterns that are inevitably repeated throughout generations.

The playwright also uses this scene to make jabs at movies and theater of the 1950s. She lets Helen be the voice of discontent on that subject. It is said that the playwright Delaney wrote this play, because she was so contemptuous of the plays currently in fashion.

Again, in this scene, there is the role reversal between Jo and her mother. While her mother is leaving Jo to fend for herself, Jo is concerned about whether Helen has a key. Still, Helen does care for Jo, as is shown by her fury at the idea of Jo throwing her life away in an early marriage. In addition, it could be argued that, since Helen did not succeed in getting rid of Peter by moving, the only way she knew to provide money for herself and Jo to live on was to do as Peter wished and go with him.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

Jo and a new friend, Geof, return from the fair. It is summer now, and Jo is obviously pregnant. As Geof looks around, he hints about how large her apartment is for just one person. Jo figures out that his landlady kicked him out for having another man in his apartment. She teases him at first, telling him that he can stay with her if he will tell her what two men do together. When he becomes offended enough to walk out, she apologizes and asks him to stay.

While Jo is gone from the room to get sheets and blankets for the couch, Geof finds her drawings. It turns out that he is an art student. He seems to think that she has potential, but he is critical of the lack of form and discipline in her work and wonders why she never went to a decent art school.

Finally, they discuss the obvious fact that Jo is pregnant and alone. Jo is working two jobs, but she will not be able to work much longer, because she cannot stand people staring at her. She has no idea how to support her baby. Geof suggests that Jo's mother should know about the baby and help Jo. Jo acknowledges that Helen has money now, but she is not sure where Helen is. When Geof starts listing all the things the baby will need, Joe becomes frightened and angry. She is superstitious that if she attaches too many hopes and dreams to the baby, it will be stillborn or retarded.

Geof cheers Jo up by becoming playful. The two begin reciting old nursery rhymes. Then they go to sleep, Jo in her bed and Geof on the couch. Geof will skip school tomorrow to clean the apartment a bit and cook Jo a proper meal.

The lights go dim. Jo and Geof dance off the stage and dance back in with props to indicate that a month or two has passed. Geof is cutting a baby's gown out of cloth. Jo is very pregnant, hot, restless and irritable. She also has a toothache.

Then, the baby kicks, and Jo expresses relief and joy to know that the baby is, at least, alive. She does not allow herself to stay joyful, however. She quickly goes back to being cynical and unkind. She teases Geof and calls him a big sister for sewing. She tells him he would make a wonderful wife.

Jo becomes very angry, not grateful, when she learns that Geof paid the rent with his educational grant and arranged for the landlady to make a wicker cradle. She cries that she wants to be left alone. She hates motherhood, she says. She does not want to read about taking care of babies or think of breastfeeding.

Geof tries to make everything all right. He kisses her, against her wishes, and asks her to marry him. Jo likes him, she says, but she does not want to marry anybody. She does not believe, even though Geof is homosexual, that he would not ask anything of her

sexually. She worries that being in the apartment with her all the time is not good for Geof. He agrees that it is not, but says he would rather be dead than away from her.

Suddenly, Helen arrives with a flourish. Geof has found Helen and asked her to come, but he does not want Jo to know it. Jo guesses it right away and becomes angry. Geof defends his decision to contact Helen. He knows Jo is depressed and frightened. He thought she needed her mother, even though Helen is extremely insulting to him.

Although Helen has come to check on Jo, she carries on the same pretense of uncaring that Jo learned from her. She claims to believe that "bearing a child doesn't place one under an obligation to it." Helen and Jo argue, but when Geof tries to stick up for Jo, Jo wants him to stay out of it. Finally, Jo sends Geof off to the kitchen to make some tea.

While Geof is out of the room, Helen drops the uncaring act. She offers Jo some money, and when Jo will not take it, she leaves it on the table for her. Helen says she has not slept ever since she heard Jo was pregnant, and that she will continue to send money in the mail every week.

Then Peter comes in, drunk and verbally abusive. When he finally leaves the room to go to the bathroom, Helen sends Geof after him to make sure he does not get lost. Alone with Jo again, Helen asks Jo to come live with her and Peter, but Jo does not want that at all. Helen keeps saying she wants to care for Jo and see her through this pregnancy. Jo keeps replying to the effect that Helen should have cared before. Peter comes back and says he will not have Jo in his house, anyway. He takes back the money that Helen left for Jo on the table. Peter walks out and threatens to leave Helen there, if she does not come along. At first, Helen says she will not go with him if Jo will not go, but then she follows him out.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

This scene introduces Geof. A caring young art student, Geof is quickly drawn into Jo's life, mostly because of his sympathy for Jo. He seems to see past all of Jo's bluster, and he does not want to leave her and her baby alone. However, as a homosexual, or perhaps bisexual, young man in the 1950s, Geof also is alone in the world, so he needs someone as much as Jo does.

The toothache Jo suffers from in the summertime is indicative of poor prenatal care. Currently, pregnant women take prenatal vitamins heavy in calcium, but there used to be a saying that a woman lost a tooth with every baby. Of course, even if Jo knew the importance of calcium, it is doubtful that she could afford to do anything about it.

It is easy to see why Jo would fear retardation. Helen said Jo's father was retarded. It is a little less obvious why Jo would fear a stillbirth, until one thinks of all that is stillborn in Jo's life. Her talent in art, her schooling and her engagement to Jimmie have all come to nothing. Jo has developed a superstition, common to people in extreme poverty, that the more she wants something, the less likely it is to happen. Therefore, her claims not

to want the baby, not to care about it, are indicative of how very much she wants it to turn out all right.

Similarly, it can be shocking to see Jo's ingratitude for Geof and the landlady. Then one remembers that Jo has been taught that nothing comes free. She is afraid that Geof will want something from her, just as all the men who supported her mother always wanted something from Helen. As much as she wants and needs help, she cannot trust it yet.

She trusts help from Helen least of all. She blames Helen for leaving her alone to get pregnant in the first place and seems to want to punish her mother for it. However, even though she is angry and hurt with her mother, she does not want Geof interfering in their intense relationship, any more than she wants Peter in the middle of it. The biggest irony of the play is that while mother and daughter do not have a harmonious relationship, their bond is very strong and leaves little room for anyone else.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

As this scene begins, in Jo's ninth month of pregnancy, she is reading an outdated pregnancy and baby care book. Geof found it for her at a used bookshop. Now, he is mopping the apartment, while she reads.

Jo is feeling much better than in the last scene. She is wearing a clumsy maternity dress that she made for herself. Geof found a job for her, re-touching photographs, and though she teases Geof about trying to prove that she is artistic, she seems to appreciate it. She also appreciates his cooking and care of the apartment.

Then, a cloud comes over her mood. Geof is sweeping and finds Jo's flower bulbs underneath the sofa. The fact that they never bloomed troubles her, and she asks Geof to stop what he is doing for a moment to hold her hand. He does, and after a moment, she is back to her bickering, teasing self, saying, "and he took up his bed and walked." (Matthew 9:7)

She finally reveals to Geof that Helen said Jo's father was retarded. Geof is amazed that Jo could have let this bother her all these months. He reminds Jo of how Helen exaggerates everything. He points out that Helen thinks Geof is daft just because his hair is a little longer than average. When he puts it that way, Jo realizes her fears about that issue have been unnecessary.

In the next moment, however, another layer of feeling is revealed. Geof gives Jo a white life-sized doll, to practice holding. Jo says the color is wrong and feels murderous rage. Suddenly, she has been overcome with the memory of how she once felt about Jimmie. For the first time, she feels her sorrow and anger that he did not come back to marry her as he promised. Geof offers to go find Jimmie and bring him to her, but Jo does not want that.

Geof again broaches the subject of marrying Jo himself, but as they go into the kitchen to get cake and tea, Jo points out that they already live like an old married couple. When they bring their tea things back into the main room, Helen bursts in, laden with packages and carrying flowers for Jo. Jo seems unsurprised and offers her a cup of tea.

Helen is very affectionate toward Jo, calling her "love" and questioning her health. As soon as she learns Jo is not planning to use a hospital, however, she is irritable and insulting again. Geof maintains that the district nurse will come to the apartment for the birth and that everything will be just fine.

Helen announces that she is home to stay. She is rude to Geof until he leaves to get a few things at the store, although Jo asks him not to let Helen push him away. When he is gone, Helen begins showing Jo the baby clothes she has brought. Jo tries to tell Helen that she really has hurt Geof, but Helen brushes this off, saying she only meant to

get rid of him, not hurt him. Jo persists in trying to set some ground rules, asking Helen to leave Geof alone, if she plans to stay.

Jo guesses, correctly, that Helen's marriage has failed. Helen admits Peter has taken up with another woman, but says it was fun while it lasted. Still, Helen says, she has known for the last few weeks that she should be with Jo, but avoided it, because she hates trouble of any kind.

Jo has developed a headache and goes to get some rest. Helen starts busying herself about the apartment in a very motherly way. Geof returns with some groceries, and Helen insults him, his groceries, his housekeeping and the wicker basket the landlady made for the baby. Geof feels that Jo cannot handle having both him and Helen there, so he prepares to leave. First, though, he asks Helen not to frighten Jo with bad childbirth stories. Even though she acts offended, Helen does honor this request.

When Jo awakes, she asks Helen if there will be much pain in childbirth. Helen reassures her that it is not as much pain as it is hard work. It is clear that Jo is in the early stages of labor, so for now, Helen lets Jo think that Geof has not yet returned from the store.

Helen needs a drink, though, when Jo tells her the baby will be black. For a moment, it seems like old times. Jo tells Helen to leave if she cannot handle it. Helen says she will leave, but Jo knows Helen is only gone to get a drink, and perhaps the nurse, and that she is coming back. Jo smiles to herself and remembers Geof, as she quotes again his nursery rhyme, "Little miss, pretty miss, Blessings light upon you. If I had half a crown a day, I'd gladly spend it on you."

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

Jo has not only grown in size in her last month of pregnancy but also she has grown in understanding and compassion. She is able to ask for help directly, as when she asks Geof to hold her hand when the faced with the bulbs that never bloomed; that is, the stillborn flowers. When the bad moment passes, she refers to the New Testament book of Matthew, verse 9:7, which tells the story of Jesus' healing of a paralyzed man. She is only partially joking. It is clear that Geof has had a healing effect on her. She has also grown in her ability to receive good things and express appreciation for them.

The rage that she expresses when she remembers Jimmie is also a sign of healing. Previously, she was so cynical that she could not admit that she had hoped he would return and that she missed him. Now, in the presence of someone who does not abandon her, she is able to feel her grief at having been abandoned.

Jo does not have any illusions about her mother. She knows that Helen has only returned because her marriage failed. Still, Helen's gift of flowers shows that she does know Jo enough to know what is important to her.

Jo understands that Helen has suddenly become affectionate only because she has no one else, but Jo also has the insight that when Helen is hurtful, she is as unaware as a child is. It is as if there is nothing personal in Helen's cruelties, no rejection of Jo. Helen just has a fragile crust, as Jo herself had before Geof, and Jo seems to understand this for the first time.

Because Geof has loved her, even enough to leave when he thinks it is better for her; Jo is able to recognize love, even in her childish mother. Similarly, because she has experienced a whole range of emotions for her own baby, Jo understands Helen's feelings toward her. The fact that she can sing Geof's nursery rhyme, at the end of the play, shows that her hope is not crushed, and that something of Geof will always be with her, even after she knows he is gone.

Characters

The Boy

The Boy is a black sailor who appears briefly, professing love for Jo. He asks her to marry him and gives her a ring. They spend a week together during Christmas, but then he leaves for a six month tour at sea. The Boy never reappears in Jo's life and does not know that she is carrying his child.

Helen

Helen is described as a semi-whore who drinks too much. As the play opens, she has a cold and has moved herself and daughter into a chilly, squalid flat. Helen is young, barely forty. She has been married and divorced, but her daughter, Jo, is the result of a brief affair with another man. Helen has been involved with many men, and she has not been any kind of real mother to Jo, who appears to desperately need maternal guidance. Helen thinks first and foremost of her own pleasure. She chooses to marry Peter, perhaps because she loves him, but also because he has money to keep her. When Peter finally throws Helen out for a younger woman, she goes back to Jo, suddenly remembering that Jo is her daughter. Jo accuses Helen of never really being a mother to her. And, indeed, it appears that Helen is incapable of thinking of anything except her own needs.

Geof

See Geoffrey Ingram

Geoffrey Ingram

Geof is a homosexual art student and friend of Jo's. His landlady has thrown him out on the street, and he begins to care for Jo, sleeping on her couch. Geof genuinely loves Jo. He is perhaps the only person who completely loves and cares for her. Geof tolerates Jo's emotional outbursts and even tries to reunite her with her mother, but he discovers that Helen is too self-centered to ever love anyone but herself. Geof also offers Jo financial support, paying the rent, buying food, and performing domestic tasks like cleaning and cooking. Although Helen turns up repeatedly, whenever she happens to remember that she has a daughter or needs a place to go, it is Geof who is the steadying influence in Jo's life.

Jimmie

See The Boy

Jo

See Josephine

Josephine

Jo is Helen's daughter. She never knew her real father, but she does know that Helen's husband divorced her after she became pregnant with another man's child. Jo has many questions about her real father, but she is upset to learn that he was probably mentally deficient, an "idiot," according to Helen. Jo is in love with a young black sailor. He arrives to comfort her after Helen leaves to marry Peter. The two spend a few brief days together, and after he has left for a six month tour at sea, Jo discovers that she is pregnant.

Jo has never experienced the love of a mother. She has been repeatedly abandoned by Helen, who did not want a child and has never assumed any responsibility or care for Jo. Jo is not at all sure that she wants the child she is expecting, nor is she sure what she will do with it when it appears. However, by the end of the play, it appears that Jo has rejected her mother's life for the stability that her friendship with Geof offers.

Peter Smith

Peter is about ten years younger than Helen. He fancies himself quite a lady's man, carrying photos of many old girlfriends in his wallet. He drinks too much, as does Helen. Peter is as self-centered as Helen, first begging her to marry him and then chasing other women. Peter is cruel and rude, caring little for anyone's feeling. He treats Jo, the daughter of the woman he professes to love, as a troublesome irritation to be gotten rid of. When Peter throws Helen out, it comes as no surprise to anyone involved.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

Jo has essentially been abandoned by her mother. This has been a life-long pattern, but it becomes overwhelming when Helen moves her daughter to a new flat just before Christmas and then leaves almost immediately with her boyfriend. Jo's loneliness directly leads to her pregnancy. When her mother, Helen, leaves with Peter, Jo dissolves into tears. The young black man, who professes to love her, appears, and Jo invites him to stay with her for the Christmas holidays. In the previous scene, Jo is resistant to any intimacy with this young man, who is leaving for a six-month tour at sea with the navy. But when he appears later at her flat, Jo is so overwhelmed with loneliness that she throws away her future plans for work, right along with her inhibitions.

Duty and Responsibility

Helen has a duty to care for her daughter, but she assumes no responsibility for her actions nor does she assume the mother's role. Helen is ready to run off with a man, quite literally, at a moment's notice. She never considers what will happen to her child. And it becomes clear as the play progresses that this has been a frequent occurrence in Jo's life. Helen has never considered her daughter's feelings or assumed any responsibility for her care. Jo is expected to care for herself, and apparently she has done so for some time before the play opens. Helen thinks so little of her child that she never even tells the men with whom she is involved that she has a daughter. This means that Jo has no model for motherhood on which to base her own behavior. This is an issue of the last act when Jo struggles with her impending motherhood and her ambivalence over having a child of her own. There is ample evidence that, with her child, Jo will repeat the cycle of neglect that Helen started.

Friendship

Geof proves his worth as a friend through the efforts he makes to care for Jo. As her only friend, he moves in when she most needs help. Because she does not want anyone to see her, Jo cannot work, and thus, she has no funds with which to pay for rent and food. Geof needs a place to stay, having been evicted because he is homosexual, and Jo offers him her living room couch as a bed. Geof becomes Jo's only friend. He pays the rent and buys and prepares the food. His friendship extends to an attempted reunion between Jo and her mother□though Geof fails to realize the extent of Helen's selfishness. He is the only person who unconditionally loves Jo. Geof offers her loyal, generous friendship, something she has never known and is not quite sure how to accept.

Mother and Daughter Relationship

A central theme in this play is the nature of mother/daughter love. In the case of Helen and Jo, there seems to be no real parent/child relationship in the traditional sense. Helen does not act like a mother, nurturing and caring for her child. Jo does not act like a child, respecting and obeying her parent. In fact, Jo does not address Helen as "mother," preferring to call her by her given name. Jo addresses her mother as "Helen" as a form of disrespect.

For her part, Helen has often hid the fact that she even has has a daughter, perhaps in the hopes of creating an illusion of youth for herself. Jo is abandoned by her mother whenever a better opportunity□usually a man with money□comes along. It is clear from her behavior that Jo desperately needs a mother. In the terms of a nurturing parent, Geof is the closest thing Jo has.

Pride

Jo has so much pride that she will not leave her flat once her pregnancy becomes evident. She certainly must be aware that she is the object of neighborhood gossip, but Jo refuses to face or acknowledge this negative attention. Staying a prisoner in her flat means that she cannot work, and so, she has no way to earn money and support herself. Pride is also an element of Helen's character: she is willing to push her illegitimate grandchild in a pram down neighborhood streets but when she discovers that the child is black, has too much pride to be seen with this particular child. Jo's pregnancy by a black man is not really a racial issue, rather it is a class issue. Jo and Helen may be poor, working class people, but Helen considers the black father to be from a class below their working class status. As such, Helen rejects Jo's unborn child, even offering to drown it or give it away, rather than be seen with it. Helen's misplaced pride permitted her to remain in a relationship with a man who mocked, humiliated, and eventually threw her out of his home, but this same pride causes her to reject her own grandchild, who is not deemed suitable.

The kind of pride exhibited in *A Taste of Honey* is not the positive kind that enables a character to rise above adversity. Rather, the misplaced dignity that Jo and Helen exhibit serves to chain them to their cycle of misery. They are too blinded by their skewed standards to break free of the confines of their existence.

Style

Angry Young Men

"Angry Young Men" was the label given to a group of British writers□notably playwright John Osborne□of the late-1950s, whose work expressed bitterness and disillusionment with Postwar English society. A common feature of their work is the antihero, a flawed, often abrasive character who rebels against a corrupt social order and strives for personal integrity. Delaney did not set out to become a part of this group, but when her play was produced, many critics saw her work as a protest against working class poverty and the hopelessness of a social system that confined people by status or class.

There are elements of the "Angry Theatre" in Delaney's play, notably its working class setting. But her characters are ultimately unmotivated. There is no sense that either Jo, Helen, or even Geof has an agenda to change the world, to correct the injustices of their existence. Unlike Jimmy Porter in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, Delaney's characters let life pass them by without attempting change, without lashing out, rebelling at their unfavorable situations. As Delaney frequently stated, however, her intention was to illuminate the working class in her play, to strive for realism. She was not angling for inclusion in the Angry Theatre.

Audience

The people for whom a drama is performed. Authors usually write with an audience in mind; however, Delaney is said to have written for actors, whom she felt were being given little enough to do in contemporary productions. One interesting aspect of *A Taste of Honey* is that Delaney frequently has her characters address the audience directly. In this sense she enables the actors to more fully realize their characterizations□engage in a kind of faux dialogue with "real" people (the audience). The technique also allowed the original audiences, many of whom had little contact with the social strata depicted in the play, a closer interaction with the working class.

Character

A person in a dramatic work. The actions of each character are what constitute the story. Character can also include the idea of a particular individual's morality. Characters can range from simple stereotypical figures to more complex multi-faceted ones. Characters may also be defined by personality traits, such as the rogue or the damsel in distress. "Characterization" is the process of creating a lifelike person from an author's imagination. To accomplish this the author provides the character with personality traits that help define who he will be and how he will behave in a given situation.

Genre

Genres are a way of categorizing literature. Genre is a French term that means "kind" or "type." Genre can refer to both the category of literature such as tragedy, comedy, epic, poetry, or pastoral. It can also include modern forms of literature such as drama novels or short stories. This term can also refer to types of literature such as mystery, science fiction, comedy, or romance. *A Taste of Honey* is generally classified as a realist, modern drama.

Plot

This term refers to the pattern of events. Generally plots should have a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion, but they may also sometimes be a series of episodes that are thematically linked (a technique frequently employed by German playwright Bertolt Brecht). Basically, the plot provides the author with the means to explore primary themes. The plot of *A Taste of Honey* is how Jo comes learns to live with her mother's abandonment, while finding the strength to survive. The theme of the play is the nature of the mother/daughter relationship.

Setting

The time, place, and culture in which the action of the play takes place is called the setting. The elements of setting may include geographic location, physical or mental environments, prevailing cultural attitudes, or the historical time in which the action takes place. The setting for *A Taste of Honey* is a run-down flat in a poor neighborhood. The action occurs over a nine to ten month period, roughly the gestation period for Jo's child.

Historical Context

England in the mid- to late-1950s was still feeling the effects of World War II. The bombing of London□the "Blitz" as it was often called□began September 7, 1940, and continued throughout the war. Children were sent out into the countryside for safety, and women in their twenties became eligible for the draft. Rationing of food, fuel, and other essentials needed for the war was common place. By 1944, Germany's secret weapon, the V2 ballistic missile began targeting London, intensifying the damage from years of earlier bombing. When the war ended, American soldiers returned home to a country that had suffered little damage within its borders.

Britain, on the other hand, had suffered greatly during the war and rebuilding would take a very long time. Rationing continued long after the end of the war. People needed homes as well as buildings in which to work and pray and, once again, enjoy life. The rebuilding of Britain's less tangible assets would take a long time, also. The war had intensified feelings about loyalty and betrayal, innocence and corruption, commitment and abandonment. The results of the Blitz and the images of the Holocaust had horrified Britains, but their endurance and survival had also strengthened the British resolve to reclaim their lifestyle.

In America, the suffering brought about by the Great Depression and World War II ended in the Postwar boom of the 1950s. With the exception of minorities, notably black Americans, the 1950s were economically successful. But this was not the case in England, where huge numbers of the population were on relief, the British government's form of welfare. There was great despair over the future and society seemed brutal and mechanistic. This was especially true of the country's industrial heartland. One response to this feeling of despair was evident in the literature of the late-1950s. A group of young writers from this period were labeled "Angry Young Men" because their writings were filled with protest, bitterness, and anger at the social values that still prevailed in Britain.

Authors such as John Osborne, Kingsley Amis (*Lucky Jim* [1954]), Alan Sillitoe (*Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* [1960]), and John Braine (*Room at the Top* [1957]) created the antihero as the protagonist of their works. These antiheroes were young people who could see that the upper classes had no desire to share the wealth or a willingness to help the lower classes achieve success. Osborne, and writers like him, viewed the upper classes and the institutions they had established with disdain. Delaney was hailed as a member of this group when *A Taste of Honey* was produced, although she was less concerned with social change than in creating realistic characters.

For the first time, the working class was finding a voice in England's literary works. These writers were not hailing from Britain's upper classes or from the genteel South. This new breed of writer understood the working class and asked "what is real?" Their response was that for the majority of Britains, poverty, dead-end jobs, and basic survival were "real." While life for the upper classes quickly returned to normal in the Postwar

years, life for the workers did not improve; England, as a victorious nation, should have prospered across its classes, yet only a small minority were benefitting during this period.

English laborers could look to America and see that the middle class were prospering, pursuing the "American Dream." Jobs were plentiful and wages were increasing. Workers were buying automobiles and homes and the furniture to fill them. But in England, there was little hope for the future unless the working class could find a voice. The dramas and novels of protest advocating social changes offered working class Britains a voice. Despite Delaney's protestations that she was not a member of the Angry Theatre, her play nonetheless raised awareness of the plight of the lower classes.

Critical Overview

When *A Taste of Honey* opened on Broadway in October, 1960, most critics seemed more taken with the author's age than with her play. Almost every review commented upon Delaney's age, and a few upon her six foot height, but few endorsed the rousing success that the British critics bestowed upon the play. Most New York critics, instead, praised the cast and director, offering mixed praise for the play's content. These critics took a wait and see attitude toward Delaney's future prospects as a successful playwright.

In his review of *A Taste of Honey,* the *New York Time's* Howard Taubman stated that the play was "an evocation of disenchantment done with touching honesty." Taubman cited the play's honesty and "plainness of truth" as strengths of the writer, whom, he stated has a way of telling a story that is "modest, almost muted." Much ofTaubman's praise, however, was directed toward the performers, especially Joan Plowright as Jo, who the critic felt "captures the shell of cynicism that the girl has grown to shield herself from her hopelessness." Plowright provided a performance that Taubman called, "haunting." Of the playwright, Taubman noted that "the Lancashire lass may grow more optimistic as she grows older." Taubman, however, did not see Delaney's pessimism as a deterrent, finding in her play, "the redeeming savor of truth."

John McClain, writing for the *American Journal,* also found the honesty of the characters an important element of the play. McClain stated that Delaney "has not written a drama of any great significance, but she has a beautiful ear for dialogue and an amazingly uncluttered feeling for the people with whom she has grown up in her little Lancashire town." Delaney's ability to bring truth to her characters' voices is a strength, although that does not entirely make up for the lack of purpose in her play, according to McClain. Although Delaney's work lacks a political or sociological agenda, McClain pointed out that the play "is written with such obvious sincerity and familiarity, and it is so well played, that it becomes a very touching experience in the theatre." As did other reviewers, McClain also admired Plowright's performance as a highlight of the play.

Richard Watts Jr. also offered a strong endorsement in his review for the *New York Post*. Of the characters, Watts stated that they "have a warmblooded reality about them which reveals the young authoress as a dramatist who knows how to fill a play with recognizable and vivid human beings." Of the playwright, Watts praised Delaney and stating that "she knows how to create characters throbbing with life, she can build a dramatic situation with honesty and expertness, she writes a simple but vigorous prose and she has a compassion that is wry, unsentimental and always believable. Without sacrificing her status as a realist, she can bring fresh imagination to the drabness of her narrative. Her drama has perhaps its weaker moments, but it rarely ceases to be effective." Watts's enthusiasm for Delaney, having referred to her as exhibiting "compassionate candor ... [and] frank and explicit realism," was also extended to Plowright's performance, which he calls, "deeply moving."

Plowright was also a major strength of the play, according to the *New York World Telegram's* Frank Aston, who said that Plowright's is a "bravura" performance. Once again, as did other reviewers, Aston cited Delaney's honesty and reality in creating these characters and dialogue. But in the end, it was Plowright's skill as an actor that carried the show, providing "a moving experience."

Some reviewers offered a more mixed assessment of Delaney's play, including Walter Kerr of the *New York Herald Tribune*. Kerr disputed the realism of Delaney's dialogue, saying that "her people talk most strangely ... they rap out words and phrases that now and then suggest they've all been given an aborted college education." But Kerr did think that Delaney created interesting characters, of whom all "pretensions to dignity" have been removed. *A Taste of Honey,* according to Kerr, "doesn't taste like honey, it tastes like vinegar spiced with ginger."

A less favorable review was provided by John Chapman in the *Daily News*. Chapman began by noting that Delaney's play made news in the London theatrical world, that the young playwright was hailed as "a fresh, forceful new talent." But Chapman disagreed with this assessment. While he felt that Delaney "has a fine ability for creating believable characters [and] good skill at keeping them alive," the critic ultimately complained that her play is without any real purpose. Clearly disappointed that Delaney did not live up to her advance notices, Chapman complained that he "could not become emotionally involved in it [the play]."

Robert Coleman of the *New York Mirror* had similar reactions to Delaney's work. Coleman also observed that a playwright should have "something important to say." In a review that actually called Delaney names, Coleman referred to her as "a snarling, cynical young Englishwoman" who wrote "an ode to misery."

Slightly twenty years later, *A Taste of Honey* enjoyed a major revival, first appearing Off-Broadway and a few months later, on Broadway. Once again, the reviews were very mixed. In the *New York Times,* Frank Rich offered a mostly favorable review, saying of Delaney's play that "it holds up better than most plays of England's look-back-in-anger period." Rich complimented Delaney, saying "she looks at a miserable world with charity and humor." However, Rich's greatest kudos went to Amanda Plummer as Jo. Similar to the play' s earlier production, it was the actress playing Jo who captured the hearts and imaginations of the reviewers.

John Beaufort provided a positive review in the *Christian Science Monitor*. Beaufort praised the honesty of Delaney's play, calling it "no nonsense realism, and deeply genuine compassion." But a less favorable criticism was offered by the *Daily News's* Douglas Watt, who said "the flavor's just about gone" on this twenty-year old play, which "hasn't worn very well." Watt argued that "the crudeness and contrived cheekiness of the dialogue stand out awkwardly, and the overall craftsmanship is negligible."

Within a few months of its Off-Broadway opening, Delaney's play moved to Broadway, where once again the critics were divided on the play's merits. In *Time,* T. E. Kalem called *A Taste of Honey* "taunt, vital, moving and funny." He reserved his greatest

admiration for Plummer, however, saying that she "invests [Jo] with an unfaltering pulse beat of humanity" Jack Kroll of *Newsweek,* also found Plummer "unforgettable" in a performance that is "the making of an actress."

Plummer also received the only compliments to be found in Clive Barnes's review in the *New York Pos* t. Barnes, who found Delaney's play a bore, did find Plummer "radiant." Barnes's opinion of the 1981 revival was that "the boredom has intensified." Despite such mixed criticism, many have opined that credit must be given to Delaney for creating such a vivid protagonist. These critics argue that without the playwright's creative skills, actresses such as Plowright and Plummer would not continue to be singled out for praise.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Metzger is a Ph.D. specializing in literature and drama at the University of New Mexico. In this essay, she discusses the disparity in the critical assessment of Shelagh Delaney 's A Taste of Honey.

Critics greeted the Broadway premier of *A Taste of Honey* with conflicting critiques. Many reviewers found the plot pointless and boring, while others found it honest and real, with wonderful authentic dialogue. It is worth considering what elements of Shelagh Delaney's play created such a diverse reaction. The New York critics were prepared to like Delaney's play, since they had received advance word from the English press that the young playwright was, as John Chapman of the *Daily News* reported, "a fresh, forceful new talent." But as were many critics in the New York theatre world, Chapman was disappointed to find that *A Taste of Honey* had no purpose, no idea, no emotional pull that commanded interest. Why this huge disparity between the British critics and the New York ones? It is possible that there is no concrete answer to that question, but it is worth considering why the same plot and characters are capable of engendering such different reactions.

Delaney's play appeared on the British stage only a year after John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger,* and the British critics were quick to put Delaney in the same class as other literary protesters□such as Osborne□who were seeking political and social change. But Delaney's writing was not motivated by such ideals. She has stated that her intent was to create realism, to bring the voices of the working class into the theatre; she did not have a political agenda to promote. As Susan Whitehead noted in *Concise Dictionary of British Literary Biography,* the British critics acclaimed Delaney's play as one which would "interpret the common experiences of today." Delaney's play offered something to the working class audience, whose existence the British theatre community had just discovered. The work was also heralded as providing "all the strength and none of the weaknesses of a pronounced, authentic local accent." For British audiences, Delaney offered the opportunity to see and hear a way of life different from that of most audience members.

And for those viewers who were of the working class, this play allowed them to remember how very lucky they were compared to the characters portrayed on the stage. While Delaney might describe the play as representing authentic working class dialogue and situations, in fact, Helen is described as a semi-whore, and Jo is described first as a student and then later as largely unemployed as she hides in her flat. Neither appears to be working class. But what Delaney did bring to the stage, Whitehead noted, is "a badly needed influx of new ideas from the provinces." These ideas included the use of music and a dance-hall atmosphere and the artifice of having a character address the audience, in asides. While critics are notoriously captivated by the idea of something new and different, with "innovative" too often substituted for "content," in this case, it seems that it was largely the British critics who provided enthusiastic approval for Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*.

The American critics greeted the Broadway debut of this play with a more tempered enthusiasm. Indeed, several disliked the play. Of those who did find something to recommend in Delaney's work, critics often qualified their review to note that, while the play lacked purpose and or plot, the performances of the leading actresses helped to offset the defects in Delaney's writing. For the New York critics, few of whom even mentioned anything new or innovative in Delaney's play, the idea of a working class audience seemed to hold little attraction. In reviews of *A Taste of Honey,* the New York critics focused largely on the cast, especially on the actresses playing Jo and Helen. In many cases, critics either ignored the problems with the play's content, glossed over the character inadequacies, or narrowly focused their reviews to the performances of the actors.

And yet, the lack of content in the plays performed in the contemporary theatre is the very reason Delaney gave for writing the play. According to Whitehead, Delaney says that "she saw Margaret Leighton in Terrance Rattigan' s *Variation on a Theme*. She [Delaney] told one interviewer: 'It seemed a sort of parade ground for the star ... I think Miss Margaret Leighton is a great actress and I felt she was wasting her time. I just went home and started work.'" It would turn out that this is the same complaint that New York critics leveled toward Delaney's work. Chapman's enjoyment of Joan Plowright' s performance as Jo, as well as that of Andrew Ray's as Geof, was tempered by his disappointment in the material provided to them.

Chapman complained that both actors' performances were commendable, except that, "in the end, he [Ray] doesn't know what do about the situation□and neither do I and neither did the author." Several other New York critics complained that the play was boring; crude, contrived, and of negligible craftsmanship; offered nothing to say, was an ode to misery, cynical, a thin script, and without purpose; and that it did not prove much. These are completely opposing views than those offered by the British critics. American reviewers were expecting something more from Delaney's play.

What should have occurred on stage was a more defined plot, driven by ideas and purpose. For example, early in Act I, Helen implies that she and Jo have moved to this shabby flat to get away from Peter, whom she later accuses of having followed her. He wants to marry her, but Helen gives no reason for her flight from her boyfriend□nor is there any obvious reason presented to reinforce Peter's desire to marry her. He shows Jo multiple photos of women he carries in his wallet implying that he is involved with them. So why is he so ardently pursuing the middle-aged Helen? It makes no sense, and indeed, within months, he has once again taken up with other women and thrown Helen out. There are other holes as well, including why the black sailor would give Jo an engagement ring, promise her love and marriage, and then simply disappear. Men often promise love and marriage to secure sex, but they rarely spend money on a ring for just that purpose.

There is also a potential plot in the relationship between Jo and Helen, but Delaney barely touches upon the possibilities. As William C. Boles noted in *Text and Presentation,* there are many similarities between mother and daughter, including the fact that Jo is repeating much of her mother's history: she is working in a bar, turning to

sex out of loneliness, conceiving a child as a result of her first sexual experience, enduring pregnancy under severe economic hardship. But Delaney never really develops these or any of the plot's other narrative possibilities. Instead, the audience is left to wonder what purpose Delaney intends in creating these people.

In his book *The Angry Theatre: New British Drama,* John Russell Taylor explored some of the problems presented in Delaney's work. Taylor singled out several serious problems, including the lack of ideas or purpose that the American critics noted. According to Taylor, Delaney' s play "has no 'ideas' which can be isolated and considered as such apart from their dramatic context." That is, it is difficult to define any theme significant enough for discussion. There is no appreciable depth for either actor or audience to explore, and, as Taylor observed, "if one tries to read the play away from the theatre, without attributing to its characters the *personae* of the actors who originally played them, it is virtually non-existent."

Interestingly enough, Taylor thought the play worked in spite of this very significant problem. The critic argued that "in the theatre ... it has the unique power of holding us simply as a tale that is told, and the words the characters are given to speak take on, when spoken, a strange independent life of their own." Taylor was saying that it is the actors who made the play work for him and that the material was less important than the actors' ability to deliver the lines.

An assessment of other reviews, however, indicates that many critics disagreed with Taylor. Another point that Taylor made is that the relationship between Jo and Helen seems believable, but it is also, as he noted, "completely impossible." Here, Taylor offered a contradiction that cannot be explained. The critic attempted to explain this by saying that Jo creates her own little world and that in spite of her misery, she also makes no effort to move beyond that small space. It is true that plays need to be seen and heard on stage to be properly appreciated and understood, but at the same time, no play should be so dependent on an actor that it cannot be appreciated without that performance.

Delaney has said that she wrote *A Taste of Honey* in two weeks. Perhaps an extra week or two of development might have allowed for some greater depth and purpose in this play's construction.

Source: Sheri E. Metzger, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In this essay, Ippolito examines Delaney and her play within the context of her contemporaries, notably John Osborne, Peter Shaffer, and Jean Genet.

Contemporary serious dramatists fall into two broad structural groups: experimenters in form and traditional naturalists. On one side we find such playwrights as Edward Albee, Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jack Gelber, and Jean Genet; and on the other, Peter Shaffer, Arnold Wesker, John Osborne, and surprisingly twenty-two-year-old Shelagh Delaney, whose first play has had an enormously successful career on the professional stage since its first production, when she was eighteen. The structural distinction is an academic one; both groups of dramatists are desperately concerned with the same twentieth-century problem: man's inability to communicate with man; and each seems to use the same icon, images, and basic symbols. The icon is the fundamental if despairing honesty of the pervert and the social rebel and the essential deceit-fulness of the conformist; the images deal with the delusive qualities of time, experience, social institutions, and religious and sometimes political dogmas; the basic symbols are the whore, the homosexual, the frustrated *mater-familias,* the drug addict, the confused, or uncommitted young adult.

We should have expected Miss Delaney, in her youth and comparative innocence, to experiment rampantly, to reject the traditional forms of dramatic communication, to seek for models among the caustic obscenities of Genet or the surrealistic redundancies of Beckett or Ionesco. Instead, she is among the dramatic communicants who express modern anxiety in comparatively old-fashioned or academic dramatic forms; she seems to have chosen to rank herself with such dramatists as Osborne and Shaffer who employ dramatic techniques which are cousin-germain to those of Brieux, Shaw, Pinero, and Terence Rattigan; this, however, is not enough to bring her to our attention. It is her recent success on Broadway and in London that forces her upon our notice and scrutiny.

It is too early to assess the young Miss Delaney's position in the drama either as the exponent of one sort of dramatic expression or the other, but her success in the East End of London, the West End, and on Broadway, makes clear at least the attraction these elements at modern American and European drama have for writers. We must examine her play, *A Taste of Honey,* with these symbols and forms of contemporary drama in mind.

By her own confession, Miss Delaney is a neophyte in the theatre, unpractised and unsophisticated; however, she is exasperated both by the inarticulate and the excessively articulate practitioners of drama who play at writing about modern problems or placating the contemporary lares and penates. It is not clear whether her impatience is directed toward Ionesco's ilk or Rattigan's. She set out to write *A Taste of Honey* in order to express her own view of her generation, and with the panache of a novice poker player she succeeded brilliantly in dealing herself a full house.

A Taste of Honey, in its present Broadway production, directed by Tony Richardson and George Devine, designed by Oliver Smith, and acted by Angela Lansbury, Joan Plowright, and Andrew Ray in the principal roles, is amusing, touching, lit with occasional flashes of optimism, darkened with irony and despair, alternately sophomoric and mature in its language, and cluttered with meretricious but effective theatrical tricks. Its success on Broadway is no surprise, for the play contains those elements most likely to appeal to a popular audience: a sensational theme, a "distinguished" cast, and a kind of vulgar, outspoken humor which flatters the self-styled broad-minded; moreover, it comes to the hub of American professional theatre at the heels of some of the most widely applauded and well-attended British plays of recent seasons, *Look Back in Anger, Five Finger Exercise, and Irma la Douce.* Osborne, Shaffer, and the English adapters of Breffort's French musical revue, More, Heneker, and Norman, prepared the Broadway audience for a play which takes homosexuality, sexual promiscuity, prostitution, and social irresponsibility for granted as the furniture of the twentieth century. More significantly, the play has also made an enormous appeal to the intellectual brigade who, like Miss Delaney, accept unblinkingly the sordid agglommeration of characters and ideas contained within the play as the undeniable sign of the *zeit-geist*. This joint approval of Miss Delaney's play testifies that the problems she writes about are not merely intellectual considerations but pervading conditions, and that her concern with the treatment of these problems is not a youthful pose but an honest preoccupation. The things she writes about are the facts of life in this decade at least of the twentieth century; and the lexicon of images, icon, characters, symbols is the accepted if not the only possible means of conveying the facts.

The central figure of the play is Jo, young, confused, searching for some sort of creative foothold in life, through whose tentative contacts with other characters in the play□her mother, Helen; her lover, the Negro sailor; her friend, the homosexual Geof; and her mother's alcoholic husband, Peter□ Miss Delaney presents a world of sterile or warped human relationships. Jo is the Everywoman of this world. Whatever Jo attempts in her efforts to bring life into the cramped and squalid world she lives in meets with frustration. She brings tulip bulbs into the flat, they do not grow; she draws pictures with a talent even her mother grants her, they remain unseen, uncommunicating; she enters into a love affair with a Negro sailor who leaves her pregnant with a child doomed to an outcast's life. Her periodic efforts at organizing herself, her flat, and her personal relationships with Geof or her mother end in failure.

It is in the interacting relationships between Jo and her mother and Jo and Geof however, that Miss Delaney drives home the central point of the play: Jo's taste of honey, her brief experience with love, only serves to emphasize the remoteness of one human being from another. If they do not selfishly deprive one another of warmth and sympathy, the moves they make toward love are abortive. The mother-daughter relationship in the play shows this clearly: Helen takes off whenever mother-love, the most reiterated twentieth-century middle-class virtue, becomes too exacting or threatens her comfort. Helen's attitude toward love in general is that it is a physical convenience: "It wasn't his nose I was interested in," she says of an old lover. Helen is a curiously contradictory character, whose inconsistencies are seemingly rooted in life

and in literature: she accuses her daughter of selfishness, yet behaves selfishly herself, selfishly and unforgivably. She has a clear, realistic view of life, and the necessity to observe the traditions, and yet leads a questionable life herself. On one hand, Miss Delaney presents us with a human being, and on the other with a symbol.

Geof also reflects this inconsistency; significantly it is he who provides Jo with the most prolonged and unwavering sympathy and devotion of any of the characters in the play, precisely at the time when she most crucially needs it. She is in hiding from society, waiting for her baby, anxious about its possible insanity, and frightened of what is to come. He loves Jo and offers to marry her. The one character who offers Jo a chance at stability, a sociable conformity, and an emotional steadiness, Geof is ironically the character who, because he is homosexual, cannot succeed in giving her any of this. As a result, his love for her is futile, and foreordained to sterility. He too is a compound; in part drawn from life, in part a symbol.

Jo moves between these characters, alternately affected by them and detached from them. She comments upon the society of these people not as if they touched her, but in the manner of a curiously amused, laconic sociologist: of her mother's and Peter's engagement, "I should have thought their courtship had passed the stage of symbolism;" of the children in the neighborhood, "It's their parents' fault. There's a little boy over there and his hair, honestly, it's walking away. And his ears. Oh! He's a real mess! He never goes to school. He just sits on that front doorstep all day. I think he's a bit deficient... His mother ought not to be allowed;" of life, "It's not [simple], it's chaotic□a bit of love, a bit of lust and there you are. We don't ask for life, we have it thrust upon us." Even when she is frightened, hurt, angered by what she sees or what happens to her, her sense of humor, even of detachment, certainly of resignation, remains: to Geof: "You've got nice hands, hard. You know I used to try and hold my mother's hands, but she always used to pull them away from me. So *silly really*. She had so much love for everyone else, but none for me;" of her birth, "A frolic in the hay loft one afternoon. You see her husband thought sex was dirty, and only used the bed for sleeping in. So she took to herself an idiot. She said he'd got eyes like me ... He lived in a twilight land, my daddy. The land of the daft." Jo, too, is both character and symbol□the uncommitted, unresolved young adult, separating herself from her actions, only tentatively claiming that a thing is right or wrong.

Shelagh Delaney seems to maintain a stronger, healthier, more humanistic point of view than her contemporaries of either dramatic camp in her treatment of these symbols. Genet's homosexuals in a play such as *Death Watch* are nihilistic, anti-human, or to use Sartre's word, "de-real." Maurice and Lefranc symbolize destructive impulses of which Genet seems to be a perverse partisan; they are not human but incarnate intellectual concepts of a complex, depraved view of man and the theatre. They have in common with Geof an underlying sense of sterility and impotence, but unlike him they are without hope; they repel, he attracts sympathy: hence, he has greater tragic connotations. Similarly with the whore: Irma in *The Balcony* is without illusions, fidelity, a sense of shame; she shares this with Helen, whom Miss Delaney tentatively designates a semi-whore in the *dramatis personae*. However, Irma like Maurice and Lefranc is not a character rooted in humanity but an allegoric device to embody a corrosive view of a

society founded on self-willed, hypocritical illusions; the whore-house she governs is the world, modern Europe, modern civilization, where she panders to the desire of these illusions. Helen panders only to herself; she achieves her impact on the audience by way of her human failings, not as an intellectualized, "de-real" symbol. She, like Geof, connotes a great deal more than Genet's figures.

Peter Shaffer and John Osborne share Miss Delaney's view of this generation; a contrast between them and her is perhaps fairer than that between her and Genet; they are closer to her in age, and the England they write about is essentially the same. Both these men are more polished literary craftsmen than she; Osborne has an ear for dialog which snaps with verisimilitude, Shaffer's prose is more elegant, precise, and evocative of complex states of mind within his characters than Miss Delaney's is at this stage. Moreover, their plays are more directly related to a social and historical point of view. Osborne sets his plays, *Look Back in Anger and The Entertainer*, in an England which suffers by a sentimental comparison with the good old days of the Edwardians and from an outdated system of class distinctions. The lack of communication between his characters, their frustrations in human affairs, seem to stem as much from the conflicts of class mores as from any inherent human disabilities. Alison, Helena, Cliff, and Osborne's angry young Everyman, Jimmy Porter, seem to fail as much through class differences as through anything else. Although Miss Delaney's play is set in a slum, class and social distinctions, the England of the past as it is seen by the present, do not operate in her play. A minor sociological failing in character motivation perhaps, but it results in characters who, like Jo, seem to command more maturity and tragic consequence than the mewling, puking Porter. Nonetheless, the same protest is there against a world where communication between human beings is seemingly doomed, for whatever reason, to failure or to halfhearted, unsatisfactory compromise. Moreover, some of the same symbols seem to operate; the relationship between Cliff, Jimmy, and Alison is ambiguous. Cliff's devotion to Porter has understated homosexual elements in it; his sympathy for Alison cannot provide any help for her; the destructive love which Jimmy and Alison bear for one another results in a miscarriage which makes her barren. Human beings, proclaims Jimmy, "all want to escape from the pain of being alive. And, most of all, from love."

Shaffer's *Five Finger Exercise* is set in an upper middle class household; his characters' inability to communicate also stems in part from class or social distinctions. The difference of experiences between father and son, husband and wife, as the family moves from one social level to a higher, contributes to their individual isolation. Again the basic symbols are there: the mother, unhappy in her marital situation, looks for love and sexual gratification where it is impossible to find it; the son senses his own love for the German tutor, whose pathetic attempts at achieving some permanent relationships with human beings are countered either with uncomprehending rebuff or misunderstanding sympathy. Shaffer's characters are more complex than Miss Delaney's; they are better educated, more subtly articulate, but also less capable than Jo of detaching themselves from their predicament. This middle-class English family is a torture rack of poses, misunderstood feelings, repressed emotions, self-imposed isolation. Shaffer's characters are not so different from Miss Delaney's, but Shaffer's greater maturity gives his characters larger, more human dimension. However, because

they are so much a part of the middle class, whereas Miss Delaney's are *not* of the lower class, they lack her universality.

Miss Delaney's characters seem to contain greater symbolic values than either Shaffer's or Osborne' s, although she is more nearly aligned to their tradition than she is to Genet's, Albee's, orIonesco's. The historic or social background against which Shaffer and Osborne place their characters tends to limit their symbolic significance while it enriches their human values. They seem frailer, weaker, more individual than Delaney's Jo, Helen, or Geof□ who are in part romanticized versions of the symbols which the experimental dramatists use in their dramatic allegories, and in part extremely humane portraits of very human types.

Source: G. J. Ippolito, "Shelagh Delaney" in *Drama Survey,* Vol. 1, no. 1, May, 1961, pp. 86-91

Critical Essay #3

Calling Delaney's play "very special," McCarter offersafavorable review of ATasteofHoney, *offering particular praise for the playwright's sharply drawn characters*.

The origins of' *'A Taste of Honey,* " which is now at the Lyceum, have the flavor of a fairy tale. The author of the play, Shelagh Delaney, is an English girl from the North Country, and a couple of years ago, while she was working as an usher in a Manchester theatre, she decided that she was wasting her time lighting people to seats so that they might behold dramas of no merit whatever. Miss Delaney, then nineteen, accordingly proceeded to write a drama of her own, and, having done so, dispatched the script to Joan Littlewood, who runs the Theatre Workshop, in Stratford. Miss Littlewood, whom you will recall as the highly capable director of "The Hostage," put Miss Delaney's work into rehearsal almost immediately, and it presently came about that " *A Taste of Honey* " moved from Miss Littlewood's experimental theatre to the more commercial environs of London's West End, where it played for over a year. Obviously, Miss Delaney's coach was not going to turn back into a pumpkin, and so David Merrick, an American producer who likes to gamble when somebody else has shuffled the deck to his advantage, has brought the play to Broadway.

What Miss Delaney has wrought is something very special. Unless you have led a life much less sheltered than mine, you will probably find it hard to take her characters in stride. The central figures in " *A Taste of Honey"* are a sleazy whore and her love-starved young daughter; among their associates are a one-eyed lecher who fancies Mother, a Negro sailor who has his way with Daughter, and a homosexual who serves as a sort of handmaiden to the girl when she is quick with the Negro's child. All this no doubt sounds quite sordid, and during much of the first act, when Miss Delaney is establishing the personalities of the mother and daughter and sketching in their life in a horrible flat in a Lancashire industrial town, you may well begin to think that you are in for something pretty bad. But let me assure you that you are not, for Miss Delaney soon demonstrates a remarkable knack for involving you emotionally with her strange quintet. They may be a tawdry lot, but when the author gets them into motion you can hear a heartbeat. " *A Taste of Honey"* isn' t long on plot□the crux of the matter is the daughter's dilemma after the sailor has impregnated her and gone off to sea□but if the playwright's tailoring is somewhat haphazard, there is nothing shoddy about her cloth.

As directed by Tony Richardson and George Devine, the performers in " *A Taste of Honey"* are completely satisfactory. In the role of the mother, Angela Lansbury is at once appalling and appealing, and Andrew Ray, as her lover, has a seedy insouciance. In his brief appearance as the colored sailor, Billy Dee Williams is a plausible sort, and Nigel Davenport, who plays the homosexual, exhibits both wit and resourcefulness as he excites our sympathy even while he outrages our ethics. But it is to Joan Plowright, who portrays the daughter, that the highest praise is due, for she galvanizes every scene in which she appears. Oliver Smith has provided a properly squalid setting for the play, and the production is helped along by an instrumental quartet headed by Bobby Scott, who composed the incidental music.

Source: John McCarter, "Lancashire Lass" in the *New Yorker,* Vol. XXXVI, no. 35, October 15, 1960, p. 73.

Critical Essay #4

Panter-Downes calls A Taste of Honey *"remarkable " and lauds the play for its precise characterizations and "bitingly frank domestic dialogue.* "

A remarkable new play is coming to Wyndham's Theatre on February 10th, after having a three-week refresher return run at the Theatre Royal, Stratford (the East End Stratford-atte-Bowe, not Shakespeare's home), where it was first put on, with resounding success, last May. The play is the Theatre Workshop production of " *A Taste of Honey,"* by a tall, good-looking nineteen-year-old Lancashire girl, Shelagh Delaney. Stratford has been for the last six years the permanent home of the Theatre Workshop, and, like the Lyric, in Hammersmith, and the Royal Court, in Sloane Square, is the London equivalent of Off Broadway. It is farther off Shaftesbury Avenue than either of the others, but, like them, it is the home of consistently intelligent theatre, and has a highly individual producer, Joan Littlewood. Miss Delaney, who used to work in a Lancashire factory before she started writing, knocked off "A Taste" in two weeks flat. It has won her, to date, an Arts Council bursary of a hundred pounds and the Charles Henry Foyle New Play Award for 1958, besides rounds of applause from the critics. She is an original, exuberant writer, with a wonderful ear for a theatrical line. Her play takes place entirely in a scruffy bed-sitting room in her known Lancashire world, inhabited by a middle-aged tart called Helen and her daughter Jo, and later (after the mother has gone off with a well-heeled admirer) by the girl and a homeless art student, who live in a sort of pathetic, platonic babes-in-the-wood relationship after he has drifted in to anchor on her sofa. Jo is now pregnant by a colored sailor, who never makes good his promise to come back for her, and the second and best half of the play is the touching, funny, often bitingly frank domestic dialogue between her and the sofa's lodger, who maternally shoulders the cooking and scrubbing, insists on her drinking milk and reading a baby-care manual, soothes her out of her nightmare fears of inherited insanity, and is himself helped to escape from homosexuality. The play ends tragically, as might be expected. In the roles of the daughter and the boy, Frances Cuka and a thin, pale young actor named Murray Melvin are perfect.

Source: Mollie Panter-Downes, review of *A Taste of Honey*, in the *New Yorker,* Vol. XXVI, no. 51, February 7, 1959, pp. 86, 89.

Adaptations

A Taste of Honey was adapted as a film in 1961, earning popular success and a number of critical awards. The film stars Rita Tushingham, Robert Stephens, Dora Bryan, Murray Melvin, and Paul Danquah. The director was Tony Richardson, who also adapted the screenplay with Delaney.

Topics for Further Study

Discuss the interracial love affair between Jo and the character known as The Boy. In view of her mother's reaction at the end of Act II, how much of a factor was race in choosing him as a date and later as a lover?

Research the economic conditions of working class women in northern England during the twentieth century. What opportunities existed for women in the working class?

Helen is described as a semi-whore. Discuss the depictions of women's lives and the poverty of the setting. According to late twentieth-century standards, would Helen still be described in this manner? Do you think that attitudes toward sexuality have changed that dramatically in the last forty years?

Jo has some artistic talent and Geof is attending art school. Late in the play, the audience learns that Jo is able to earn some money touching up photos. Investigate the opportunities for aspiring artists. What kinds of jobs are available and how difficult is it to earn a living?

Compare and Contrast

1958: An English Roman Catholic economist, Colin Clark, condemns birth control. Clark argues that although population growth places difficult demands on agrarian societies, it also provokes greater efforts in the fields of industry, commerce, political leadership, and science.

Today: Birth control continues to be a politically charged issue, with murders, bombings, and increasing violence emerging as an increasingly frequent image in protests against abortion.

1958: Agatha Christie's *Mousetra* p is the longest running play in British history, with over 2000 performances. Terrance Rattigan's *Variations on a Theme,* which opened on May 8, is credited as the play whose lack of content inspired Delaney to write *A Taste of Honey*.

Today: Both *Mousetrap* and *A Taste of Honey* continue to be produced in regional theatre, but *Variations on a Theme* has achieved no lasting notoriety.

1958: The Clean Air Act, passed in 1956, goes into effect. It represents Britain's efforts to cut down on deaths in London and in England's industrial cities, where many deaths are thought to be caused by the polluted air from factories and coal-burning furnaces.

Today: Automobiles still cause pollution, but contamination from the burning of coal is significantly diminished. Britain continues its cleaning of public buildings, which for many years have been covered in the black soot left by burning coal.

1958: For the first time, the British government allows women to sit in the House of Lords.

Today: With a woman, Margaret Thatcher, having served several years as Prime Minister, women in Britain's Parliament are no longer considered novel or unusual.

What Do I Read Next?

TillieOlsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" (1961)isa short story about the relationship between mother and daughter and the effects that poverty and a working class life can have on two people.

Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, by Alan Sillitoe, is a novel about Britain's working class life.

John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1957) is a play that offers an antihero, Jimmy Porter, on the verge of the middle class but aware that the upper class can squash his climb up at any moment.

Carolyn Kay Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story* (1987) is about growing up working class in England and the struggle for survival.

D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) is set in the factory town of Nottinghamshire, a coal mining village. This novel is considered one of the first British novels to focus on working class life.

Further Study

Campbell, Louise. *Coventry Cathedral: Art and Architecture in Postwar Britain,* Clarendon Press, 1996.

While this book focuses on only one building, its construction represents many of the important Postwar ideas and forces found in architectural building in the 1950s and 1960s in England and Europe.

Ellis, Peter Berresford. *A History of the Irish Working Class,* by Pluto Press, 1996.

This book provides an examination of the how the working class in Ireland has been shaped by economic, political, and social factors.

Jones, Gareth Stedman *Language of Class,* Cambridge University Press, 1984.

This book is a collection of essays by a British social historian that discusses the nature of class consciousness and central issues of Britain's working class.

Taylor, John Russell. *The Angry Theatre: New British Drama,* Hill and Wang, 1969.

This book provides biographies of playwrights and a discussion of their individual works.

Throop, Elizabeth A. *Net Curtains and Closed doors: Intimacy, Family, and Public Life in Dublin,* Bergin & Garvey, 1999.

This book focuses on the family life and the influences of religion, society, English Colonialism.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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