

This Is Our Youth Study Guide

This Is Our Youth by Kenneth Lonergan

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Introduction

In 1993, the MET in New York City produced Kenneth Lonergan's one-act play "Betrayal by Everyone" during their festival of short plays. Lonergan then expanded the play and renamed it *This Is Our Youth*. The new version opened off Broadway in 1998 to rave reviews that continued when the play moved the following year to the Douglas Fairbanks Theater on Broadway. The play was published by Overlook Press in 2000.

The entire play takes place in an Upper West Side apartment in New York City in 1982 and centers on two friends: twenty-two-year-old Dennis, whose father pays for his rent, and nineteen-year-old Warren, who has just stolen fifteen thousand dollars from his father. Both are college dropouts who have been caught up in the excesses of the "Me Generation" of the 1980s yet, at the same time, reject the elitist world of their parents. The plot is complicated by a young woman who, along with Dennis, introduces Warren to the complexities of human relationships, especially concerning issues of loyalty and betrayal. As Lonergan focuses on the efforts of Dennis and Warren to return the cash to Warren's father, he presents an acerbic look at this generation in its ironic struggle both to resist and to attain adulthood.



Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1963

Kenneth Lonergan was born in New York City in 1963 to parents who were both psychiatrists. His father was also a retired doctor and medical researcher. Lonergan attended Walden School, a progressive private school in Manhattan, where he began writing in the ninth grade. His interest in playwriting was sparked when his drama teacher asked him to collaborate on a play. The characters in *This Is Our Youth* are loosely based on his Walden friends and himself. After graduation, Lonergan attended Wesleyan University in Connecticut and took classes at the HB Studio in Greenwich Village, New York City. He eventually earned a degree from New York University's drama writing program. While he was attending New York University, he wrote his first play, *The Rennings Children*, which was chosen for the Young Playwright's Festival of 1982.

Lonergan supported himself after college by writing speeches for the Environmental Protection Agency and Weight Watchers, creating video presentations for Grace Chemicals, and writing comedy sketches for Fuji Films sales meetings. During his time as a speechwriter, he never abandoned his love of writing for the theater; he often participated in readings and workshops with the Naked Angels, an off-Broadway theater troupe.

The fact that Lonergan's parents were both psychiatrists seems to have influenced much of his writing, including *The Rennings Children*, a play about a family's struggle to avoid mental disintegration, and the screenplays for both *Analyze This* (1999) and *Analyze That* (2002), films that explore the psychiatric problems of a member of the Italian mafia. Lonergan's play *This Is Our Youth* gained much attention at the 1993 festival of short plays at the MET in New York City. *Waverly Gallery*, another semi-autobiographical work, is based on the life of his grandmother. The play received critical acclaim, including a Pulitzer Prize nomination in 2001, but it was not a commercial success. Another of Lonergan's works, *Lobby Hero*, made the top-ten list in *The Best Plays of 2000-2001*.

Lonergan also wrote the screenplay for *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle* (2000) and wrote, directed, and costarred in *You Can Count on Me*, a film that won the Grand Jury Prize at its premiere at the 2000 Sundance Film Festival and an Oscar nomination for Best Original Screenplay and earned Lonergan the Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award. Lonergan has also worked with the director Martin Scorsese on writing for some of Scorsese's films. He was nominated for an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay for his on-the-set rewrites for Scorsese's film *Gangs of New York* (2002).



Plot Summary

Act 1

This Is Our Youth takes place in Dennis Ziegler's one-room apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, in New York City. It opens on a Saturday night in March, after midnight. His friend Warren appears at Dennis's door, lugging a large suitcase and a backpack. Dennis begins rolling a joint, after he discovers that Warren has brought some marijuana with him. Warren admits that his father has kicked him out because he smokes too much of it.

Warren pulls two hundred dollars out of his backpack and gives it to Dennis, in payment of a loan. He admits that he stole fifteen thousand dollars from his father, who, he guesses, got it from a shady business deal with gangsters. He explains that he wanted to make his father pay for kicking him out. Dennis tells Warren that he is stupid for stealing the money and is afraid that his father and his associates will come after Warren and find him at Dennis's apartment. He wants Warren to take the money somewhere else, but Warren insists that there is nowhere else he can go.

Dennis tells Warren that no one likes him, because he is always provoking people and he is an idiot. He then analyzes everything that is wrong with Warren's life—that his father continually beats him, that he owes Dennis money, that he is “an annoying loudmouthed little creep,” and that now he is “some kind of fugitive from *justice*.” Close to tears, Warren says that he does not know what to do or where to go. Warren talks Dennis into letting him stay until he figures out what to do about the money.

Warren asks whether Dennis has seen Jessica, a friend of Dennis's girlfriend, Valerie, but Dennis tells him that Jessica is out of his league. Warren suggests that they take some of the money, get a hotel room, and have a party with Jessica and Valerie. After he accidentally breaks Valerie's sculpture, Dennis explodes.

As a way to replace the missing money, the two think about selling some of the vintage toys that Warren is carrying around in the suitcase, but Dennis comes up with a plan to sell cocaine instead. The plan involves partying with Jessica and Valerie. Dennis insists that Warren will do fine with Jessica if he does not talk about his dead sister. When Jessica arrives, Dennis goes downstairs (offstage) to meet Valerie, and the two leave to get the drugs and some champagne.

After some awkward conversation, Warren and Jessica talk about their plans for the future and argue about environmental influences and personality development. They then have more amicable conversations about their families and Warren's toy collection, which Jessica admires. He tells her that he considers the 1914 Wrigley Field Opening Day baseball cap that his grandfather gave him his most valuable piece. After she inquires about his sister, he reluctantly tells her how she was murdered by her boyfriend. They smoke pot and begin to dance to the vintage albums Warren has. They



begin to kiss, but Jessica soon breaks it off, asking Warren whether he really likes her. He insists that he does and invites her to share a room with him at the Plaza Hotel.

Act 2

In the early afternoon of the next day, Warren arrives at Dennis's apartment. Dennis tells him that he got the cocaine and that Valerie stormed out after she saw her broken statue. When Dennis asks what happened with Jessica, Warren says that they had sex at the Plaza. Dennis says that the Plaza is a dump and that they should have gone to the Pierre instead. Warren is worried that Jessica was too quiet before she left in the morning.

When Warren says that he spent about a thousand dollars for the night, Dennis explodes, claiming that they will not be able to make up the money by selling the cocaine and that Warren's father will come after him. The two decide to sell Warren's toys to make up the difference, but Warren keeps the baseball cap. When the door buzzer rings, Dennis panics, thinking that it is Warren's father, but he calms down when he finds that it is Jessica. She comes up, and Dennis makes innuendos about her and Warren.

After Dennis leaves, Jessica tells Warren that she cannot go out to brunch with him because her mother is upset that she stayed out all night without calling. When Warren inquires whether he can see her later in the week, she declines and asks whether he told Dennis that they had slept together. After Warren admits that he did, she becomes angry, and the two get into an argument. Warren tries to explain that he really likes her and that what he told Dennis was very respectful. When he asks what he can do to make it up to her, she tells him that she would like him to give her his grandfather's baseball cap. He immediately hands it to her, insisting that he wants her to have it, but he cannot hide his distress.

They argue about the hat; Jessica tries to give it back to him, but he refuses. When she asks about seeing him later in the week, he replies, "I don't think we can. I'm all out of baseball hats." As she takes it off her head, he threatens to burn it if she tries to give it back again. Jessica leaves it on the table and departs.

Just after Warren pours out on a plate the cocaine that Dennis has bought, the phone rings, and he knocks over the plate. When Warren realizes that it is his father, he admits that he took the money. They discuss his sister and his own bad judgment and end the conversation with each telling the other, "I hate you."

Dennis returns, apparently devastated by the discovery that the person he bought the drugs from the previous night has died of an overdose. When he tells Warren how much he got for the toys, Warren says that Dennis was cheated. At first, Dennis explodes, but then he apologizes, explaining that he is upset by his friend's death. As he starts talking about it, he determines that he will get off drugs, because he has become "high on



fear.□ He considers how he can try to make something of himself, insisting that he could be an excellent chef, film director, or sports star.

Warren and Dennis then argue about the money and the spilled cocaine, and Dennis again tells Warren that he is a loser. Fed up, Warren complains that Dennis is not on his side, which causes Dennis to sob. Warren tries to calm him down by telling him to drop the subject. They then discuss the overdose, and Warren goes into a long monologue about how alone his father is after his sister's death. Dennis, obviously not listening, cuts in with the comment □I can't *believe* you don't think I'm on your *side*.□ To placate him, Warren insists that he knows Dennis is and then decides to go home. The play ends with Dennis smoking pot and Warren just sitting there.



Act 1, Pages 6 - 12

Act 1, Pages 6 - 12 Summary

Set in the 1982, this play revolves around two young men from affluent backgrounds and takes place entirely in an apartment in Manhattan's Upper West Side over the course of about twenty-four hours. Unlike their parents, these men make their living dealing drugs and have no direction in life.

The play begins on a cold night in late March. Dennis Ziegler, twenty-one, is watching television in his apartment. A description is given of his bachelor-style pad and his general attitude and personality. He is a jock, evidenced by sports equipment in the room, and is very confident and charismatic, while also appearing fanatical and bullying. His friend, nineteen-year-old Warren Straub, arrives unexpectedly with a suitcase and backpack. He is described as someone who has spent most of his adolescence in trouble. He models his clothing and behavior after Dennis. Dennis asks what he is doing, but Warren doesn't answer right away. He shows Dennis some pot he purchased. Warren says he's saving it, but Dennis immediately begins crumbling the pot. Dennis yells at Warren to get him rolling papers from a table, reminding him that he owes a lot of money. Warren pulls out two hundred dollars and gives it to Dennis. Dennis is surprised and asks where the money came from.

Warren describes a conflict he had with his father. He was stoned and his father said he was sick of the smell of pot in his house and told him to leave. He threw Warren some cash and told him to get out before he beat his head in. He then left on a date. Warren says after that, he packed his suitcase and left. Dennis tells him he can't stay there. He asks where the pot came from and slaps Warren when he doesn't answer. They get in a scuffle, though Dennis easily wins, as he is much stronger. They get stoned and Dennis asks how much money he stole. Warren replies he stole a lot and opens his backpack to reveal fifteen thousand dollars worth of cash. Dennis says he is crazy but asks him for half.

Act 1, Pages 6 - 12 Analysis

The opening of Act 1 introduces us to the two main characters in the play; Dennis and Warren. Their personalities are revealed in the descriptions and interactions. Dennis is very controlling of Warren and proves his physical superiority in a scuffle. Warren obviously looks up to Dennis as he models his fashion and behavior after him. At the same time, he tries to resist some of Dennis' abusive tactics, but has little success. He basically complies with Dennis' wishes despite his efforts to stand up for himself. Dennis knows Warren well enough to know he stole money from his father. The money will become the catalyst for the rest of the play as the friends determine what to do with it. It also indicates that Warren has a wealthy father. From his description, the reader can tell his relationship with his father is strained and conflicted.



Act 1, Pages 13 - 21

Act 1, Pages 13 - 21 Summary

Dennis suggests they take five thousand dollars, go to France, and return the rest to Warren's father. Warren says he intends to keep the money. Dennis says he is crazy, as his father will send "large men" after him. Warren says his father doesn't know he has the money as he found it in his room while he was out for supper. He was going around the house looking for things to "lift" and saw a briefcase on his bed. He jimmied the lock and saw all the cash. He decided he wanted to make his dad pay so he took the money and replaced it with old issues of National Geographic and locked the briefcase up again. Warren believes it will sit there all weekend and his father will only discover it Monday if he tries to deposit it or use it for a bribe. Warren thinks that maybe he'll assume one of his cohorts or his girlfriend stole it.

Dennis tells him that's ridiculous because his father isn't a moron. He tells Warren to take it to their friend Christian's house so his father's bodyguards can break his legs. Warren points out that his father doesn't have bodyguards, but Dennis brings up his menacing driver who is always showing off his gun. Dennis tells Warren to get the cash out of his place, but Warren says no one else is home. Dennis derides Warren for his idiotic behavior and describes his father as "arguably the most dangerous lingerie manufacturer in the world".

Dennis continues to verbally assault Warren about his idiotic ways and how he never has money and can't get laid. He brings up Warren's last brief relationship with a young girl. Warren admits he "freaked her out". Dennis goes on about how Warren's father always beats him up, his life is pathetic, and now he's a fugitive. Although Dennis' parents pay his rent, he considers himself independent because his parents would rather pay for him to be out of their house. Warren gets close to tears. Dennis makes fun of him and says he should at least give him five thousand dollars to go to France. Finally, Warren offers him some money, but Dennis says he doesn't want to go to France and have his father after him for the rest of his life. He tells Warren to take the money back because it scares him. Warren tries to convince Dennis to let him stay until Monday. Finally, Dennis relents.

Act 1, Pages 13 - 21 Analysis

Dennis continues his bullying tactics on Warren, driving him close to tears. Dennis has no patience for Warren's constant problems and is afraid of his father who he sees as a viable threat. Through the conversation, the reader learns that Warren's life has always been filled with disasters and he has little success with girls. It is also learned that Warren's father is a lingerie manufacturer who probably has some shady business deals, evidenced by the briefcase of money, and that he is abusive toward Warren. Warren is persistent and wears Dennis down to the point of letting him crash there for a

few days. Their friendship obviously goes back a long time and one can sense the dominating and submissive dynamic between the two has always existed.



Act 1, Pages 22 - 29

Act 1, Pages 22 - 29 Summary

Warren asks Dennis about a girl named Jessica and says he likes her. Dennis tells him she's out of his league. He reminds Warren of the typically unattractive women of his past and points out that Jessica is a cute girl. Warren is sure she likes him but Dennis disagrees. Warren asks where Dennis' girlfriend is. Dennis says they had a fight. Warren suggests inviting her and Jessica over and taking a few thousand dollars to get a hotel suite. He picks up a football and tosses it to Dennis. Dennis returns the ball, obviously a good thrower. Dennis tells him he can't spend the money but then suggests getting Japanese prostitutes instead. Warren tosses the football again but it smashes into breakables on a shelf, including a clay sculpture Valerie made of two girls kissing.

It's a clean break so Warren suggests they superglue it back together. He sets it back on the shelf and picks up the football. Dennis tells him to put it down but he throws it anyway, just out of Dennis' reach and smashes other things. It is as if Warren is asking for trouble. Furious, Dennis grabs the ball and throws it viciously at Warren's head. Warren ducks just in time, but the clay sculpture is completely shattered. Dennis grabs Warren in a headlock and throws him to the floor. He slaps Warren's head and body and then knees him hard in the gut. Dennis throws the sculpture away, kicking one piece hard in his anger. Warren writhes on the floor, complaining about his stomach. Finally, Dennis asks if he is okay.

Act 1, Pages 22 - 29 Analysis

Warren is restless and full of energy, which drives Dennis crazy and creates a brewing tension between them. When Warren accidentally breaks the clay sculpture, it gives Dennis the excuse to beat him and vent some of his frustration. The sculpture will continue to be a source of conflict and stress. The sculpture also has sexual connotations, two women kissing, which is exactly what is on Warren's mind. He suggests meeting a girl he likes or getting prostitutes with his money. However, like going to France, it seems like another idea that probably won't amount to much in the end. The two young men seem to have little inclination or reason to do much more than "hang out" and goof off, which shows their complete lack of direction in life.



Act 1, Pages 30 - 48

Act 1, Pages 30 - 48 Summary

Regardless of the physical brawl, Warren still wants to get Japanese prostitutes. Dennis tells him he couldn't handle it. Warren says he can't spend the money but he'll sell some of his memorabilia to make up what's missing. Dennis chides him for never selling any of it when Warren owes him money, but Warren tells Dennis he already makes plenty from all of them by selling pot. Dennis tells him he's providing precious memories for Warren and the others and that he's "a one-man youth culture" that they all imitate. He tells Warren he should thank God he knows him. Warren opens his suitcase full of 1950s and '60s memorabilia. At first, Dennis is disinterested, but then starts looking at Warren's collection and is surprised by how much it is worth. Valerie tries calling but Dennis is incredibly rude, so she hangs up on him. He tells Warren that instead of letting people freak him out, he freaks them out.

Dennis mentions a girl named Natalie who likes him, and suggests they get some cocaine and invite Natalie and Jessica over and do drugs and have sex with them. He says he'll sell the rest of the cocaine and turn a profit and Warren will be able to return all the money to his father. Warren doesn't like his sense of a profit margin, which irritates Dennis, but they finally settle on an agreement. Dennis pinches Warren hard and calls the dealer, Philly, but he doesn't answer. Valerie calls again. This time Dennis acknowledges he has a tendency to snap and get out of control and blames it on his mother. Dennis finds out that Valerie is with Jessica and asks Valerie to bring her along as Warren "is in love with her."

Dennis still needs to get some drugs so he calls another contact, Stuey, and arranges a deal. Warren wants to do speedballs but Dennis tells him he couldn't handle it. Dennis warns him not to act weird around Jessica and blow his chances. He brings up Warren's murdered sister and tells him he needs to get over her death. Warren says she's lucky she's dead. Dennis puts on a slow song and goes to Warren, singing the lyrics. He jumps on top of Warren. Warren tries to away but Dennis gives his cheek a big wet kiss. Stuey calls again and Dennis plans to meet him. Warren asks him to get some champagne as well. He gives Dennis \$1,700 for the drugs and champagne. Dennis tells him to wait there in case the girls come. Dennis again advises him not to say much or Jessica will smell his weirdness. Dennis leaves. Warren goes to a mirror and does his best to look casual.

Act 1, Pages 30 - 48 Analysis

In this section, the reader learns that Warren collects memorabilia, which will become relevant later in the story. Even though he talks about selling his collection, he is very attached to the items, which are rare and in mint condition. Dennis and Warren can't make up their minds about what to do until Valerie calls and sets things in motion.



Dennis admits his aggressive style, but does not apologize, as his ego won't allow it. Instead, he blames his behavior on his mother. One also learns that Warren has a sister who was murdered ten years ago and, according to Dennis, the murder is still an influence in his odd behavior. Dennis gives him advice for not blowing his chances with Jessica, which is basically not to talk or be himself. Again, Dennis shows his dominance by becoming physically aggressive with Warren, pinning him down with a kiss; in essence, showing Warren how weak and subservient he is. When Dennis leaves to get the drugs, Warren shows his nervousness about seeing Jessica.



Act 1, Pages 49 - 62

Act 1, Pages 49 - 62 Summary

Jessica arrives at the apartment alone. She is described as nineteen, fairly friendly, but nervous and defensive. She is nicely dressed and has an obvious interest in Warren but maintains her guard. She tells Warren that they ran into Dennis and he told her to come up while Valerie went with him to get the drugs and they should be back in half an hour. Jessica says she doesn't want to be part of some matchmaking plan, so Warren tries to assure her that no one is trying to set her up. He makes a joke about it when he locks the door, freaking Jessica out. He calms her down and she smokes a cigarette. Warren says he never got into cigarettes, but Jessica points out that all the pot he smokes is more damaging to his lungs. Jessica asks why his dad threw him out of the house, which Warren brushes off. She asks if he has any plans and he talks about going west to visit a friend in Seattle. He gives his reasons for preferring nature to the city and that he still can do there what he does in New York, which is essentially smoke pot. Jessica talks about her fashion design goals, and about how she gets along with her mother, with whom she lives.

Jessica gets into a heavy conversation about how much people forget in life as they grow and change, and that they might as well have been dead in those forgotten times. She uses youth of the sixties as an example, as when they matured, money and careers were suddenly more important than ideals. Warren agrees with her to a point but feels like everyone has a certain characteristics that shape him or her differently. It reminds him of weird kids in school and knowing they would grow up to be weird adults. He starts rambling on about a scientific explanation that has nothing really to do with what Jessica is talking about. She describes coming across letters she wrote years ago and not remembering writing it or who having those opinions or even the person it was written to. She finds it very depressing. When Warren tells Jessica that her views seem rather nihilistic, she becomes defensive and says that is the opposite of who she is. To change the subject, she says she's thirsty, so Warren gets her a glass of water. He sits next to her on the bed, making them both feel very awkward. Unable to manage the tension, Jessica gets up to look at photos on the wall.

Act 1, Pages 49 - 62 Analysis

There is an obvious attraction between Warren and Jessica, but as she is a rather nervous young woman, she becomes quite defensive, making it difficult for Warren to approach her. They get into a debate of sorts, though Warren relents quite a bit so as not to completely anger Jessica. He makes his points in an understated way, though at times he interrupts too much. There is a general sense of awkwardness as they wait for Dennis and Valerie to get back, using mundane attempts to keep the conversation going and silent moments filled with tension. Warren's attempt at getting physically close to

Jessica on the mattress fails miserably and raises doubts as to whether he will be successful in wooing her.



Act 1, Pages 63 - 80

Act 1, Pages 63 - 80 Summary

Dennis' collection of photos includes one of Warren with long hair. Jessica says Valerie told her that Warren cut his hair right after Dennis cut his. She sees one of Dennis and remarks that he would be gorgeous if he cleaned up a bit. She asks about his famous father and if it's hard for Dennis to live with. Warren doesn't have a clue. Jessica sees a photo of Dennis' beautiful mother and asks about her. Warren explains that she's a social worker but also a psycho. Jessica thinks he means that because she's a social worker she's psycho, so Warren goes into defense mode, explaining that's not what he meant. Another argument ensues with Warren just managing to get his point across. He explains he is not against social workers, but that for Dennis' mother, her work is more of a mission than her having any real opinion about it.

Jessica notices his memorabilia. It reminds her of childhood toys and she asks him questions about the collection. Warren is in his element as he describes his prized possessions, especially his grandfather's cap from opening day at Wrigley Field. He describes his grandfather as being an aviator when he was young. Jessica asks about his mother. Warren explains she lives in Santa Barbara with a boyfriend but he wouldn't want to live there as his mother is freaked out most of the time. Jessica then asks about his sister who died, and if that is what freaks his mother out. She is shocked to find out that Warren's sister was murdered. Warren explains she was eighteen and living with a much older guy. When he says it's not something he likes to talk about, Jessica apologizes and another awkward silence ensues. Jessica breaks it by asking about his records. He puts on a Frank Zappa song and Jessica begins dancing. Warren dances separately, though he moves closer to Jessica. She subtly moves toward Warren until they are more or less dancing together. They finally dance arm in arm but then the music changes to something impossible to dance to.

Warren quickly puts on a slow song and they dance again. He impresses her with a "dip". Warren tells Jessica he finds her attractive and asks for permission to kiss her. She is at first reluctant but they finally kiss. It turns quite passionate but Jessica breaks away. She is nervous that Valerie and Dennis will walk in and she'll feel embarrassed. Jessica expresses her fears of getting drawn into relationships where she ends up getting hurt. Warren tries to assure her he really likes her. He closes his eyes and Jessica kisses him again. They start making out on Dennis' bed. They get very worked up, getting tangled in the sheets, but Jessica pulls away again before things get out of control. Warren suggests they get a room at the Plaza and watch the sun rise over the park. When Jessica sees his backpack full of money, he explains it is "proceeds from my unhappy childhood". Jessica feels she should call her mother as she normally does if she's out late, but for some reason decides against it. They leave together.



Act 1, Pages 63 - 80 Analysis

In this section, more is learned about Dennis and Warren's family lives through the questions Jessica asks about the photos. Dennis hails from successful parents but has a rather strident mother, and Warren's mother lives far away and is not really part of his life. Warren's inability to talk about his sister's murder also shows that it does still affect him. The music finally offers Warren a chance to make his move on Jessica. Although she pulls back each time they kiss, he is persistent in a non-threatening way and manages to convince her to go to the hotel. She is obviously interested in him despite his normally bad luck with women. However, while there is a physical attraction, the newness of their relationship is tense and without any sense of warmth.



Act 2, Pages 81-96

Act 2, Pages 81-96 Summary

Act 2 begins the following morning. Drug paraphernalia is on the table and Dennis is asleep in a tangled mess on his mattress. The buzzer wakes him. Warren has returned with coffee. He enters looking very pleased. Dennis immediately questions him about where he's been, and Warren tells him he was with Jessica. He asks Dennis if he got the drugs from Stuey. Dennis says yes, and that he and Valerie did lines with him and a Dutch girl and that the drugs were amazing. Dennis also mentions that Valerie went insane when she saw her broken clay sculpture in the garbage and took off for her aunt's house in a fury. Dennis blames Warren, but doesn't seem too upset as one might expect. He asks more questions about what happened with Jessica. Warren doesn't say much but lets Dennis know they had sex and that he likes her a lot, even if she is argumentative. He says he came pretty fast and that she seemed a bit freaked out afterwards. Warren describes how Jessica became quiet and when he tried to assure her he liked her, she made a comment about not knowing him. Dennis tells him not to get depressed after finally breaking his losing streak with women and that he should be proud of himself for once.

Dennis shows him a rock of coke he got from Stuey and says it would pay for a night at the Plaza. Warren explains he ended up spending a thousand dollars. Dennis thinks he's insane when he could probably have had sex with Jessica for free. Now the stash of money is \$2,500 short. Dennis says he can't make that much selling the drugs, but tells Warren to call their friend Christian to help with distribution. Unfortunately, Christian isn't home, but Dennis leaves a message with his father. This infuriates Dennis as now others are learning that Warren is staying with him. The phone rings - it's Valerie. Dennis goes ballistic, screaming and ranting about how crazy she is over a clay sculpture and reiterating that it was Warren who broke it, not him. He hangs up on her and kicks the phone. Dennis laughs at his own sick behavior.

Dennis suggests Warren sell some of his memorabilia to help replace the stolen funds. Dennis says he knows someone who will buy it and makes a call. Warren says he has a dealer he normally works with, but Dennis assures Warren he's going to get him the best deal and lauds himself on his business skills. Warren tells him the collection is worth about \$2,500 but he probably won't get that much. Dennis makes Warren promise he is okay about selling the stuff and won't get on his case later about making him do it. Warren agrees and tells Dennis to sell it. The only thing he won't part with is his grandfather's baseball stuff. Dennis makes a call to arrange the transaction with Warren over his shoulder telling him special information about each item. The buzzer suddenly sounds. Dennis goes into a panic thinking Warren's father has shown up, but Warren insists it won't be him. Dennis goes to the intercom, scared to death.



Act 2, Pages 81-96 Analysis

Dennis is quite impressed that Warren managed to have sex with Jessica and for once tells him he should feel proud and not go into his usual depressive mode. Despite the happiness of his conquest, Warren expresses unease about how Jessica ultimately reacted. Dennis is upset when he finds out that Warren spent another \$1,000 at the Plaza. He goes into action to try to line up distribution for the drugs. When Warren agrees to sell his memorabilia, Dennis again goes into control mode and lines up a potential buyer. He obviously likes the sense of power in making decisions and doing deals, even if it's for someone else. He will still benefit and it strokes his ego and sense of self-assuredness.

Again, he screams and yells at Valerie over the phone, belittling and blaming her for their problems and taking no responsibility himself. Only when he is off the phone does he acknowledge his inappropriate behavior as "sick", but it seems as if he enjoys it. He controls his girlfriend as he controls Warren and most other people in his life. However, he is not immune to fear. Despite his physical strength and intelligence, he truly fears Warren's father and the potential of getting seriously hurt or having his life disrupted in an unsettling way.



Act 2, 97-111

Act 2, 97-111 Summary

Fortunately, it's only Jessica who answers the intercom. Dennis is angry but Warren claims he didn't know she was coming. Dennis gets ready to go sell the memorabilia. Warren watches sadly as he packs up the collection, but Dennis assures him his troubles are almost over. Dennis opens the door for Jessica and makes a comment about her short skirt. Jessica explains she was nearby and thought she would stop by. Warren makes an awkward attempt at being humorous, which totally fails, though Dennis laughs rudely at the effort. Warren attempts to kiss Jessica while Dennis is in the bathroom but she ducks away. When Dennis reemerges, Warren asks him how long he'll be. Dennis asks how long he needs. Warren is embarrassed and explains they're going out to brunch. Dennis won't let it go and makes some remarks that show he knows what happened the previous night. Jessica is defensive and keeps reiterating they won't be "indulging in anything very dastardly" as Dennis suggests.

Once Dennis leaves, Jessica tells Warren she can't go to brunch. She explains that she got in a big fight with her mother for not calling the night before and she has to go talk to her and sort things out. Warren suggests making plans for later in the week but Jessica declines, saying she plans to chill out. She tells Warren that he seems angry. He says he isn't, but doesn't understand why she went to all the trouble to show up to cancel brunch when she could have called. She asks Warren if he told Dennis about what happened and Warren admits to it but that Dennis pumped him for information and he didn't give details and was respectful of her. Jessica is angry and concerned it will ruin her new friendship with Valerie, as she told her she was somewhere else. Warren doesn't understand what she is so upset about as they had a good time. He is really interested in seeing her again and the night meant far more to him than just sex.

He flatters Jessica's ability to make him think and hold her own in conversations. Jessica acknowledges that he is being very sweet, but she is confused and feels like her instincts have stopped working. Warren apologizes again and says he will buy her any present she wants, even a new car. Jessica jokingly suggests his grandfather's hat and he tells her it's hers. She can't believe he would give it to her so easily since he treasures it. He keeps insisting she take it and she models it for him. She notices Warren is distressed even though he does his best to hide it. She tries to give the hat back but he refuses. Finally, she asks if he no longer wants to see her this week and he makes a joke that he can't as he is out of hats. She tries to say something but he yells at her not to return the hat. Regardless, she sets it down on the table and leaves. Warren sits for a moment and then puts away the hat. He pours the cocaine onto a plate and stares at it.



Act 2, 97-111 Analysis

Jessica's actions are very conflicting. She turns Warren down for brunch yet she has shown up to say this in person, meaning she probably has feelings for him but is trying to avoid getting hurt. In a sense, Dennis sabotages things by alluding that he knows about their night together, which greatly upsets Jessica when she finds out it is true. Warren tries his best to prove his sincerity and offers her his most prized possession, the hat, but she can tell he doesn't really want to part with it. By asking him if he doesn't want to see her that week after she has told him she won't see him, she negatively implies she is still interested. Even though nothing is resolved when Jessica leaves, there is a sense that the relationship may not be over, though it is as ambiguous as most things in Warren's life.



Act 2, 112-128

Act 2, 112-128 Summary

Warren is mixing the cocaine with Mannitol when the phone rings. As he reaches for it, he knocks the plate of cocaine onto the floor. He doesn't know what to do so just laughs. Finally, he picks up the phone. It is his father, who has obviously found out about the missing money. Only Warren's side of the conversation is heard. He tells his father he is planning on returning the money but it will be at least an hour. His father obviously asks if he knows what kind of world he is living in and brings up his dead sister. Warren tells his father he thinks about her too much and that he has better judgment than she did at the same age. For one, he won't move in with an abusive thirty-five year old. It seems his father makes some sort of threat, but Warren is flippant and ends by telling him he hates him too. He tries to gather up the cocaine but it is impossible to get it all so he smears it more with his foot.

Dennis enters and sees the mess. While he would normally be angry, Dennis is instead freaked out. He tells Warren that someone has died. Warren asks if it's his mother, but Dennis says that it's Stuey, who died of an overdose. Warren can't even place the name until Dennis reminds him. Dennis had been doing drugs with Stuey the night before, so the impact of his death is very immediate. He is glad he didn't do any speedballs, as that seems to be what led to the overdose. Dennis is convinced their cocaine isn't bad because he, Valerie, and Stuey's Dutch girlfriend used it and they are all fine. Dennis goes on about the finality of life, and how that scares him. He plans to stop doing drugs, though his words are more maniacal than reality based. Warren asks if he sold the memorabilia. Dennis tells him he sold it all for nine hundred dollars. Warren is furious he sold it for so little. In return, Dennis gives him grief about spilling the cocaine. He asks about Jessica and Warren says he isn't sure what happened. Dennis can't believe Warren messed things up that quickly and asks if Valerie called. He admits he went too far on their last phone call, but he is still too freaked about Stuey's death to deal with her.

Dennis goes into a long, rambling diatribe about how heavy death is compared to everything else in daily life and how his fear makes him want to do something big, like become a famous chef or get into show business. He thinks he would make a great director because of the way he looks at the world compared to the average person. He starts bragging at how good he is at sports and that even black players respect him. He keeps repeating how he's "high on fear" and starts talking about his mother and her wild extremes, which trained him to snap back as soon as anyone messed with him. He realizes that is how he fights with his girlfriend, but he's glad he doesn't have to take any grief from her like his father takes from his mother. He talks about how his father lords his genius over the family, but now that he is sick he is at his wife's ruthless mercy. She ridicules him for the meaninglessness of his art, and points out how it only reaches a tiny percent of the population, and yet she is making a difference for humanity. Dennis blames his mother for driving his father to sleep with "groupies" in the past, but now he



can't even do that. Dennis then turns his energies on Warren and again blames him for managing to smash the one thing that would cause the most problems in his life, the clay sculpture. He says in five years of drug dealing he has never dropped drugs on the floor.

Dennis wonders if Stuey will have a funeral since no one liked him. He says he called about six people and they were more concerned about the cocaine than him. Warren says he doesn't remember any fond feelings when he met Stuey. Dennis claims his funeral would have standing room only and plans to one day make a movie about their lives. He asks Warren if he thinks he would be an amazing director. Warren says he doesn't know because Dennis has never tried it before. This irritates Dennis, and soon they are arguing over the memorabilia sale. Warren can't hide his disappointment that Dennis got so little for his collection, though Dennis shoots back at any of his arguments.

Warren finally speaks up to Dennis about the way he is always pointing out his faults and troubles with girls. Dennis has an excuse for everything and can't believe Warren doesn't believe he's on his side. When Warren says Dennis is his "personal hero" but isn't sure about his sincerity, Dennis starts crying. Warren asks why and Dennis says it's because Warren called him his hero. They resolve their differences for the moment and decide to smoke pot. Warren talks about his father and how he used to say that people like them would have to really mess up before anything truly bad happened, but then his daughter got out of control and got killed by the "world next door". Since then, he's been hammering his life back together but it's not working and in the end he is alone. Dennis is still focused on their argument. He tells Warren he can't believe he thought he wasn't on his side. Warren finally relents and says he is. Dennis wonders what they should do. Warren says he'll go home, but they just sit there as Dennis gets stoned.

Act 2, 112-128 Analysis

Only one side of the conversation between Warren and his father is shared, and Warren is flippant and rude. There is a sense his father is concerned that Warren might suffer the same fate as his sister, but it is obvious that communication between them is so broken that they don't really listen to each other. Warren's clumsiness with the cocaine is typical of his distracted behavior and somewhat of a metaphor of his life: things always going wrong with no real solutions or quick fixes. Stuey's death greatly affects Dennis. Although he didn't particularly know or like him, the fact that someone in their young circle died makes him question his life, his drug use, and his mortality. He has grandiose ideas about becoming a chef or a director with no discernable means to achieve them other than an inflated egotistical belief in his natural gifts. Much of his internal conflict stems from his parents and their conflicts. Dennis resents his father's arrogance, and yet he despises the way his mother emasculates him now that he is sick and vulnerable. He patterns himself after his mother, more willing to attack than to risk getting hurt or appear weak.



Warren has found a voice of his own and is less willing to take Dennis' verbal abuse, stuff he's apparently used to from his father. He also questions Dennis' alliance, which oddly drives Dennis to tears. However, the questioning is not from any sense of guilt but because Warren still regards him as a hero. As Dennis is questioning his future and mortality, the idea of losing his God-like position in his small, squalid circle is upsetting and is something he seeks reassurance for at the end of the play.

Warren's description of his father's sense of security from wealth, and then losing it in a single moment with his sister's death, speaks volumes about Warren's choices. He is bitter and resentful toward his father, so inhabits the very world of which his father is afraid. As such, he floats through a chaotic, meaningless world that distracts and numbs him, and prevents him from moving forward. The play ends with the characters much as they were in the beginning, without any discernable growth, aimless and incapable of changing their situation.



Characters

Jessica Goldman

Nineteen-year-old Jessica Goldman is a "cheerful but very nervous girl" who displays "a watchful defensiveness that sweeps away anything that might threaten to dislodge her, including her own chances at happiness and the opportunity of gaining a wider perspective on the world." She uses this defensiveness to help her project her own image of herself as a hip, intelligent, independent young woman who cannot be taken advantage of, yet her actions suggest that she is not as self-assured as she appears.

On first meeting Warren, Jessica tries to convince him that she is in control, when she insists that she will not let others play matchmaker for her. But her defensiveness immediately becomes apparent when she does not recognize that Warren is teasing her about his sexual intentions. She ironically reveals her own fragile sense of self when she tells Warren, "Like right now you're all like this rich little pot-smoking burnout rebel, but ten years from now you're gonna be like a plastic *surgeon* reminiscing about how wild you used to be." Jessica's vision of their futures as successful doctors or fashion designers suggests that she will follow the same path as their parents, proving that she does not recognize the meaninglessness and moral vacuity of their lives. She insists that this inevitable transition "just basically invalidates whoever you are right now." "So," she says, "it's like, what is the point?" This view also provides her with easy excuses for her present behavior, such as trying to persuade Warren to give her his most prized possession, a vintage baseball cap given to him by his grandfather.

Jessica reveals her shallowness in her obvious attraction to Dennis and his famous father and beautiful mother and in her excitement when Warren suggests that they get a penthouse room at the Plaza Hotel. The most blatant example of this quality emerges after she becomes worried about telling Dennis's girlfriend, Valerie, that she and Warren did not sleep together, after Warren told Dennis that they had. Even when Warren insists that he talked about her with a great deal of respect, she still needs him to validate her worth by asking him to give up his most important possession. She clearly shows no concern for how valuable the baseball cap is to Warren and how difficult it would be for him to give it away. Her only concern is proving her own merit, through Warren's offer of a treasured possession.

Warren Straub

Warren is "a strange barking-dog of a kid" who finds himself in a great deal of trouble at the beginning of the play. After he steals his father's money, he turns to the only person he can; unfortunately, that is Dennis, who continually makes him feel like a loser. Although that description fits Warren in many respects, he has more thoughtfulness and "a dogged self-possession" that gives him more authenticity than his friends exhibit.



Unlike his friends, Warren understands that he is wasting his time in New York. He reveals his desire to move on when he talks about the pleasure of being out west in the mountains, in contrast to what he considers the trash heap of the city. He notes that he is not getting any intellectual stimulation and that all he is doing is getting high, which he can do anywhere.

Warren is also more able to express his vulnerability and his sense of loss, especially concerning the death of his sister. Although he is reluctant to talk about her, he admits that he is dealing with her death by keeping pictures of her in his room. He later tells his father that he thinks about her "all the time" and sees her in his imagination. Warren's compassionate nature emerges when he recognizes how much his father has also suffered. Even though his father has physically and mentally abused him, Warren shows sympathy for the fact that he is "totally by himself." He also exhibits compassion for Dennis, even though he recognizes how self-involved his friend is. When Dennis practically begs Warren to reassure him that he feels that Dennis is on his side, Warren agrees.

Valerie

We never meet Valerie, Dennis's girlfriend, but Dennis speaks to her on the phone. Her function in the play is to reinforce Dennis's character flaws, specifically, his inability to control his anger and his self-centeredness. He screams at her when she voices anger at the fact that Warren has broken the sculpture she made for Dennis, never acknowledging to her the time and effort that she put into it. She also helps generate conflict for Jessica, who has to admit to Warren that she lied to Valerie about her night with him.

Dennis Ziegler

Dennis is "a very quick, dynamic, fanatical, and bullying kind of person; amazingly good-natured and magnetic, but insanely competitive and almost always successfully so." He had been "a dark cult god of high school" and still appears to have a great deal of influence over his circle of friends, whom he frequently verbally abuses. He takes great pride in this authority, insisting to Warren, "I'm like providing you with precious memories of your *youth*" and "I'm like the basis of half your personality." Dennis has learned that when he breaks down his friends' egos, they become grateful to him for agreeing to allow them to be in the company of what they consider to be a superior person.

Dennis has no compassion for anyone, including Warren, who appears on his doorstep with nowhere else to turn after he steals his father's money. Dennis shows him no mercy, continually criticizing and belittling him, goading him to tears at one point. He tries to take advantage of Warren's predicament by planning a drug deal to replace the lost money but figuring in a large cut for himself.



Others besides Warren suffer from Dennis's abuse, always doled out in an effort to maintain a complete sense of control over them. He berates his drug supplier for being overweight and greedy when the supplier dares to increase the selling price of some cocaine Dennis wants to buy, and he screams obscenities at Valerie when she expresses anger over Warren's breaking the sculpture that she had made for Dennis. In an effort to get back in Valerie's good graces, he blames his behavior on his mother, who, he claims, taught him to lash out as viciously as he can when he feels that he is being attacked.

At one point in the play, Dennis expresses a sense of vulnerability, but it takes a cowardly form. After he learns that his drug supplier has overdosed, he shows no compassion for his friend, concerned only with his own welfare. Realizing that if he does not change his current lifestyle, he could meet a similar fate, he admits to Warren, "I'm like, high on fear." He assumes that whatever choice he makes would bring him great success and considers that he could "go to *cooking* school in *Florence* or like go into *show* business." His overly inflated ego prompts him to declare, "I could so totally be a completely great chef it's like ridiculous." When he considers a career directing films, he insists, "I'd be a genius at it."

At the end of the play, however, Dennis reveals that his inflated ego is just a sham. When Warren questions whether Dennis is really a true friend to him, Dennis cannot deal with his friend's doubts about his character and breaks down in tears. Only after Warren reaffirms his friend's worth can Dennis calm down and recreate the illusion of confidence.



Objects/Places

Dennis' Apartment

The entire play takes place in Dennis' apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side. It is a typical young bachelor's apartment with many records, sports magazines, underground comic books, and sports equipment. It is rather shabby and impersonal, other than photos on one wall.

The Plaza Hotel

Although it is not shown, Warren takes Jessica to the Plaza Hotel, where they have sex. He manages to spend a thousand dollars at the hotel.

Valerie's Sculpture

Early in the play, Warren accidentally breaks Valerie's clay sculpture of two girls kissing when he tosses a football around the apartment. The broken sculpture sends Dennis into a rage, during which he beats Warren. This leads to his conflict with Valerie when she discovers the remains of the sculpture in the garbage.

Fifteen Thousand Dollars

The stolen money in Warren's backpack is a focal point in the story. It represents Warren's "stolen childhood" and bitterness toward his father. For Dennis it represents danger. They both attempt to make up the missing money throughout the play in an attempt to restore their sense of order, though nothing goes quite as planned.

Warren's Collectables

Warren arrives at Dennis' apartment with a suitcase full of memorabilia from the 1950s and '60s. There are toys, albums, a unique Toaster, and his grandfather's baseball cap from opening day at Wrigley Field. He prizes these treasures, but he sells all except the cap to try to replace what money he has spent from the stolen cash. He tries to give Jessica his grandfather's hat but she doesn't take it.

Cocaine

Warren and Dennis buy cocaine with a plan to distribute it for a profit. They also do a fare share of the drug.



Speedballs

Speedballs are a combination of heroin and coke. Warren wants to try them, though the only time he took heroin he was throwing up all night. Stuey ends up overdosing on speedballs.

Football

An avid sports enthusiast, Dennis has a football in his apartment. Warren tosses it about and ends up cracking the clay sculpture with it. Dennis tries to hurt Warren with it but ends up shattering the sculpture.

Photographs

Dennis has a display of photos on his wall, the only personal touch in his otherwise tawdry living quarters. The photos include many aspects of his life, past and present, including images of family and friends. A lot of family information is revealed when Jessica sees the photos and asks Warren about them. Dennis and Warren's long-term history is evident in photos where they are years younger and have long hair. They also provide a visual context to Warren's idolization of Dennis in terms of modeling him physically.

Telephone

As the play takes place with only three characters in one setting, the phone is the only link to external unseen characters. Dennis argues with his girlfriend on the phone while Warren argues with his father. Dennis also uses the phone to arrange drug deals.



Themes

Coming of Age

All three main characters are on the brink of adulthood but are having difficulties with the transition. They have been living in a state of stasis, supported by their wealthy parents, who demand only that their children leave them alone. None of them has been forced to examine his or her empty life or to determine the future. Their days are spent thinking only about how they can fulfill their immediate desires: drugs, alcohol, and sex. Only Warren shows any development toward maturation, as he begins to realize the meaninglessness at the heart of their existence.

When Jessica determines that she wants Warren's baseball cap, his most prized possession, Warren recognizes her self-centeredness and her lack of respect for what is important to him. He rejects her offer of getting together later in the week, because he no longer wants to spend time with someone who cannot acknowledge the needs of others. He becomes impatient with Dennis at the end of the play for these same qualities, when he tells his friend that he does not believe that Dennis is on his side. Jessica's and Dennis's lack of sensitivity ironically encourages the sensitivity in Warren, who begins to think about what his father must have suffered after his sister died.

Identity

Each of the main characters must find a clear sense of identity in order to make the transition into adulthood. The two who appear to have accomplished this are Dennis and Jessica, yet during the course of the play, they reveal the illusory nature of their images of self. While Warren has not established a firm sense of his own self by the end of the play, he has been able to see the true nature of those around him, which suggests that he will then eventually be able to gain a clearer vision of himself.

Dennis and Jessica exhibit a confidence that is easily shaken when tested. Dennis continually promotes himself as a role model for all those who know him. As he tells Warren, "I'm providing you schmucks with such a crucial service" (as their drug supplier) as well as supplying "precious memories of your *youth*." He claims that he is "like the basis of half your personality." Dennis notes that his friends all imitate him and so should thank God they met him. Still, when Warren, who has grown tired of Dennis's constant criticism of him and his lack of support, declares that he cannot tell whether Dennis is on his side, Dennis crumbles and begins to sob. He cannot face the fact that he may not be the heroic figure he thought he was, since he has based his entire identity on this assumption.

We do not gain as clear a picture of Jessica as we do of Dennis, since she appears in only two scenes. However, Lonergan's acute ear for dialogue effectively presents a penetrating snapshot of Jessica's own struggles with her identity. Initially, she seems



self-confident; she is not as arrogant as Dennis but is just as self-assured in her opinions, of which she has many. She immediately declares that she does not want Warren to assume that she will agree to any matchmaking scheme that he and Dennis may have planned. She insists that she alone makes any decisions about whom she will date.

Jessica also has strong opinions about the maturation process, insisting that all of them will undergo radical personality changes, which will "basically invalidate whoever you are right *now*." Yet this becomes an ironic statement of her own tentative identity, since, as the stage directions suggest, Jessica's sense of herself is continually undercut by "a watchful defensiveness that sweeps away anything that might threaten to dislodge her." She is obviously shaken when she discovers that Warren has been discussing with Dennis his night with her, becoming increasingly agitated to the point that she declares that she does not care what others think of her because she can make more new friends if she has to. Her insecurities lead her to ask for Warren's most prized possession, the hat his grandfather gave him, as a way to try to reestablish her self-worth; she assumes that she must have value if he would give her something so precious to him.

Warren has not built up a false persona, as have the other two characters. He sees himself more realistically, even though that means he must recognize the more negative aspects of his personality. This insight into his own identity provides him with the capacity to discover the illusory concepts of self that his friends have constructed. Lonergan suggests that Warren's ability to recognize this reality will help him establish a truer sense of himself in the future.

In the Shadow of Power

Dennis and Warren have successful, powerful parents. Dennis' father is a famous artist and his mother an aggressive public advocate. Warren's father is a highly successful lingerie manufacturer, but is considered highly dangerous by Dennis. These two young men are very affected by living in their fathers' shadows. They resent their fathers' neglect or abuse, and consequently they drift further into the shadow, a place that scares Warren's father since Warren's sister's death and is a disconnection from Dennis' self-centered father. Dennis resents his father's God-like status, although that is exactly what he emulates in his smaller world. He also patterns himself after his mother, a strong, dominating woman who doesn't take grief from anyone without snapping back twice as hard. Warren has an abusive father with questionable associates, so Dennis naturally fits a father-figure type that is safer and yet is still a familiar pattern. As two young men who grew up in their fathers' shadows, they have a natural alliance even if they are characteristically quite different in nature.



Death

Death presents itself in two ways in the play. Warren has a sister who was murdered ten years prior, when he would have been a young child. It affects him still. He pretends to Dennis he is over it, but admits to Jessica it is a topic he doesn't like to talk about. His sister's murder is a crucial element of his familial troubles. His parents split after the murder, his mother is "freaked out" most of the time and has moved away, and his father has struggled to reshape his life to have meaning as everything he strived for and believed in was destroyed by his daughter's death. Where he felt secure, his safe world crashed into the "other" seamy world that his son now inhabits. Warren's father is afraid of this world and there is indication that his efforts to protect Warren from it, albeit in a nonproductive way, have added to their conflict.

The death of the Stuey, the young drug dealer in their circle, greatly affects Dennis, while Warren is apathetic about it, as he hardly knew him. Dennis wasn't fond of the man, but as they were together the night before he died, Dennis feels a sense of immediacy about his death that Warren can't grasp. It scares Dennis into thinking about his sense of purpose and lifestyle, but he is incapable of changing it other than projecting about ridiculous goals through his sense of fear.

Domination and Submission

Dennis and Warren have taken on roles in their relationship in a dominating and submissive fashion. Darren is the Dom and there is even a brief sexually indicative moment where he kisses Warren on the cheek after winning a brawl to prove his status. Warren is the reluctant and hapless submissive, as he is to his father. Any attempts to subvert his position end up in conflict and chaos. He is in a sense trapped by this pattern, much as he tries to avoid it at times. Dennis is clearly dominating at all times, especially to his girlfriend, who he verbally abuses beyond reason, knowing that she will still come back for him to maintain control over. It is his fear of losing control or his sense of being a God-like figure, like his father but in a much smaller circle, that fuels his inappropriate rage. The fact his father is losing control due to illness makes Dennis even more driven not to end up in a similar submissive state.

Apathy and Resignation

Dennis and Warren are apathetic characters and Warren is resigned to his fate in a meandering, chaotic world. Unlike their father's drives for success and wealth, they are shadow figures simply surviving without the stresses, expectations, and anxieties of the elite while experiencing the more extreme stresses of the drug culture. Dennis feels his sense of power only by virtue of his adoring circle of similarly misdirected friends, equally apathetic about life, such as Warren. Warren is far more honest about his existence when he tells Jessica about his idea of going west and the fact he can take his life, ergo smoking pot, with him wherever he goes. He has no goals other than an obscure daily existence and doesn't pretend otherwise. He is resigned to being a

pothead while Dennis still clings to fantastical dreams that undoubtedly won't be realized given his lifestyle, regardless of his charm and intelligence.



Style

Dialogue-Driven Plot

The plot advances through dialogue rather than action, which occurs offstage. The dialogue reinforces the sense of the characters' self-absorption, especially in the case of Dennis, who pays little attention to what the others are saying. This occurs most notably at the end of the play, when Warren has just delivered a heartfelt monologue about his father's reaction to his sister's death. Dennis's response to Warren's question about his father being "totally by himself" is "I guess," followed quickly by his attempt to shift the focus back to himself and his fear that Warren thinks ill of him.

Symbols

The sparse setting becomes an important symbol in the play, which takes place entirely in Dennis's studio apartment, an appropriately confined space for the limited lives of the two main characters, Dennis and Warren. Only three characters appear in the play; three others are spoken to by Dennis and Warren on the phone, but Lonergan does not include their words, which reflects and underscores the self-centeredness of the main characters.

The dominant symbol in the play, however, is Warren's suitcase full of toys, which he calls "the proceeds from my unhappy childhood." They are a symbol of a lonely youth spent gathering "authentic" artifacts that gave him pleasure. One item in his suitcase, however, provides a happy memory, because it reflects a strong familial link: the Wrigley Field Opening Day baseball cap that his grandfather gave him. This item is the most precious to him, and it becomes an important catalyst for change when Jessica asks him for it.

Point of View

The play unfolds from a third person perspective. As there are only three characters in the play, their lifestyle and personalities are revealed through their words and actions. Darren and Warren come from the same world, having wealthy and dominating fathers, and now share the same squalor and lack of purpose or direction. Although their circumstances are similar, their perspectives are quite different; however, as such, their perspectives make them a natural pairing. Dennis is a bullying egotist while Warren is used to taking abuse and completely lacks Dennis' sense of self-assuredness.

The reader only knows of other characters through their point of view, shared in dialogue, and through one-sided phone conversations. The opinions and descriptions Dennis and Warren share about their parents and others give the audience a clear understanding of what those people are like. They seem dimensional even though they are never seen. For example, it is easy to imagine Stuey as Dennis is very descriptive



about him physically (overweight, Jewish, ugly) as well as his life style (drug dealer, sleeping with a Dutch hitchhiker) and his general persona (not particularly likeable, no one seems upset about his death).

Setting

The novel is set in one location - Dennis' apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Warren leaves the apartment once to have sex with Jessica at the Plaza hotel, and Dennis leaves twice, once to do drugs with his girlfriend and Stuey, though the location is not given. He also goes out to meet a friend to pawn Warren's collectables. The era is 1982, a time of commercial and monetary pervasion under Reaganomics. Both boys come from wealthy backgrounds but have the bitterness of a discontented youth. They could "have it all" but choose to live in a chaotic, uncertain world.

Dennis' studio apartment is on the second or third floor of a "rundown, postwar building". It is a typical bachelor pad and described as a place that could be cleaned out in half an hour. Dennis' love of sports is evident in the sports equipment. A kitchenette appears rarely used. Dennis sleeps on a mattress on the floor. There is a black and white television that Dennis is watching when the play opens. The only effort to decorate the apartment is a wall of photographs that includes pictures of friends and family members.

Language and Meaning

Except for character descriptions or brief stage directions, the play consists almost entirely of dialogue with very little action. At the same time, there is an intensity in the conversations and conflicts that take place between Warren, Dennis, and the women in their lives. The pacing is generally quick and snappy, though there are some longer passages primarily from Dennis that offer moments of introspection, however misguided they might be. After Stuey's death, Dennis has very long passages covering several pages in which he tries to cope with his fear. It is a rambling, contradictory diatribe in which he considers quitting drugs and going after illusive, far-fetched goals, and strokes his own ego as if to prove to himself that his life has meaning. Although these passages toward the end of the play are long, they are quick, witty, and revealing. The overall effect of the language captures the confused, conflicting, and aimless world of the main characters.

The brief action sequences typically involve physical violence or destruction, such as Warren breaking Valerie's sculpture, or Dennis beating up on Warren. Again, this adds depth and understanding to the main characters and their sense of abuse, self-abuse, and frustration. There are also in-depth descriptions of the three main characters that provide information on their backgrounds and personality. As stage directions are not "read" in a performance, they are fairly straightforward to explain specific action, such as opening a door or the phone ringing.



Structure

The novel is structured in two acts. The first act is the longest at eighty pages. It begins with Warren showing up at Dennis' apartment with fifteen thousand dollars stolen from his father, and ends when Warren manages to woo Jessica to spend a night at the Plaza Hotel with him. Other important moments in the first act include Warren accidentally breaking Valerie's sculpture, his physical and verbal confrontations with Dennis, and their plans to restore the stolen cash, which include a drug deal with Stuey.

Acts Two begins the next morning and is forty-eight pages long. Major events include Dennis' pride over Warren's sexual conquest with Jessica, Jessica's defensive and elusive reaction, and Stuey's sudden death by overdosing. Dennis and Warren also come to a head about Dennis' abusive tendencies. In some sense, that is resolved, but with a sense of status quo. In other words, Warren relents, but at least he has made his voice heard.

The play unfolds in a linear progression over less than 24 hours. There is no definitive plot other than trying to replace stolen money and woo a girl. It is more of a portrait of two young men in angst rather than a structured plot with a beginning, middle, and end. It is as if the reader has "stepped in" to a slice of these young men's lives without any sense of resolution when it is left. The main events that take place in the "slice of life" include Warren arriving with the stolen money, Warren breaking Valerie's sculpture, Jessica arriving and then leaving with Warren, and Stuey dying. The pacing is consistent throughout with crisp, sharp, argumentative, and satirical dialogue.



Historical Context

Consumerism

In the 1980s, the government's political and economic agenda, with its championing of American capitalism, triggered a promotion of self-interest. The decade of the 1980s was ushered in with Ronald Reagan's presidential inauguration in 1981 and was heavily influenced by Reagan's economic philosophy. □Reaganomics,□ as this philosophy was termed, proposed that the encouragement of the free-market system, which depends on the individual pursuit of wealth, would strengthen the economy. This vision included the theory of trickle-down economics: as businesses were freed from governmental regulation, their profits would eventually trickle down to the American public through the creation of jobs and strengthening of wages. Americans would then be able to spend more money, which would further bolster the economy.

Republicans argued that the welfare programs implemented in the 1960s had turned Americans into government dependents and that only the reality of poverty would inspire lower-class Americans to adopt an independent spirit of enterprise. This championing of the free-market system focused the country's attention on the amassing of wealth and material possessions, fostering a dramatic escalation in consumerism and a new zeitgeist for the age. Reagan's own inauguration cost eleven million dollars. Soon after entering the White House, the first lady, Nancy Reagan, continued the spending spree with expensive renovations at the White House, which included a new set of china that cost more than two hundred thousand dollars. Initially, this lavish spending was criticized, but eventually, the entire country became caught up in the attraction of wealth.

In the 1987 film *Wall Street*, the New York financier Gordon Gekko insists that □greed is good,□ which became the mantra of the 1980s for many American consumers as well as for investors on Wall Street. During this decade, American goods were more plentiful than ever, and Americans began to feel that they had the right to acquire them. This age of self-interest was promoted by the media through periodicals like *Money* magazine, which taught Americans how to dramatically increase their earnings and glorified entrepreneurs like Steven Jobs, the founder of Apple Computers, and the real-estate tycoon Donald Trump. One of the most popular television shows of the time was *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, which brought viewers into the lavish homes of the superrich.

Shopping became Americans' favorite pastime during the 1980s. Apart from going to malls, consumers could also satisfy their shopping urges by accessing the mall from home. With the advent of the shopping television network QVC and the steady stream of catalogues and telemarketing pitches from a wide range of mail-order companies, such as Sears and L. L. Bean, consumers could purchase a variety of goods over the phone.

Voices of Dissent

Some voices critical to the promotion of America's consumer appetites were emerging in the early 1980s and became stronger at the end of the decade, when evidence of insider trading on Wall Street resulted in prison terms for greedy speculators. Economists noted that the unemployment rate reached its highest point in more than forty years in 1982, which helped raise the number of Americans living in poverty to the highest level in seventeen years. Sociologists warned of the effects of homelessness and drug abuse and insisted that more governmental programs were needed.

Writers like Tom Wolfe (*Bonfire of the Vanities*, 1987) and Jay McInerney (*Bright Lights, Big City*, 1984) chronicled the empty lives of Wall Street's elite. Musicians made political statements by organizing concerts and recording music to help a variety of social and political problems. In 1984, Bob Geldof, for example, put together a band of Irish and British musicians, called Band Aid, to cut a single to raise money for famine relief in Ethiopia. Geldof went on to organize multivenue charity concerts, called Live Aid, in London and Philadelphia for the same cause. Elizabeth Taylor took up fundraising activities for the awareness and treatment of AIDS.



Critical Overview

The critical response to *This Is Our Youth* has been overwhelmingly positive. Many critics, like Robert Brustein, in his review for the *New Republic*, have applauded the play's realism and praised Lonergan as a "penetrating cultural historian." Brustein characterizes the play as a "sharp [x-ray] of social abscess and moral atrophy," noting its "tough-minded, almost clinical examination of the aimlessness, the vacuity, and the emotional deadness" of its privileged main characters. He concludes, "Lonergan's capacity to evoke these qualities without moralizing about them is the mark of a significant writer."

Stefan Kanfer, in a review for the *New Leader*, echoes Brustein's assessment of Lonergan's talent when he writes, "A lesser playwright might have been content to let [the initial conflict] occupy the evening." But while Dennis and Warren are trying to decide what to do about the money, "Lonergan introduces a third party and takes the play to another level." Kanfer insists that "the star of the evening is the playwright, who summons up a world much larger than the three actors onstage" and who has "a gift for character analysis, dramatic tension and the kind of wry, ironic dialogue that jump-starts the Off-Broadway season."

In his review for *Variety*, Matt Wolf claims that Lonergan is "a playwright blessed with an ear so finely attuned to slacker-speak that every 'um' and 'man' seemed to encapsulate an era." Wolf comments that this "master dramatist" "clearly and cleanly sets forth" the play's "jumble of emotions." He notes "how seamlessly orchestrated the play feels, its landscape encompassing burgeoning romance and long-abiding friendship alongside sudden and brutal ache." In a closing note, he praises the "numerous perceptions so piercingly captured by a play that could not seem more adult."

Richard Ouzounian, in his review for *Variety*, has a darker vision of the play, concluding that it is "a deeply disturbing look at the moral emptiness of a generation." However, in her review for *American Theatre*, Pamela Renner calls it an "acerbic comedy" and says that "the transitional self of adolescence is hard to pin down in writing, but *Youth* draws urgency and propulsive strength from its presence."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1



Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of American and English literature and film. In this essay, she traces the development of one of the central characters in the play as he takes the first steps toward adulthood.

At the beginning of Lonergan's play *This Is Our Youth*, twenty-one-year-old Dennis Ziegler tells his nineteen-year-old friend Warren Straub, who has just stolen fifteen thousand dollars from his father, "Nobody can stand to have you around because you're such an annoying loudmouthed little creep, and now you're like some kind of fugitive from *justice*? What is gonna happen to you, man?"

Although Dennis's assessment of his friend is characteristically harsh, Warren often proves himself to be quite annoying, a trait intensified by his decision to hole up in Dennis's apartment until he can figure out what to do about his father's money. He also wonders what will happen to him when his father finds out that his money is missing. Warren, along with Dennis, never thinks much beyond the next few days, which are often viewed through a haze of marijuana smoke. By the end of the play, however, Warren will emerge from his self-induced fog, as he begins to make a thoughtful assessment of the characters of those around him. This new awareness of his world and his place in it will mark the beginning of his transition into adulthood.

Both Warren and Dennis are the spoiled, rootless offspring of Upper West Side elitist parents who have written them off as essentially worthless members of society. Robert Brustein, in his review for the *New Republic*, writes that Lonergan is a "penetrating cultural historian" who has realistically depicted "the aimlessness, the vacuity, and the emotional deadness" of these youths.

In her review for *American Theatre*, Pamela Renner notes an important difference, however, between the two main characters and their parents. Renner notes that Warren and Dennis "both know that they are running out of excuses." And, she says, "they don't mistake their own disaffection for moral authenticity; it's just a way of gaining some breathing room until they figure out what they want." They are determined not to become just like their parents. They reject the false philanthropy of Dennis's mother, who, Warren insists, is "a bleeding-heart dominatrix with like a *hairdo*," and the greed of Warren's father, who is involved in business deals with the mob.

At the beginning of the play, Warren has no idea what he wants, other than the money that he has just stolen from his father. He steals it initially to make his father "pay" for kicking him out of the house and for emotionally and physically abusing him for so many years. Once he has it, he is not sure what to do with it, other than to buy a few bottles of champagne and some drugs and, he hopes, lure girls to an expensive suite at the Plaza Hotel for a night of partying.

Warren knows that without the money, he is not likely to get a date. He illustrates his penchant for disaster not only when he steals money that his father most likely got from



gangsters but also when he destroys Dennis's girlfriend's sculpture. Dennis underlines this trait when he asks, "How emblematic of your personality is it that you walk into a room for *ten minutes* and break the *exact item* calculated to wreak the maximum possible amount of havoc?" He determines Warren to be "a total troublemaker."

Warren has a long list of other faults, as Dennis continually points out. Dennis notes that Warren is not very bright, which he has proved by stealing his father's money, and has little to say unless he is asked a direct question. Warren's inability to establish his own identity has prompted him to adopt Dennis's habits and style, which others, including Dennis, recognize as blatant hero worship. These traits have prevented him from attracting girls, a fact to which Dennis often calls attention, until Warren has fifteen thousand in cash ready to spend on a night of partying.

Warren soon discovers, however, that the money is not a guarantee of success. When Jessica appears to have lost interest in him the morning after their stay at the Plaza, Dennis inquires, "What kind of talent for misery do you have, man?" Warren replies, "I don't know. I guess I'm pretty advanced." Warning him that his destructive lifestyle may eventually ruin him as it does other less advantaged youths, his father has insisted that "the only difference between you and them is my money. . . . It's like a big . . . safety net, but you can't stretch it too far, man, because your sister fell right through it."

For all of his faults, however, Warren has—as Lonergan's stage directions suggest—"large tracts of thoughtfulness in his personality." Still, at this point in his life, they "are not doing him much good." He exhibits "beneath his natural eccentricity a dogged self-possession" that suggests a certain core of inner strength. Brustein comments, "Warren seems at first to be slightly brain-dead—restless, easily bored, always asking 'What's up?'—but the closer we get to him, the more sharply focused he becomes."

Renner writes, "It's a testament to Lonergan's slyness and restraint as a writer that one comes to care powerfully about his hapless Warren—who has a way of reminding you instinctively how much the empty spaces inside your heart ached at his age." We note his painful self-consciousness as he tries to impress Jessica enough to encourage her to give him a chance. We glimpse his heartache in his attachment to his suitcase full of toys, "the proceeds from my unhappy childhood" as he calls them. These toys are "authentic" artifacts to Warren of moments when he could escape the loneliness of a childhood that offered him little comfort. We recognize the importance of the baseball cap given to him by a grandfather who apparently provided him with moments of attention and affection that he did not often experience. Finally, we observe the painful loss of his murdered sister, a loss with which he has not been able to come to terms. Never, though, does he succumb to self-pity.

Warren's thoughtfulness emerges in his interaction with Jessica. In an effort to prove to her that he cares about helping others, he insists, "I'm a total Democrat." His actions support his contention, revealing that he has a kinder heart than does Dennis, who repeatedly screams obscenities at his girlfriend when she expresses anger about her smashed sculpture. Warren is truly concerned about Jessica's self-consciousness when



she discovers that he has discussed with Dennis their night together at the Plaza, and he does everything he can to put her at ease.

Jessica, however, does not prove worthy of his concern, as she illustrates when she asks for his grandfather's baseball cap as payment for his telling Dennis about their night together. This event forces Warren to stop worrying about how he appears to Jessica and to pay attention to her true character. He tests her shallowness when he hands over the cap that she knows means so much to him. When she accepts it, noting his distress, she fails the test. Warren subsequently rejects her suggestion that they see each other later that week with the appropriate amount of irony, declaring, "I don't think we can. I'm all out of baseball hats." He stands his moral ground when she tries to return it, threatening, "You try to give me that hat back one more time, I swear to God I'll . . . burn it."

The incident with Jessica appears to have lessened Warren's self-consciousness and increased his awareness of others, which becomes evident when he speaks on the phone with his father. After admitting that he stole the money, he engages in a conversation with his father about his sister, admitting, "I think about her all the time." He says that he sees her "in my imagination." That conversation ends on an ugly note when he declares to his father, "Do whatever you want. . . . I hate you too." But Warren soon displays a true sense of compassion for his father. He explains to Dennis, "For the last nine years he's been trying to literally *pound* his life back into shape. But it's not really going too well, because he's totally by himself. . . . You know?"

By the end of the play, his compassion extends even to Dennis, who has taken every opportunity to criticize and belittle him during the past twenty-four hours. Recognizing Dennis's overwhelming need to envision himself as a role model to his friends, Warren calms him with false assurance, "All right, all right. You're on my side." The stage directions in this final scene note that Warren looks at Dennis "as if from a very great distance." Warren, in fact, has distanced himself, by the end of the play, from Dennis, who is still caught up in the same destructive self-absorption that Warren displayed when he first arrived at the apartment. Unlike Dennis, however, Warren has been able, through his capacity for introspection and insight into the character of others, to take his first steps toward maturation and a clearer sense of selfhood.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on *This Is Our Youth*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.



Quotes

"But my father is not a *criminal*. He's just in *business* with criminals." Act 1, p. 15

"Don't send me to college. Just spring for my rent. I'll be a fuckin' bike messenger till I decide what I wanna do, and we'll never have to deal with each other.' And they're like, 'Fine.'" Act 1, p. 17

"Dennis rains open-handed blows down on WARREN'S head and body. WARREN covers up. DENNIS drops onto his gut, knee first. WARREN groans in pain. DENNIS gets up and looks at the wreckage." Act 1, p. 29

"I'm like the basis of your personality... I'm like a one-man youth culture for you pathetic assholes. You're gonna remember your youth as like a gray stoned haze punctuated by a series of beatings from your fuckin' Dad, and like, *my* jokes." Act 1, p. 31

"As soon as I start arguing, I immediately snap into attack mode and just become as insanely brutal as I possibly can. It's because of my fuckin' *mother*...." Act 1, p. 39

"Well why do you have like her childhood *pictures* up all over your room, and like articles about her *murder* in your fuckin' *drawer*, like ten years after the fact?" Act 1, p. 44

"WARREN struggles to get out from under him. DENNIS gives him a loud wet kiss on the cheek and sits back." Act 1, p. 45

"All I do is smoke pot. I can do that anywhere. I can just bring it *with* me, you know? Act 1, p. 55

"Everything you think will be different, and the way you act, and all your most passionately held beliefs are gonna be completely different, and it's really depressing." Act 1, p. 57

"And now like Ronald *Reagan* is President of the United States. I mean, how embarrassing is *that*?" Chap. 4, p. 67

"It's just, I'm always getting drawn into these situations and then getting hurt really badly.' She murmured. Chap. 5, p. 72

"Valerie walked in here and took one look at the shards of her sculpture lying in the garbage and went completely insane." Act 2, p. 83

"I'm not letting you stay here all week with that money, Warren, because when your father finds out you spent that money on drugs, he's gonna think I'm in *cahoots* with you, and then he's gonna forgive *you* and kill *me*." Act 2, p. 86



"I guess I just don't understand why you walked ten blocks out of your way so you could be around the corner so you could buzz up and tell me you can't have brunch with me." Act 2, p. 102

"Well, I feel pretty strongly about the fact that I have a lot better judgment than she did at my age, and it's also not too likely that I'm gonna move in with some thirty-five year-old guy who beats me up all the time." Chap. 6, p. 91

"I mean the guy is *dead*. Do you know what that *means*? It's like, he's not gonna be *around* any more, like at *all*. And it's got me really fuckin' scared." Act 2, p. 115

"I feel totally high on fear. I'm like - I don't even know what to do with myself. I wanna like go to cooking school in Florence, or like go into show business. I could so totally be a completely great chef it's like ridiculous." Act 2, p. 118

"I mean all he does is fuckin' lord it over everybody man, over all my brothers and sisters and like all these celebrities who buy his art, because he totally knows that he's like a complete genius and so he's like, 'Why should I spend two minutes talking to anybody I don't want to?'" Act 2, p. 119

"How emblematic of your personality is it that you walk into a room for *ten minutes* and break the *exact item* calculated to wreak the maximum possible amount of havoc, no matter where you are?" Act 2, p. 120

"Jessica Goldman is the first girl I ever had a chance with who was like clearly good-looking enough that you weren't able to make me feel like a second-rate asshole for wanting to go out with her." Act 2, p. 124

"I'm sure you love me, man, and you're totally like my personal hero, but I really don't get the feeling that you are." Act 2, p. 125

"But then at the height of his powers, he totally lost control of his own daughter, and she ended up getting beaten to death by some guy from the world next door to us. And there was nothing he could do about it." Act 2, p. 128

"I can't *believe* you don't think I'm on your *side*." Act 2, p. 128



Topics for Further Study

Lonergan's dialogue in the play has been praised for its realism. Write your own dialogue of a conversation between you and a friend that reveals an important quality of your friendship.

Read J. D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* and compare the depiction of a teenager in 1950s America with the depiction of young people in the early 1980s in *This Is Our Youth*. Are the struggles involved in the coming-of-age process the same or different in these works? Write an essay comparing and contrasting the two works.

Imagine what might have happened to Warren after the end of the play. Would he have given his father back the money and reconciled with him? Would he have continued his friendship with Dennis? Write a character analysis of Warren ten years after the play ends. Use details from the play to back up your views.

Interview four people who have experienced death in their families. Take notes, focusing on the effect of death on the family members. Report your findings to the class and lead a discussion, asking the class to compare your findings with the effects of Warren's sister's death on him and his father.

What Do I Read Next?

Lonergan's 1982 play *The Rennings Children* focuses on the psychological problems and tensions within a family.

Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* (1949) looks at the troubled relationship between a salesman and his two sons.

J. D. Salinger's 1951 novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, celebrated as an acute expression of the cynical adolescent zeitgeist, chronicles a teenaged boy's maturation into adulthood.

Jonathan Larson's play *Rent* (1996) presents eight different stories of young adults in New York City in the 1990s as they struggle to cope with poverty, drugs, and AIDS.



Further Study

Camardella, Michele L., *America in the 1980s*, Facts on File, 2005.

Camardella explores the cultural history of America in the 1980s.

Frosch, Mary, ed., *Coming of Age in America: A Multicultural Anthology*, New Press, 1995.

The essays in this collection offer different multicultural views of the maturation process.

Kushner, Rachel, □Kenneth Lonergan,□ *BOMB*, Vol. 76, Summer 2001, pp. 40-45.

Kushner discusses Lonergan's writing process and the main themes in his plays and screenplays.

Schaller, Michael, *Right Turn: America in the 1980s*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

Schaller focuses on politics in the 1980s and America's reversion to the conservatism of the 1950s.

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Brustein, Robert, Review of *This Is Our Youth*, in the *New Republic*, June 28, 1999, pp. 36-38.

Kanfer, Stefan, "Trio and Quintet," in the *New Leader*, Vol. 81, No. 13, November 30, 1998, pp. 22-23.

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Ouzounian, Richard, Review of *This Is Our Youth*, in *Variety*, October 6, 2003, p. 95.

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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.

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