Torch Song Trilogy Study Guide

Torch Song Trilogy by Harvey Fierstein

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Introduction

Torch Song Trilogy is a play that straddles genres, existing as both a comedy and a melodrama. Harvey Fierstein's play opened at New York's Richard Allen Center in October, 1981, and moved to the Off-Broadway Actors Playhouse in January of 1982. The play opened on Broadway in June, 1983, at the Little Theatre and continued for a long and successful run, having won several awards, including two Antoinette "Tony" Perry Awards.

The work is semi-autobiographical; Fierstein used his own experience as a homosexual to bring a sense of authenticity to the play. Critics have remarked that the language and situations ring true and not only to homosexual audience members. Fierstein states in a brief author's note to the play that he hopes members of the audience will recognize themselves in the exchanges between lovers and the relationship between mother and child. The play's popularity among a wide range of viewers indicates that the playwright's intentions succeeded.

Torch Song Trilogy began as*The International Stud,* a one-act play that was produced Off-Off-Broadway in 1978. This early work was combined with two other one-act plays, *Fugue in a Nursery* (1979) and *Widows and Children First* (1979), to create *Torch Song Trilogy*. Each element of the play focuses on an important passage in the life of its protagonist, Arnold. Although the play is about homosexuals, at its heart it is a play about family, love, and survival. Fierstein's play appeared just as AIDS was recognized as a major medical problem. His reinforcement of the importance of love in all relationships, hetero and gay, served to counter the attacks against homosexuals as promiscuous pleasure seekers.

Author Biography

Harvey Fierstein was born June 6, 1954, in Brooklyn, New York. He received a fine arts degree from the Pratt Institute in 1973, but even before finishing school he had embarked on a career in theatre. After working as a female impersonator, and while still a teenager, Fierstein earned his first role as an actor in 1971. In Andy Warhol's Pork, Fierstein played an overweight, asthmatic lesbian maid. He began writing his own plays in 1976. *International Stud* was written as a form of therapy after the end of a two-year romance.

Fierstein later combined the semi-autobiographical *Stud* with two other one-act plays, *Fugue in a Nursery* and *Widows and Children First,* to form *Torch Song Trilogy,* which debuted Off-Broadway in 1981. *Torch Song Trilogy,* which Fierstein also starred in, is the play with which he is most closely identified; it is considered his defining work. The play won a number of awards, including an Obie, two Drama Desk awards, and two Antionette "Tony " Perry Awards for best actor and best play.

Fierstein also won awards for his stage adaptation of the popular French comedy film La *Cage aux folles,* including Tonys for best musical and best book of a musical. His other plays include, *Safe Sex* and *Forget Him*. In 1988, Fierstein wrote the screenplay adaptation for *Torch Song Trilogy* and reprised his role of Arnold in the film. Fierstein has also written a television drama based on his play *Tidy Endings,* as well as a second television drama, *Kaddish and Old Men*.

In addition to writing plays, Fierstein has also gained a considerable reputation as an actor. He has appeared in many theatrical productions, including *Xircus: The Private Life of Jesus Christ, The Trojan Woman,* his own *Safe Sex* trilogy, and *The Haunted Host*. Films in which Fierstein has appeared include *Garbo Talks, Mrs. Doubtfire, Bullets over Broadway,* and *Independence Day.* Fierstein has received a Rockefeller Foundation Grant in Playwrighting, a Ford Foundation Grant for new American Plays, and a special Obie Award for writing and acting When not writing or acting, he enjoys painting, gardening, and cooking. Fierstein is also a committed activist for AIDS research and gay rights.

Plot Summary

Act I: The International Stud, scene 1

The play opens with Arnold reciting a monologue to the audience. This speech sets the stage for the remainder of the play, since Arnold talks of his loneliness and of his need to love and be loved. He relates his disappointments in love and what he is looking for in a partner.

Act I: The International Stud, scenes 2-3

Ed Reiss is introduced, with the scene consisting of Ed's side of a conversation in which he meets Arnold. They are attracted to one another, and the two decide to leave together.

Scene 3 follows a brief exchange, heard over the sounds of a radio, in which Ed and Arnold both confess how scared they are. The scene is a telephone confrontation between Arnold and Ed. It has been some months since the action in scene 2. Arnold, who has been waiting impatiently for Ed to call, finally calls Ed, and it becomes clear that Ed is seeing someone else. The someone else turns out to be a woman, Laurel. Ed is trying to deny his homosexuality and form a heterosexual relationship. Arnold is very hurt and the conversation ends when Arnold slams down the phone.

Act I: The International Stud, scene 4

The setting is a bar, where Arnold has gone out of loneliness. He is talked into going into the back room where men have anonymous sex. Arnold is not comfortable with this type of encounter, but he tries it, his nervous chatter revealing his anxiety. Arnold has sex with a stranger in the dark. The scene ends with him trying to be positive about the experience.

Act I: The International Stud, scene 5

Ed has gone to see Arnold five months after their break-up. It is not clear what his purpose is, since he tells Arnold he is happy with the woman he is seeing. But it is also obvious that Ed's relationship with Laurel is not ideal. Ed hints at wanting Arnold back, and he appears to want both Arnold and Laurel in his life. Ed reveals to Arnold that the depth of his feelings for Arnold scares him and that he sees Arnold as an impediment to the kind of straight life he□and his parents□wants. The scene ends with Arnold asking himself what he should do.

Act II: Fugue in a Nursery, "prologue"

The scene is one year after Ed and Arnold's meeting at the end of Act I. It is a telephone conversation between Arnold and Laurel. She has called to invite him to the country for the weekend. Arnold initially resists, but his new lover, Alan, wants to go, so Arnold agrees. All the scenes in this act occur in a large circular bed with all four characters (Arnold, Alan, Ed, and Laurel), but the lights focus on only the two who are speaking at the moment.

Act II: Fugue in a Nursery, "Nursery: a fugue"

This is a brief conversation between Ed and Laurel, in which the audience learns that Ed is unhappy that Alan has come to the country with Arnold. Ed was in favor of Arnold coming, but Ed is jealous of his former lover's new companion.

Act II: Fugue in a Nursery, "Subject"

This scene is a conversation between Alan and Arnold, in which it is revealed that Alan is very young and that he has been a hustler (a young gay man who prostitutes himself to other men). Intermingled is conversation between Ed and Laurel. Both sets of conversation include sexual banter. Ed again states his resentment and jealousy of Alan. When the conversation returns to Arnold and Alan, Alan questions Arnold about his relationship with Ed. Arnold insists that there can never be anything between him and Ed again.

Act II: Fugue in a Nursery, "Codetta"

This scene is a continuation of the previous, with the discussion now focused on young men and older women. Both sets of partners are reading from the newspaper and quizzing one another about their sexual desires and loves.

Act II: Fugue in a Nursery, "Strettol"

In this scene both couples are engaged in conversation about what happened during a three hour meeting between Arnold and Ed earlier that afternoon. Laurel and Alan want details, though both Ed and Arnold insist that nothing sexual happened. Alan tells Arnold that Laurel made a pass at him, another hint that Laurel is attracted to gay men. Laurel tells Alan how she met Ed and the details about their relationship, including that they have both been in therapy together. Coincidentally, Ed has told Arnold the same thing during their afternoon together. All partners insist that they have open and sexually free relationships.

Act II: Fugue in a Nursery, "Counter Subject"

Laurel has been trying to get Arnold and Alan to accompany Ed and her to church, but they have resisted. As the brief scene continues, Laurel confesses to Ed her apprehensions about the weekend and that she really just wanted Arnold to come up so that Ed could choose her rather than him.

Act II: Fugue in a Nursery, "Strettol"

It is just after lunch and Arnold decides to help Laurel with the dishes, allowing them time for a private conversation. At the same time Alan and Ed go off for some private time together. In the hour that follows, Laurel tells Arnold that she thinks he is trying to get Ed back. She knows about the telephone conversations they have been having, but she thinks Arnold is the one trying to rekindle the relationship. Arnold tells her that it is Ed who is calling him. At the same time, Alan is telling Ed about how he and Arnold met. The scene ends with Ed seducing the younger man.

Act II: Fugue in a Nursery, "Coda"

It is after the weekend, and Ed calls Arnold to tell him that Laurel has left him following a fight they had. He asks Arnold to check on her, since she has come into the city. When Arnold talks to Laurel, he learns that she has left because of the sexual encounter between Ed and Alan. She does not realize that Arnold was unaware of Alan's betrayal. The scene ends with a confrontation between Alan and Arnold in which they both admit that they do not want an open relationship. Alan has not liked Arnold's trips to the back room of the bar for anonymous sex, and Arnold does not like Alan's hustling. Although Alan has been saying all along that he loves Arnold, Arnold has been afraid to commit to the relationship.

Act II: Fugue in a Nursery, "Epilogue"

Laurel has come to visit Arnold. She brings a wedding present for Alan's dog, since Alan and Arnold have decided to be "married." She also comes to tell Arnold that she and Ed are getting married and to ask him not to say anything to Ed that might cause him to renege on the marriage. At the end of the scene, Arnold sings a song about the end of a love affair.

Act III: Widows and Children First, scene 1

It is five years later, and Alan has died. Arnold has taken in a young fifteen-year old boy, David, that he and Alan were going to adopt. Ed has left Laurel and is staying with Arnold, temporarily. Laurel has called Ed, and only his side of the conversation is heard. It is clear that he is not planning on returning to the marriage. Arnold tells Ed that a

social worker is coming to visit to determine Arnold's suitability as a parent for David. It turns out that Arnold's mother is also coming for a visit, and David is all dressed up to meet his prospective grandmother.

Ed approaches Arnold about the possibility of getting back together as a couple, but Arnold is resistant. Arnold's mother does not know about David as a prospective adopted son, she thinks he is Arnold's new roommate. David leaves to go to school and Ed leaves also. Arnold's mother enters. Arnold's mother quizzes him about Ed's presence in the apartment. She believes in the sanctity of marriage and thinks that Ed should go back to his wife. She also states her disapproval of Arnold's homosexuality. David enters and for a few moments Mrs. Beckoff thinks that her son has a child-lover. The scene ends with David revealing that his last name is Beckoff and that he is Arnold's son.

Act III: Widows and Children First, scene 2

Although Mrs. Beckoff and David spend the afternoon together, she is under the impression that the arrangement is temporary and that David will be going to another set of foster parents in a few weeks. When it becomes obvious that David's stay is permanent, there is a terrible fight between mother and son. She does not think Arnold's lifestyle is suitable for raising a child and the two explode, saying all the things they have been feeling and concealing for years. The audience also learns how Alan died. He was murdered by a group of gay-bashers with baseball bats. The scene ends with Arnold telling his mother to leave.

Act III: Widows and Children First, scene 3

At the beginning of this scene, David tells Ed how he met Arnold and about how lonely Arnold has been without a partner. But he also tells Ed that Arnold has been secluding himself from any possible relationship. When Arnold joins them, Ed leaves, and David tells Arnold that he needs to share his life with a partner.

Act III: Widows and Children First, scene 4

It is early morning and Ed and Arnold are talking. Ed again approaches Arnold with the idea that they get back together, but Arnold is still resistant. Ed is trying to tell Arnold that he loves him when David enters. David reassures Ed that Arnold will change his mind, that he always does. Indeed, within a few moments, Arnold indicates he may be willing to consider Ed's offer of love.

Mrs. Beckoff, who could not get a plane in the middle of the night, is still in the apartment. She enters the room, having thought about the argument from the previous evening. In a brief exchange with Arnold, she expresses a reserved approval, or at least acceptance, of her son's life-style. She also offers some ideas about how to grieve for

the loss of a spouse. Since she had never accepted Alan as Arnold's spouse, it is a big step for her. The play ends with a reconciliation between mother and son.

The International Stud: Scene 1

The International Stud: Scene 1 Summary

The play opens in a dressing room where Arnold is preparing for his performance as a drag queen. From another part of the stage, a torch singer named Lady Blues finishes a ballad and Arnold begins a monologue directed at the audience. Arnold shares his frustrations at the lack of true love in his life despite all his attempts and all the humiliations and betrayals that plague a homosexual man. Arnold is well aware of his own shortcomings but admits that he has much to offer the right person. After sharing his idea of the perfect man, Arnold makes final preparations for his show and tells the audience that the right man may just be in the audience tonight.

The International Stud: Scene 1 Analysis

Torch Song Trilogy is the combination of three plays, *The International Stud, Fugue in a Nursery,* and *Widows and Children First.* The trilogy marks important points in the life of Arnold Beckoff, a homosexual who works as a drag queen in New York City in the early 1980s.

Arnold's monologue sets the tone of the play in this first scene, in that he discusses his frustrations at not being able to find love. The themes of betrayal and longing are established in Arnold's wistfulness but hope overrides all the negative thoughts as Arnold ends the monologue with the idea that his perfect mate may be in the audience and his longing may end very soon.

The International Stud: Scene 2

The International Stud: Scene 2 Summary

Lady Blues sings a torch song between each scene and as she finishes, lights go up on Ed Reiss, a homosexual man in search of companionship in The International Stud gay bar. Ed engages in a conversation with Arnold although Arnold is not physically present. The dialogue is from Ed's perspective as he makes small talk with Arnold. Ed asks Arnold if the backroom is crowded, and Arnold apparently replies that he does not know. A backroom in a backroom bar is where intimate homosexual encounters occur in the dark to retain anonymity. Ed and Arnold are attracted to each other and leave the club together.

The International Stud: Scene 2 Analysis

The introduction of Ed as Arnold's potential love interest is the focus of this scene. Arnold is never seen although Ed carries on a conversation as if he were with him. The audience must imagine that Arnold is responding positively to Ed's overtures by the nature of the one-sided dialogue. The theme of sexual ambiguity is established by Ed's presence in the homosexual club, but he insists that he dates women as well.

The International Stud: Scene 3

The International Stud: Scene 3 Summary

Four months after the last scene, Arnold is at home impatiently waiting for a phone call from Ed, who has become his lover. Arnold can no longer stand the suspense and dials Ed's number and Ed is wary upon hearing Arnold's voice. Ed's evasive tone leads to the revelation that he has been seeing another person, a woman named Laurel. Ed is in conflict about his heterosexuality and feels that if he were to date a woman, this ambiguity would be banished. Societal and family pressures would also be relieved if Ed were to establish a long-term relationship with a woman. Ed reveals that Laurel is to meet his parents, a fact which particularly hurts Arnold who was never introduced to them. The significance of meeting a lover's parents is not lost on Arnold, who is deeply wounded and asks Ed if he is ashamed of him.

Ed replies that he will talk to Arnold again, but does not want to have this discussion over the phone. Arnold persists because he knows that if Ed hangs up the relationship will be over. Ed cannot give Arnold the commitment Arnold wants and Arnold's impatience ends in an abrupt end of the conversation.

The International Stud: Scene 3 Analysis

The theme of the importance of love to human beings, despite their sexual orientation becomes important in this scene. Arnold's infatuation with Ed is not requited and Arnold suffers the pangs as intensely as any heterosexual person might when faced with the same situation. The author's shedding light on this aspect of homosexuality is important during this period of time in America, when it is assumed that homosexuals live only for the pursuit of carnal pleasure and cannot feel the depths of love and its emotional extensions.

The International Stud: Scene 4

The International Stud: Scene 4 Summary

Arnold has gone to The International Stud gay bar with a friend named Murray who is never seen. Arnold's one-sided dialogue reveals that he is hurt by Ed's betrayal and wants a deep and true love that knows he will not find it in a place like this. Arnold feels that the gay bar scenario is humiliating and degrading, yet it is the only sure place to find other homosexual men.

Murray tries to convince Arnold to go to the back room and Arnold resists because of the fear of rejection by a stranger in a dark room. Eventually, Arnold acquiesces and he and Murray enter the backroom. The two men are soon separated and Arnold's nervousness is almost palpable in his voice. Arnold reveals that a stranger is fondling him and opening his pants, and when Arnold bends down to set down a beer can, a strange man penetrates him from behind.

Arnold initiates a dialogue with the stranger whom he cannot see and more than once it is clear that the stranger slaps Arnold to silence him. When the stranger is finished, he disappears and Arnold tries to justify the anonymous encounter as an attempt at finding love.

The International Stud: Scene 4 Analysis

Arnold's loneliness takes the shape of an anonymous stranger in the backroom of the club where Arnold submits to sex without the benefit of seeing his partner or of even being allowed to speak. Arnold is reduced to being an object, which further drives home the personal humiliation and alienation he had gone there to bury.

The International Stud: Scene 5

The International Stud: Scene 5 Summary

It is now five months since Arnold and Ed have ended their relationship. Ed has come to the theatre to see Arnold's performance and visits him backstage afterwards. Arnold's cool response to Ed reveals his remaining hurt over the end of the relationship. Ed is not sure why he has come to see Arnold, yet will not leave at Arnold's request. Eventually Ed reveals that he is still seeing Laurel, although things in that relationship are not perfect either. Ed intimates some thoughts at wanting to reconcile with Arnold but cannot make a choice. Ed's conflicted state of mind is annoying to Arnold who would like to have Ed back, but he does not want to suffer the pain of another break-up.

Arnold admits to Ed that he had hoped Ed would return, but also hoped that Ed would have more clarity on the direction of his personal life. Arnold is still hurt that Ed cannot share his presence in his life with his parents. Ed knows that his parents would not understand a homosexual relationship and has tried to forge the relationship with Laurel because it would make life so much easier on almost every level. Ed still has feelings for Arnold and cannot figure out how to bring all the elements together.

Arnold asks Ed to bring the car around and Arnold muses over his choices after Ed leaves. Arnold could leave Ed waiting in the car and disappear or he can join Ed and continue the discussion and possibly the rekindling of the relationship. Finally Arnold admits that he loves Ed and it becomes clear that his decision will be an attempt at reconciliation.

The International Stud: Scene 5 Analysis

The author repeats the theme of the search for true love as Arnold considers reconciliation with Ed, the man who had wounded him so deeply because of his own conflicted feelings in the area of emotions vs. societal pressures. Arnold is a true romantic and has endless hope in spite of the humiliations and degradations from both anonymous partners and Ed, whom he loves. Arnold shares some possible scenarios of leaving Ed stranded and abandoned at the end of the scene but these are merely mental exercises, because Arnold does love Ed and cannot bring himself to hurt him or hurt his own chances of getting back together with him.

Fugue in a Nursery: Prologue

Fugue in a Nursery: Prologue Summary

It is now a year after Ed and Arnold's last meeting. Laurel places a telephone call to Arnold with an invitation for Arnold to visit Ed and her at Ed's farmhouse in upstate New York for the upcoming weekend. Arnold is not at all sure that this type of visit would be a positive experience, but eventually relents and agrees to come and bring his new lover, Alan, with him.

Fugue in a Nursery: Prologue Analysis

This very short scene establishes the passing of one year's time and that Ed has made the decision to remain with Laurel while Arnold has a new love interest, Alan. Laurel's attempt to reunite the former lovers, Ed and Arnold, and their respective new lovers sets the stage for potential conflict and it is not sure if Laurel is well intentioned or a bit perverse in her need to see the interaction between Ed and Arnold after a year has passed.

Fugue in a Nursery, Nursery: A Fugue

Fugue in a Nursery, Nursery: A Fugue Summary

The activity in this scene and all the others to follow in this act take place in a huge bed in which Arnold, Alan, Laurel, and Ed all sit or recline depending on the action. The stage lights focus only on the characters that are speaking at the time, a staging element that eliminates the need for scenery. The characters stay in the bed even though they could be at completely different locations throughout the act.

It is the evening of the first day of Arnold and Alan's visit with Laurel and Ed, and Laurel is feeling particularly smug about her sophistication of hosting Ed's former lover in their home. Ed does not understand all the commotion over a weekend visit and ultimately reveals his discomfort that Arnold has brought Alan. Clearly Ed did not know that Arnold is involved with someone new and Alan's presence at the house stirs up feelings of jealousy, which Ed cannot manage.

Fugue in a Nursery, Nursery: A Fugue Analysis

The setting of the bed for this act is symbolic of the intimacy of the characters with each other, although in different combinations and levels at some point throughout the balance of the play. It is also important to note the element of irony that the bed creates. The characters are within inches of each other yet find it difficult to touch or relate in spite of their physical and emotional proximity.

Fugue in a Nursery, Subject

Fugue in a Nursery, Subject Summary

The scene opens with Alan trying to awaken the sleeping Arnold with teasing and flirting. Arnold prefers sleep to play at the moment but cannot resist Alan's boyish charms. Their conversation is stalled as a dialogue between Ed and Laurel begins, yet neither couple is aware of the other. This style continues throughout the scene.

Ultimately it is revealed that Alan makes his living as a male model and a hustler for gay sex, and is quite a bit younger than Arnold. In a conversation between Ed and Laurel, Ed restates his jealousy of Alan and the resentment of Alan's presence in Arnold's life and at the house this weekend.

The scene ends with a conversation between Alan and Arnold, who declares to his young lover that there is nothing between Arnold and Ed anymore. Alan does not fully believe Arnold, who does not provide any comfort in his ambiguous answers to the questions of whether or not he still loves Ed.

Fugue in a Nursery, Subject Analysis

The author reveals the relevance of the title of this section of the trilogy in this scene by showcasing the style of a fugue in the dialogue of the characters. A fugue, which is a musical composition in which one or two themes are repeated by different voices, is symbolized by the interweaving of the conversations of the two couples. It is almost as if the couples are singing songs in a round with each repeating their parts in turn.

The author masterfully crafts the physical elements of a fugue with the characters' voices, but implies the second meaning of the word, which is that of a disturbed state of consciousness in which a person seems to perform acts in full awareness but later cannot recall any actions. It is as if the author wants the reader to understand that love is something that overtakes a person and when it occurs, that person seems fully cognizant, but love's long-term effects cannot fully be realized until much later after the initial impact has diminished.

Fugue in a Nursery, Codetta

Fugue in a Nursery, Codetta Summary

Ed reads a newspaper to Laurel about a love affair between an 80-year-old woman and a boy of fifteen. The continuation of the overlapping conversations of the two couples in the bed reveals that Ed thinks the old woman and young man in love is sexy. Alan and Arnold pick up on a similar vein in their own discussion and ultimately both couples talk about the possibility that in each relationship there is always one person who loves one more than the other.

Fugue in a Nursery, Codetta Analysis

The weekend at the country house has stirred up insecurities in each person who begins to question the loyalty and depth of love of his or her lover. Stylistically, the author calls this scene a codetta. In a musical fugue, a codetta is a link between the entries of a subject. The author is simply revealing more of the characters' vulnerabilities and emotional states as their relationships are explored.

Fugue in a Nursery, Stretto

Fugue in a Nursery, Stretto Summary

Arnold and Ed manage to get some time alone together, which sets-off sparks of jealousy from Laurel and Alan, who want details. Ed reminds Arnold that he used to call Arnold's bedroom The Nursery because it was so cozy and comfortable. Laurel and Alan probe for details of the time that Ed and Arnold spent in bed today, but both men declare that nothing sexual happened between them.

Later on, Alan shares with Arnold that Laurel had made a pass at Alan while Arnold and Ed were alone together. Arnold believes this validates Laurel's attraction to gay men, a fact which she tries to hide. Laurel has also told Alan that she had met Ed while they were in the same therapy group, a fact which Ed has also shared with Arnold earlier today. Ultimately, both couples agree that their individual relationships are honest and open and that they enjoy the mix of freedom and security derived from their respective partners.

Fugue in a Nursery, Stretto Analysis

The author continues to craft the piece in tune with a musical fugue, in which the term stretto means an overlapping of answer with subject. The interaction of the characters and the quick paced dialogue physically exhibits the stretto characteristics while the characters overstep their bounds in the limits of their own relationships causing an emotional overlap as well.

Fugue in a Nursery, Counter Subject

Fugue in a Nursery, Counter Subject Summary

It is finally Sunday morning of the country weekend and Laurel calls Arnold and Alan to breakfast, but the two men are hesitant to rise. Laurel's attempts to coerce Arnold and Alan to accompany her and Ed to church are met with even more resistance. Laurel and Ed continue with their normal Sunday morning schedule and Laurel admits that the weekend has not worked out as she had planned. Laurel's real motive for inviting Arnold had been a little devious in that she wanted to place Arnold and Ed together one more time and determine whether or not Ed would choose her over Arnold.

Fugue in a Nursery, Counter Subject Analysis

Ironically, Laurel has invited Arnold for the weekend to test Ed's love for her, but Arnold has brought Alan, which negates any opportunity for testing Ed. Once more the author drives home the point that jealousy as related to love relationships is as common for both sexes as it is for both homosexuals and heterosexuals. Every person shares essentially the same emotions, feelings and needs and the author's reiteration of this point is especially important given the time period in which the play was written. When the AIDS crisis became prominent in America, there was an overriding fear of homosexuals and the author knew the importance of portraying homosexuals as living, breathing people with the same phobias, anxieties, and strengths as anyone else.

Fugue in a Nursery, Stretto

Fugue in a Nursery, Stretto Summary

After lunch on Sunday, Arnold offers to help Laurel with cleaning up the kitchen, which will allow Ed and Alan some time alone to get to know each other better. During their conversation in the kitchen, Laurel reveals to Arnold her intuition about Arnold's trying to win Ed back into his life. Laurel knows that Arnold calls Ed frequently, which validates her claim. To Laurel's surprise, Arnold reveals that it is Ed who initiates the phone calls, not Arnold. Out in the barn, Ed reveals the circumstances of his meeting Arnold, and he is overcome with Alan's beauty; eventually Ed seduces Alan.

Later on, Arnold muses about feeling bad that he had revealed the truth about the phone calls to Laurel, who was stunned about the revelation, but took the information in stride. Alan wants only to leave the country house because of the guilt associated with his intimate encounter with Ed earlier in the afternoon.

Fugue in a Nursery, Stretto Analysis

Again the author uses the stretto technique in the dialogue exchange and the ebb and flow of the emotional betrayals, which have occurred between the couples and with the encounter between Ed and Alan unbeknownst to Arnold and Laurel.

Fugue in a Nursery, Coda

Fugue in a Nursery, Coda Summary

It is now Monday morning and Ed phones Arnold because Laurel has left Ed at least temporarily and is in New York City, where Ed hopes Arnold can check on her occasionally. Laurel unwittingly reveals that it is Ed's sexual encounter with Alan, which has prompted her to leave the house, a fact that Arnold justifies as basic human frailties.

Arnold does confront Alan about the encounter but realizes that he loves Alan and the two men ultimately declare their love for each other and commit to a permanent relationship.

Fugue in a Nursery, Coda Analysis

True to the style of the play, the author finishes with what he calls a Coda, which, in a musical fugue, is the conclusion of the main body of work. The crisis of the weekend is over and one of the couples is no longer intact while the other is stronger than before. Arnold has grown emotionally and has finally achieved the love he has wanted his entire life and the machinations of Ed and Laurel are mere annoyances now that Arnold and Alan are truly in love.

Fugue in a Nursery, Epilogue

Fugue in a Nursery, Epilogue Summary

It is now quite awhile since the weekend in the country and Laurel is visiting Arnold at the club where he is rehearsing his act singing torch songs. Arnold and Alan are still very much in love and have decided to have a commitment ceremony, and Laurel shares with Arnold that she and Ed are engaged to be married. Ed will be stopping by to tell Arnold himself, but Laurel wanted to tell Arnold first so that Arnold will not react negatively when presented with the news.

Unfortunately Laurel is not able to invite Arnold and Alan to the wedding in Massachusetts, because it will be in Laurel's parents' home, and the space is limited. Arnold instinctively understands Laurel's true meaning and graciously bids her congratulations on her upcoming nuptials. After Laurel leaves, Arnold sings another torch song about the end of an affair.

Fugue in a Nursery, Epilogue Analysis

Laurel is still not sure about Ed's feelings for her in spite of their engagement. The visit with Arnold is meant to allay any fears Laurel may still have about any residual feelings between Arnold and Ed. Laurel's plea to Arnold to feign surprise at hearing of the engagement from Ed is just another attempt to secure her bond with Ed in a relationship that is on perilous ground.

The author also brings up the topic of prejudice against homosexuals in that Laurel cannot invite Arnold and Alan to the puritanical New England home of her parents, who would not understand the relationship between the two men. Arnold is accustomed to such bias and resigns himself to signing a torch song whose lyrics betray a hint of love that still lingers for Ed.

Widows and Children First: Scene 1

Widows and Children First: Scene 1 Summary

It is now five years later and the scene takes place in the interior of Arnold's small apartment in Manhattan. Ed is cooking breakfast for Arnold and David, a fifteen-year-old boy whom Arnold is in the process of adopting. It is revealed that Alan has died and Arnold is proceeding with adopting David because it is a goal that Arnold and Alan shared.

Ed has separated from Laurel and is staying with Arnold and David temporarily until he finds an apartment. A phone call interrupts the morning and it is clear from Ed's one-sided dialogue that the caller is Laurel who wants Ed to recommit to the marriage, but Ed cannot do that.

Arnold reminds Ed and David that a social worker is coming to inspect Arnold and the household as a preliminary action prior to the formal adoption. Arnold's mother, Mrs. Beckoff, is also expected for her biannual visit from Miami, a fact that increases Arnold's anxiety level even more.

David is running late for school and emerges in a new three-piece suit in order to impress Mrs. Beckoff, his potential grandmother. Finally Arnold is able to get David off to school and Ed leaves to run an errand but returns immediately with news that Mrs. Beckoff has arrived and is on her way upstairs to the apartment well ahead of her scheduled arrival time.

Mrs. Beckoff is appalled at the state of disarray in the apartment and questions Arnold about Ed's presence. Arnold had mentioned to his mother about someone named David but has not told the woman that David is the boy he hopes to adopt. David returns home early from school for the occasion of meeting Mrs. Beckoff and the old woman's first thoughts are that Arnold has taken an underage lover. David finally reveals that his last name is Beckoff, too, and that Arnold is his adopted father.

Widows and Children First: Scene 1 Analysis

Mrs. Beckoff represents many parents in this time in America who are facing the realization that their children are homosexuals. The old woman has fought the fact for many years and continues to push the idea of marriage on Arnold but to no avail. Finally she must accept Arnold's homosexuality as only one facet of a person who is capable of tremendous love, as evidenced by the process of adopting the gay teenager, David.

Ed is still conflicted by his own sexuality and may be near a breakthrough with his refusal to return to the marriage with Laurel. Ironically, Ed is jealous of the relationship that Arnold had shared with Alan and wonders if he and Arnold would be adopting David had he not left Arnold for Laurel.

Widows and Children First: Scene 2

Widows and Children First: Scene 2 Summary

Ed returns to the apartment and Arnold flies into a rage for Ed's leaving him alone to face Mrs. Beckoff, who is hurt and outraged over the news that Arnold plans to adopt David. Apparently Mrs. Beckoff, who has spent the afternoon with David, was under the impression that David's stay with Arnold is a temporary one. The news that David will probably be staying permanently prompts Mrs. Beckoff to declare Arnold's lifestyle as inappropriate for raising a child.

During the course of the fight between Arnold and his mother, Arnold reveals that Alan had been killed in the street by some young men who hate homosexuals. Arnold's grief was never validated by his mother and even Arnold's friends grew weary of his mourning. Arnold attempts to get his mother to understand that his grief over losing Alan is comparable to his mother's grief over losing her husband. Mrs. Beckoff is outraged that Arnold would even attempt to compare the two situations.

Arnold tries to show his mother how he has learned to be a self-sufficient person in the world and how he loves her, but the old woman cannot see past the homosexual lifestyle of her son. Finally Arnold wearies of the struggle of trying to justify his life to Mrs. Beckoff and asks his mother to leave.

Widows and Children First: Scene 2 Analysis

In this scene, the author vividly portrays the prejudice and violence directed toward homosexuals. The details of Alan's death at the hands of some young men who clubbed him to death are revealed and Arnold even takes David to the spot on the sidewalk where a bloodstain can still be seen. The outrage that Arnold feels is fierce, but unable to be expressed because society does not condone the homosexual relationship and therefore the grief over the murder of one's partner. It is this very fear of something that they do not understand, which is the source of Alan's death and the subsequent squelching of any mourning. Even Mrs. Beckoff cannot understand the depth of Arnold's grief as his relationship with Alan cannot possibly compare with the relationship she shared with her own husband.

Widows and Children First: Scene 3

Widows and Children First: Scene 3 Summary

David and Ed have left the apartment so that Arnold and Mrs. Beckoff can have some privacy and are sitting on a bench in the park across from the apartment waiting for a sign from Arnold that it is safe for them to return. During the course of their conversation, David encourages Ed to discuss his relationship with Laurel but Ed declines. David takes this as a good sign and prompts Ed to rekindle the relationship with Arnold, who David respects tremendously.

According to David, Arnold is lonely and leads a solitary life since Alan's death and David feels that Ed would be good for Arnold and for himself as a member of the household. Arnold joins Ed and David as they eat hot dogs on the park bench and asks to speak to David alone. Ed departs temporarily and Arnold assures David that the fight between Arnold and Mrs. Beckoff has nothing to do with him and does not diminish Arnold's love for the boy. David is appreciative of Arnold's thoughtfulness and states his joy at the thought of being adopted as Arnold's son. David also takes the opportunity to encourage Arnold to begin living again and to find a partner, possibly Ed, with whom he can share his life.

Widows and Children First: Scene 3 Analysis

The climax of the play is over, with the fight between Arnold and Mrs. Beckoff leaving as the resolution phase where Arnold calms himself and feels pride for standing up for his life and his intent to adopt David. Arnold's core of goodness remains intact in spite of outside forces, even his own mother, which would make it easy to turn bitter and angry. Deep down Arnold wants a life that will be acceptable to society and perhaps his adoption of David will move him closer to that goal. Having David in his life is also a way to stave off the overwhelming loneliness he has experienced with the loss of Alan.

Widows and Children First: Scene 4

Widows and Children First: Scene 4 Summary

In this scene it is now early morning and Arnold and Ed are talking after Arnold has come home from a night of drinking. Ed broaches the subject of him and Arnold reuniting, but Arnold encourages Ed to return to Laurel where he has a ready-made socially acceptable life. Ed persists and just as he is about to tell Arnold of his love for him, David enters the room making preparations for another school day. David is able to glean the nature of the conversation between Ed and Arnold and tells Ed not to be too concerned about Arnold's initial denial, because Arnold always changes his mind. Soon after, Ed prepares to leave and Arnold indicates to Ed that the idea of their becoming a couple is a possibility. Ed is encouraged and leaves on a positive note.

Sounds from the bedroom are heard, which means that Mrs. Beckoff is stirring and making the final preparations to catch a morning flight back to Miami. Mrs. Beckoff finally emerges from the bedroom and it is clear that her anger from the previous night has cooled. She tells Arnold that she always knew about his homosexuality but had held out hope that he might one day find the right girl and settle down. Finally she has accepted Arnold as a person and not just as a person with a different sexual preference, and even offers some advice on grieving for a spouse.

This admission and support moves Arnold who is unable to respond due to a phone call from Murray to tell Arnold that David has just made a dedication on the radio from himself to Arnold. While Arnold is on the phone, Mrs. Beckoff leaves the apartment and Arnold is surprised to find her gone but is happy with David's love and the potential of a relationship with Ed again and feels hopeful once more.

Widows and Children First: Scene 4 Analysis

The author leaves the play on a hopeful note and the message that in spite of all the loneliness, betrayal, and prejudice, there can be some contentment in the lives of people who live a homosexual lifestyle. Arnold may be close to his ideal of a family unit, too, with the imminent adoption of David and the strong possibility that Ed will make the family unit complete. Ultimately, the author's message is that each person, no matter his or her sexual preference, has basic core wants and needs which revolve around loneliness, betrayal, and unrequited love, the most popular themes in any torch song sung by everyone at some point.

Characters

Alan

Alan is a handsome young man, eighteen-years old, who models and aspires to be an actor. He enters into a relationship with Arnold following Arnold's break-up with Ed. He is considerably younger than Arnold, and he is accustomed to being wanted for his looks. Alan is a hustler, who has always been able to make money selling sex.

Arnold Beckoff

Arnold is the central character of the play. He first appears in *The International Stud* segment. It is Arnold who begins the play with a monologue in which he reveals his loneliness and his desire for a lover who will commit to him totally. Arnold finds Ed and the two begin a loving and passionate relationship, but Ed is tormented by guilt over being gay. After Ed leaves Arnold for a heterosexual relationship, he finds Alan, a much younger lover. They commit to a "marriage," but Alan is murdered in a street killing five years later.

Arnold continues with a plan he and Alan had to adopt a child, and David is placed with Arnold as a foster child. Finally, in *Widows and Children First,* Arnold confronts his mother and the two open up for the first time, but not before a terrible argument that nearly splits the family. In the end, Arnold is finally able to accept his mother and the possibility that Ed may once again have a place in his life.

Mrs. Beckoff

Mrs. Beckoff is Arnold's widowed mother. She disapproves of her son's homosexuality and continues to hope that he will find a nice girl to marry. She arrives to visit and finds David, who she did not know was to be Arnold's adopted son. Mrs. Beckoff and Arnold finally confront their differences and find a sense of resolution. At the play's end, she indicates a willingness to accept both Arnold's homosexuality and his adoption of a gay teenager.

Lady Blues

Lady Blues sings the songs that separate the scenes in *The International Stud*. She has no real role, but her songs help establish mood and in some ways act as a Greek chorus, enhancing the action and dialogue that occur on stage. Her songs are not intended to comment upon the action, but are left open to the interpretation of the audience.

David

David is a fifteen-year-old foster child that Arnold considers his son and who he wants to adopt. David is gay and has been abused by his parents. He has been in other foster homes and has been placed with Arnold so that he can have the example of an adult with a positive attitude toward homosexuality. David is bright and wise beyond his years. It is also clear that he loves and respects Arnold very much.

Laurel

Laurel is the woman Ed meets while he is still seeing Arnold and who later becomes Ed's lover. She is in her mid-thirties and has been involved in many relationships□though none of them have worked to her satisfaction; every man that she has been involved with was either bisexual or married. She seems to see Ed as a last chance for happiness, although it is also clear that she loves him. It is her idea to bring Arnold and Alan to the farm for a weekend getaway. She does this in an effort to prove to herself that Ed will choose her over Arnold.

Ed Reiss

Ed first appears in *The International Stud* as Arnold's love interest, and although he loves Arnold, he wants to belong to straight society, thus his heterosexual relationship with Laurel. By the end of *Fugue in a Nursery,* Ed and Laurel are engaged. Ed reappears at the beginning of *Widows and Children First*. He has separated from Laurel and the audience later learns that he has come back to Arnold looking for a reconciliation.

Themes

Betrayal

Betrayal is a central theme in *Torch Song Trilogy,* since much of the play focuses on Ed's betrayal of Arnold's love. Ed loves Arnold but cannot accept his own homosexuality. In a very real sense, Ed betrays himself as well. He hurts the person he loves because he feels he must live as a heterosexual, fulfilling his parent's expectations. His betrayal of Laurel is also an issue, since he leaves her emotionally, long before he physically leaves their marriage.

Early in the play, Ed approaches Arnold, and although he wants to continue with Laurel, and in fact live with her, he also wants Arnold in his life. Ed wants the best of both worlds, Laurel and Arnold; he ends up betraying the two people who love him. Arnold is so wounded by Ed's treachery that he fears loving Alan, who certainly loves Arnold. It is only after a sexual betrayal that Arnold realizes that he and Alan need to have a more committed relationship. By the end of the play, Arnold is making his first tentative moves toward trusting Ed again.

Loneliness

The play opens with Arnold's monologue on loneliness. He wants a committed relationship with another person who will love him as much as he loves that person. Arnold is so lonely after Ed abandons him that he seeks out anonymous sex in the back room of a bar. Laurel has also been lonely; she meets Ed on a blind date and bonds with him. Having been abandoned by several previous lovers, Laurel views Ed as a means to end her loneliness. She agrees to a relationship in which Ed can still see other people□namely other men.

Loneliness is an important theme in *Torch Song Trilogy* because it illustrates how forlorn an existence can be when behavior does not fit certain defined social parameters. Because Arnold is gay, he feels isolated after Alan's death, since, as he points out, people do not think that queers can have feelings or grieve for a lover.

Love and Passion

That homosexuals can share love, passion, and a depth of feeling is an important theme in this play, since all too often the nature of homosexual love is misunderstood. Fierstein makes it clear to the audience that love offers the same joy and happiness and pain to gays as it does to heterosexual partners. Arnold's fight with Ed when he learns of Ed's betrayal sounds much like the argument that any other couple would have. Laurel's fears that Ed will love Arnold more echo the fears that any person might have when confronted with their partner's previous lover. And the nature of the love-hate relationship between mother and son is based on the same kinds of misunderstandings

that any child and parent might experience. This play reveals to audience that love is the same whether it is between two men or between a man and a woman.

Prejudice and Tolerance

The violent death of Alan illustrates the danger of prejudice. He is beaten to death by a crowd of baseball bat-wielding bigots who fear what they cannot understand. The prejudice against gays is further illustrated by Arnold's mother who thinks that he cannot adopt a son because of his sexual orientation. She thinks that Arnold will teach David to be gay, and when she is told that David is gay, she responds with surprise that Arnold's conversion of the boy only took six months. Prejudice against gays is also the reason that Ed wants to have a girlfriend and later a wife. He thinks that a woman will provide him with a level of social acceptance and protection against prejudice. His sexuality is hidden in the closet because of his fear of prejudice.

Sex Roles

There is a lot of humor in the sex roles assumed in this play, especially in the last few scenes with David. David has several opportunities to joke about Arnold as his new mother, and he also jokes that with Arnold and Ed together, he would have a mother and father. Many of Arnold's dreams center on his desire to have a marriage as stable and happy as his parents. He wants a family and a home and that same kind of stability, but he states that his dream has only a few minor alterations. Arnold's dream substitutes male for female. He and a partner, whom he will love as much as his mother loved his father, will build the same kind of stable relationship that heterosexual partners enjoy.

Violence and Cruelty

Fierstein illustrates how dangerous the world can be for homosexuals when he tells the story about the death of his lover, Alan. Alan dies offstage, between the second and third act, but his death casts a shadow over the last third of the play, since Arnold has now been left alone. That Alan was murdered on the street, in a violent attack provoked by the mere fact that he was a homosexual, illustrates the dangers for anyone who does not fit prejudiced people's idea of normal. Although the audience never sees the violence onstage, the effect becomes part of the story, and the telling of the details provides a horrifying moment in the last act of the play. Arnold uses the site of the attack as a daily reminder of this violence when he rents an apartment overlooking the place where Alan was killed.

Style

Character

A character is a person in a dramatic work. The actions of each character are what constitute the story. Character can also include the idea of a particular individual's morality. Characters can range from simple stereotypical figures to more complex multi-faceted ones. Characters may also be defined by personality traits. "Characterization" is the process of creating a life-like person from an author's imagination. To accomplish this the author provides the character with personality traits that help define who he will be and how he will behave in a given situation. For instance, in the beginning of the play, Arnold tells the audience how important it is for him to find a partner who will love him freely and commit to a relationship. When he meets Ed and is later hurt by him, the audience is already aware of the depth of Arnold's pain, since it has already been stated how important love is to him.

Coda

A coda is a conclusion. It usually restates, summarizes, or integrates the themes of the literary work. In the case of *Torch Song Trilogy,* Fierstein uses a coda in the*Fugue in a Nursery* segment as a division in the act.

Drama

A drama is often defined as any work designed to be presented on the stage. It consists of a story, of actors portraying characters, and of action. Historically, drama can also consist of tragedy, comedy, religious pageant, and spectacle. In modern usage, the word drama is used as an adjective to describe a certain kind of play, typically one that explores serious topics and themes but does not achieve the same level as tragedy.

Fugue

A fugue is most often defined as a musical composition in which different parts successively repeat the theme. This is the case in Act II, when each set of partners repeat both the action and the dialogue in a type of round□almost like the repetition of a chorus in a song.

Plot

Plot refers to the pattern of events that occur within a play. Generally plots have a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion, but they may also be a series of episodes with a loose thematic connection, such as the epic plays of Bertolt Brecht *(Mother Courage*

and Her Children) . Basically, the plot provides the author with the means to explore primary themes. Students are often confused between the two terms; but themes explore ideas, and plots simply relate what happens in a very obvious manner. Thus the plot of *Torch Song Trilogy* is the story of how Arnold finally finds love. But the themes are those of loneliness, commitment, and love, what Arnold must experience and learn before arriving at the play's happy ending.

Scene

Scenes are subdivisions of an act. A scene may change when all of the main characters either enter or exit the stage. But a change of scene may also indicate a change in time or place. In *Torch Song Trilogy,* the third scene of Act I occurs several months later, and thus, indicates the passage of time in the play.

Setting

The time, place, and culture in which the action of the play takes place is called the setting. The elements of setting may include geographic location, physical or mental environments, prevailing cultural attitudes, or the historical period in which the action takes place. The locations for Fierstein's play are varied, but they include his apartment, a bar, and a country home. The action occurs over a period of several years.

Stretto

A stretto is a musical term for when the subject and the answer overlap. Fierstein uses a stretto in *Fugue in a Nursery* as a division in the act.

Historical Context

In 1981, when *Torch Song Trilogy* opened, the first cases of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) were becoming important medical news. When AIDS was discovered, it was soon recognized as deadly and, at the time, untreatable. It was unknown exactly how the disease was spread. Public fear was probably similar to the panic that spread across Europe in the fourteenth century when the Black Plague claimed every third person as a victim.

Since the public had no real understanding about how the disease was transmitted, they focused on the early victims, who were largely homosexual men. Homosexuals were unfairly blamed for both the cause and spread of the virus and thus became the victims of even greater prejudice. Information that was disseminated by the press included data on the disease's growth pattern□including the assertion that gay bath-houses, where anonymous sex could be enjoyed, was responsible for much of the spread of the disease. In response, many people began to think that gays where preoccupied with promiscuity, anonymous sex with many different partners. The rumor spread that committed monogamous relationships were a rarity among gays.

One of the social points that Fierstein makes in *Torch Song Trilogy* is that gay men really desire the same committed relationships that heterosexuals enjoy. Through Arnold's speeches, the audience understands that love is the same regardless of the participants' genders. When Arnold tries to equate love with anonymous sex and fails, the play further reinforces the idea that love and sexuality are partnered with commitment.

Fear of AIDS also meant that homosexuals were even less likely to become accepted by mainstream America. In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan squashed attempts by the government to fund additional research into the causes and cures of AIDS. He viewed the disease as solely a gay epidemic and saw no point in channeling large sums of money into research. It would be years before the government would start to fund research and only after it became clear that heterosexuals were also acquiring the disease.

The debate on the transmission of AIDS and funding of research□widely covered, sometimes to sensational effects, by the world media□fed into the public's paranoia that AIDS was a death sentence too easily caught. People became so afraid that violence against homosexuals increased. Another unfortunate side-effect of AIDS's proliferation was that the nation's blood supply had became contaminated by unwitting donors infected with the virus. As a result, the disease was spread to a number of new victims; where previous cases could be traced to either intravenous drug use or unprotected sex, these new victims became infected through routine blood transfusions. Especially at risk were hemophiliacs, people whose blood can not properly clot and who required frequent infusions. A young hemophiliac, Ryan White, became infected with AIDS by such a transfusion. His experience with prejudice regarding the disease□he was kicked

out of his school solely because of his illness□made him a poster child for the movement to educate the public and humanize the disease.

White was not the only child to experience prejudice. When other children became victims of AIDS, they also became victims of the public fear. These infected children were banned from schools and from neighborhood businesses, and they were forbidden to enter other children's homes. Rational people became irrational and were afraid to touch anything that an infected individual have touched. Parents did not want their children to breath the same air as a child with AIDS, and they petitioned schools, sometimes violently, to have an infected child removed from school. Early in the epidemic, scientists made it clear that the only way to transmit the virus was through contact with infected blood, touching or breathing the air of an AIDS victim posed no threat. Despite this fact, irrationality and fear won out over common sense; people remained prejudiced and fearful of AIDS sufferers well into the 1990s.

The largest benefit of the public's acceptance of *Torch Song Trilogy* was that Fierstein was able to demonstrate to a large number of people the stupidity and hurt that comes from prejudice□and violence□against gays.

Critical Overview

Reviews for *Torch Song Trilogy* were generally positive with most of the negative commentary focusing on the play's considerable length (four hours). In his review for the *New York Times,* Mel Gussow called Fierstein's play an "illuminating portrait of a man who laughs, and makes us laugh, to keep from collapsing." Fierstein's portrayal of Arnold (while other actors have assumed the role, the playwright is the actor most closely associated with Arnold) is often cited by reviewers as the centerpiece of the play. Gussow echoed this sentiment, equating Arnold and Fierstein as a single person. Gussow noted that he found himself "enjoying Arnold's wit□he has the pithy humor of a Fran Lebowitz□at the same time I was moved by his dilemma. He is a man of principle who compulsively plays the fool."

Gussow also observed that "the author is so accomplished at playing Arnold that he cannot resist an extra flourish or an easy wisecrack." Of the play, Gussow noted that the "sociological implications are complex and the author treats them with equanimity, demonstrating that the flamboyant Arnold is truly a reflection of his assertive mother, which is why they are destined to spend their lives at loggerheads." Arnold is, stated Gussow, in his own torch song, and "the role is inseparable from the actor-author. Gussow concluded that "Mr. Fierstein's self-incarnation is an act of compelling virtuosity."

In her review of *Torch Song Trilogy,* the *New York Post's* Marilyn Stasio began by asking, "Who could resist Arnold Beckoff? He's more comforting than your mother, more understanding than your shrink, and funnier than your puppy." Stasio declared that Arnold's "lovable drag queen is a triumphant affirmation of the romantic soul in a cynical age." This assessment was seconded by Don Nelson of the *Daily News,* who noted that Fierstein's hoarse, gravelly voice is "the ideal vehicle for the character of Arnold." One of the strengths of the play, according to Nelson, is that the action "arises from contradictions that we also face as humans rather than as labels like homo or hetero."

The play's wide appeal is something that Jack Kroll mentioned in his review in *Newsweek*. Kroll argued that *Torch Song Trilogy* is a play for the whole family. He stated that Fierstein's play is "the most truly conservative play to come along in years ... [with its commitment] to the classic values of fidelity, family, loving, parenting et al." Kroll added that the play is "very funny, poignant and unabashedly entertaining." Of special note, said Kroll, is "Fierstein's ability to combine almost nonstop humor with a complex texture of emotional levels." Kroll also commended the other members of the cast, stating that they do "absolute justice to this play, which is both far out and central to the civilized values of loving and caring."

Torch Song Trilogy's praises were also sung in Clive Barnes's review, which appeared in the *New York Post*. Barnes stated that "Fierstein has written a devastatingly comic play with just the right resonances. It is a play about love and the merciless mayhem love wrecks." Noting that the play is just longer than four hours, Barnes nevertheless

observed that "it is a marathon very much worth running. It is□through Fierstein's fluent invention and buoyant humor□strangely untiring."

Not all reviews were so positive, however. Gerald Clarke's mixed review in *Time* began by stating that the play "is too long ... it is often inconsistent; and for embarrassingly long periods it becomes as mawkish as an afternoon soap opera." But Clark also found that Fierstein "has created characters so vivid and real that they linger in the mind, talking the night away, long after the lights have been turned out." Referring to Fierstein's Arnold, as "arresting," Clarke declared that he "seduces the audience." One major problem, said Clarke, is that there is "enough material in act three to construct another separate three-act play, and consequently, there are too many rough edges." Despite his reservations, Clarke conceded, "with all its flaws ... *Torch Song Trilogy* is a remarkable achievement."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Metzger is a Ph.D. specializing in literature and drama at the University of New Mexico. In this essay, she discusses the universal appeal of Harvey Fierstein's Torch Song Trilogy *and the nature of audience involvement in the play's success.*

When *Torch Song Trilogy* opened Off-Off-Broadway in the late fall of 1981, Harvey Fierstein's comedy became the first commercially successful play to openly feature homosexuality as both star and theme. Fierstein's play is a semi-autobiographical story. Thus homosexuality is central to the play, since it is an essential part of the playwright's life; Fierstein takes special care in the opening lines to make clear his identity as a homosexual. But he does not announce he is gay; instead, Arnold/Fierstein offers a monologue that offers his position on any number of important issues: beauty, youth, love, dating, commitment. And while he never says, "I am gay," the words are there, unspoken and just as visible as if he had held a sign up for the audience.

Indeed, Fierstein's stage mother's complaint in the final act is that Arnold's homosexuality is a part of every conversation. She tells him, "You're obsessed by it. You're not happy unless everyone is talking about it." This is true of Fierstein's play, as well. The audience leaves the theatre equally obsessed with the topic and continues to talk about it. In his commentary on the play in *Maske und Kothurn: Internationale Beitrage zur Theatrewissenschaft,* Willliam Green attempted to determine the elements in Fierstein's play that made it "Broadway's first successful play on the subject [homosexuality]" Green offered the theory that it is Fierstein's positioning of homosexuality as normal and accepted that accounts for the play's popularity.

Instead of approaching his play as a means to make an abnormal behavior acceptable, Fierstein "has not taken the negative view... but has built on the positive view of his own life," according to Green. Love, breakups, pain, loss, and death are all part of loving someone. Fierstein makes it clear that these events are the same for homosexuals as they are for heterosexuals. He uses comedy because it is an almost subversive form of theatre that can entice and seduce an audience before they are aware of it. Through the playwright's wit and his character's entertaining humor, the audience comes to appreciate and love Arnold and the characters in his life as human beings not stereotypes.

The viewer cannot help it; Fierstein insists upon it. Arnold's forthright manner and humor force the audience to realize that Arnold is no different from a heterosexual person; the basic truth that homosexuality is not abnormal is powerfully transmitted to the audience. His grief at Alan's death rings true for any person who has ever lost a loved one. He wins the audience's sympathy when he tries to explain to his mother that his "widowing" is much the same for him as her experience in losing her husband. Green declared that "Fierstein uses it [homosexuality] to make a larger statement about the joys and the pain and the struggle which are the lot in life for most human beings straight or gay." This is why audiences, whether homosexual or heterosexual, enjoyed *Torch Song Trilogy,* and it is why audiences found a way to identify with the central protagonist a

necessary act for any work to succeed. Quite simply, Arnold's loves and disappointments are the same as everyone else.

This is the same point that Madeleine Cahill made in *The Conception, Realization, and Reception of a Controversial Film,* a thesis on the film adaptation of Fierstein's play. Although she is discussing the film, the same points are applicable to the theatrical staging of *Torch Song Trilogy*. The audience, according to Cahill, cannot sit through a performance uninvolved. We cannot simply sit and watch; Fierstein will not allow that; he beckons us into his room, onto the stage, into his life. Cahill argued that "we are being addressed directly, engaged in Arnold's life, forced to identify with him because of his frank expressions of human pain and longing." Although, Cahill was discussing only the opening scene in Fierstein's play where Arnold turns to the audience and tells us of his desires and dreams, this expression of sharing with the audience is present throughout the play. In performance, Fierstein often addressed the audience as if he were simply living his life up on the stage. But even beyond that, he is using a "blend of pathos and comedy," as Cahill noted, to keep the audience involved in his life. Before much of the play is completed, we are already involved. We already care about this character.

Fierstein uses our feelings toward Arnold to involve us as sympathetic participants in the gay issues that he is promoting. If the audience cares about Arnold, then we must also care about prejudice and anti-gay violence, and we also care about the conflicts between heterosexuals and homosexuals. In a review of *Torch Song Trilogy* for *Theatre,* Kim Powers drew an analogy between the mother-son conflict and the lines that separate gays from straights. Powers pointed out that when, in the last act, Arnold and Mrs. Beckoff argue, "much of the anger from both combatants can be excused by the heat of battle, but a new and different truthfulness has been uncovered. The eternal bond (Mother/Son) has become less important than the sexual, societal conflict (homosexual/heterosexual)."

Instead of being simply a mother-son fight, their argument becomes an debate between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Initially, Mrs. Beckoff cannot find a way to compare her thirty-five year heterosexual marriage to Arnold and Alan's five year homosexual union. She cannot conceive of the loss being the same. She represents those people who would say, "everybody knows that queers don't matter! Queers don't love." The irony of these words, is that the audience knows just the opposite, the preceding portions of the play have proven it. When Mrs. Beckoff can finally admit to her son's pain and loss, the bridge between homosexuality and heterosexuality has been crossed□at least for a few moments. Fierstein forces the audience into accepting his homosexuality just as he forces his mother into some level of acceptance.

Powers stated that "The extremity of Fierstein's personality forces some sort of judgment [from the audience]. He is abrasive, shocking, flamboyant; the audience must resolve, or at least come to understand, any discomfort it may be feeling with an effeminate man. It must see beyond the bitchy gestures to the basic issues." Fierstein succeeds in opening the gay community to the heterosexual world. He puts the pain, the alienation and isolation, the loss, and the issues on stage, and he dares the

audience to care. In the end, we do care. Arnold's love and fear and pain are very much the same for him as they are for anyone who has ever taken a chance on love. His portrayal of homosexuality as an emotional equal to heterosexuality helps to remove much of the fear that the uninformed may have about homosexual love.

In many ways, *Torch Song Trilogy* serves as a lonely sentinel to the past. The same year Feirstein' s play was staged in New York, a new disease was being unmasked, starting in the gay communities of New York and San Francisco. Suddenly, doctors began noticing an unusually high number of men succumbing to diseases of the auto-immune system. The disease was named Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). It would forever change the homosexual community and it would change the way theatre and film approached gay issues. In a discussion of Fierstein's subsequent play *Safe Sex,* Gregory Gross said in the *Journal of American Culture* that plays about gays have changed because of AIDS; there is a division in the theatre. Gross stated that "Gay writers know that both drama-time and real-time break down into pre-AIDS and post-AIDS."

Where *Torch Song Trilogy* deals with acceptance between heterosexuals and homosexuals, the plays that followed it deal with survival. How do gays confront a disease so insidious, so deadly? Gross stated that these new plays are "history plays that are performed in the midst of their own history." But that is true for *Torch Song Trilogy,* as well. The history of conflict between homosexuals and heterosexuals is more involved that a violent murder on a New York City street or in the argument between mother and son, but Fierstein uses these examples because the nature of their intimacy can involve the audience.

Gays have been the targets of violence in the past. They were victims of German leader Adolf Hitler and the Nazi death camps during the Holocaust of World War II. The Holocaust included the deaths of homosexuals, just as it included many other disenfranchised groups. But even before the Nazis made them a target, homosexuals were targeted by laws intended to punish or marginalize their behavior. British playwright and writer, Oscar Wilde *(The Importance of Being Earnest),* was imprisoned for "homosexual offenses" in 1895, thus proving that talent and notoriety offer no protection from persecution. But an audience for a play needs an emotional center with which to identify. They can sometimes be convinced of an issue's importance through emotional identification with the protagonist.

The history of Wilde's trial and imprisonment will no doubt appeal to a small, select audience, but Arnold's comedic travails will capture our hearts, as well as our intellects. Audiences need to belong to Fierstein if he is to make progress in his desires to promote gay issues, especially progress in the fight against AIDS. Gross argued that each new play about gays "laments the loss of a better time before the AIDS abyss." But, in truth, even pre-AIDS plays lament the lack of equality and acceptance that has been so long denied to homosexuals.

Source: Sheri E. Metzger, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In this review of the 1989 film adaptation of Torch Song Trilogy, *which Fierstein adapted fromhis play text, Johnson praises the playwright for shedding light on "social terrain rarely explored in American movies."*

It is a film about an eccentric Jewish drag queen struggling for some semblance of a normal life in New York City. It is also a funny, poignant and surprisingly wholesome tale of romantic love and old-fashioned family values. It could almost be a Hollywood movie□but it is not. Although *Torch Song Trilogy* as a stage drama captivated audienceson Broadway for two years□winning Tony awards for best play and best actor in 1983□Hollywood producers were nervous about bringing it to the screen. They proposed a sanitized version of the play with the sex cut out. They suggested Dustin Hoffman or Richard Dreyfuss for the lead role. And at least one studio executive said that *Torch Song Trilogy's* 1970s-era "gay esthetic had been rendered obsolete by AIDS.

But Harvey Fierstein, the author and star of the play, persisted. He was encouraged by both Hoffman and Dreyfuss: after seeing the play, the two actors individually told Fierstein that he himself was the best man for the part onscreen. Then, with the help of New Line Cinema, an independent U.S. producer, Fierstein wrote and starred in a movie made on his own terms. With a story that spans the years 1971 to 1980□before AIDS had begun to spread through the homosexual community□the film makes no mention of the virus. And Fierstein expresses outrage at suggestions by some critics that the omission of AIDS makes his story outdated. In Toronto last week to attend a benefit première of the movie for local AIDS groups, he told *Maclean's,* "Very well-meaning people have gone out of their way to mention AIDS in every review of the movie when it's not even an issue." Added Fierstein: "It's heinous to suggest that gay people have no issue other than AIDS."

One issue that the movie does deal with□aside from the right to be unapologetically gay□is the importance of being honest in matters of intimacy. Arnold (Fierstein), who performs in nightclubs as a female impersonator, is glibly pessimistic about his emotional future. He wants a loving relationship, and *Torch Song* encompasses his frustrating attempts to find one. The first is with Ed (Brian Kerwin), a confused bisexual who sleeps with men as a diversion from his romance with Laurel (Karen Young). The second is with Alan (Matthew Broderick), a pretty-boy prostitute who settles down with Arnold. Meanwhile, Arnold's most tempestuous relationship is with his caustic mother (Anne Bancroft).

Petulant, narcissistic and immature, Arnold is not an especially sympathetic character. And his liaisons with both Ed and Alan are unconvincing. As Alan, Broderick gives the movie its few faint sparks of erotic energy. In the original stage version, Broderick played David, the 15-year-old orphan adopted by Arnold, and that Broadway debut in 1982 led to starring roles in such movies as *Ferris Bueller's Day* Off (1986). Broderick fills the screen with charm, but his character seems contrived, a fantasy figure all too eager to comply with Arnold's romantic game plan. In no uncertain terms, Arnold sets

the agenda: "There are a couple of things we better get straight," he says. "A) I want children; B) If anyone asks, *I'm* the pretty one."

Fierstein's trenchant wit continually redeems the movie. But Arnold has a capacity for self-dramatization and self-mockery that tends to overwhelm everyone around him. Too often, the other characters seem like accessories in a would-be one-man show. The crucial exception is Arnold's mother. Although she represents all the prejudices that her son detests, she is also the only person with enough vitriol to penetrate his self-centred universe. In a cathartic series of verbal brawls between her and Arnold, *Torch Song* finally purges cynicism and burns with a clear, hot flame. Rising to the occasion, Bancroft breaks the tight Jewish-mother caricature that confines her in earlier scenes and delivers a heartrending performance. She fights guilt with guilt. "You cheated me outta your life," she tells Arnold, "then blamed me for not being there."

The script has the keenly whittled quality of stage drama. But the movie's naturalistic look and chronological structure depart radically from the play, which relied on flashbacks. In the opening shot, the camera sweeps from the skyline of Manhattan, down to the equally grey gravestones of a sprawling cemetery, and finally settles on the house in Brooklyn where Arnold grew up. Although such cinematic flourishes are rare, director Paul Bogart has at least succeeded in re-creating *Torch Song* as a movie in its own right rather than simply committing a play to film.

Since writing *Torch Song* in 1976, Fierstein has talked about it so much that, in an interview, an understandable fatigue darkens his voice, already a dry baritone. There are obvious parallels between Fierstein and his sardonic character in *Torch Song*. Explaining that his story is only semiautobiographical, Fierstein said, "I'm not as naïve as Arnold, not as moonstruck□Arnold is really a very specific personality, not a gay Everyman." *Torch Song* indeed has a deeply personal quality. Still, as Fierstein carries the torch from the stage to the screen, he illuminates social terrain rarely explored in American movies.

Source: Brian D. Johnson, "Drag Queen Romance" in *Maclean's,* Vol. 102, no. 8, February 20, 1989.

Critical Essay #3

Simon is one of the best-known and respected drama critics of the late-twentieth century. In this review he lauds Fierstein's play for successfully blending important social issues with comedy and moving human drama.

Kenneth Tynan created a stir some years ago by asserting that the two principal types of humor in the American theater were the Jewish and the homosexual. If this is so, and it well may be, the good news is that the two strains have been successfully crossbred in Harvey Fierstein' s *Torch Song Trilogy,* which is a very amusing as well as moving affair for whose enjoyment, be it said right off, neither Jew-ishness nor homosexuality is a prerequisite.

This trilogy of shortish plays that lasts, all told (and is all ever told!), a little over four hours is about half the length of *Nicholas Nickleby,* but has at least twice as much to tell us about the way we live now. And when I say *we,* I mean people, any people, except perhaps those living in an offshore lighthouse or in the very buckle of the Bible Belt. Fierstein wrote, and performed the lead in, these three plays one at a time, but it is much better to see them as they are now: the long acts of one extended but not excessive work that gathers meaning as it progresses until, at last, all parts of it resonate in the mind in a bittersweet harmony made of dissonances, pain, resignation, and a little daredevil hope.

Arnold Beckoff, the protagonist, has all the earmarks of a stylized projection of the actor-author himself; yet even though one feels this potentially stifling closeness, one is not, or not for long, an embarrassed voyeur. Buttonholing immediacy is transmuted□by wit, irony, fair play to one and all□first into a bearable distance, then into a sense of wonder. For Beckoff-Fierstein emerges at the far end of identification in a state of liberated semi-detachment that is not quite so good as serenity but that will□will have to□do.

In the first play, Arnold, a drag queen, is either backstage at the nightclub where he performs (a performance we do not see□an unfortunate evasion), or at a gay bar called the International Stud, which gives the play its name, or in his apartment, when not in that of his new lover, Ed, a bisexual who is also involved with a young woman called Laurel. The themes here are Arnold's drifting into the orgiastic back rooms of gay hotspots versus his yearning for a solid relationship, Ed's shuttling between two kinds of sexuality and styles of life,and the difficulties with commitment to anything, even noncommitment. In dialogues, monologues, phone conversations with a homosexual friend, Arnold reveals himself and his world with a sweet campiness, an outrageousness whose bark is worse than its bite, an arrested development that does not preclude perceptions of devastating lucidity. "I always thought of myself as a kind person," says Arnold; "not small, but generous in a bitchy sort of way." Or: "To me a lap in bed is worth three in a [gay] bar, because deep down I know they don't marry sluts." Or: "That's really hitting below the belt: appealing to my Susan Hay ward fantasies!"

Now, these lines may not be funny out of context, and they lose a lot on paper, without Fierstein's engagingly abrasive presence: the face of a weather vane whirling between corruption and innocence; the movements of an overgrown, precociously epicene baby; and the mind of a tirelessly impudent, lubricious wit that can instantly switch to self-mockery and comic *Weltschmerz* enunciated with a provocatively rasping voice that seems to be picking away at existential scabs on the self, on others, on the world. An upside-down world that one meets with tragicomic defiance: ' T could make love to an 80-year-old woman. I could probably make love to an 80-year-old camel. I could make love to an 80-year-old anything as long as it kept its mouth shut."

In the second play, *Fugues in a Nursery,* it is a year later in the upstate farmhouse shared by Ed and Laurel, now living together and playing weekend hosts to Arnold and his new lover, Alan, a very young male model. Fierstein situates the entire action in an enormous symbolic bed in which the two couples talk, argue, copulate. and crisscross both emotionally and sexually. The writing is in the form of a fugue, which is clever, but also means something: The overlapping, intermingling dialogue, in which we are often not sure about who is talking to whom, conveys thought-provoking parallels between homo- and heterosexual relationships□though the captious might argue that Ed's bisexuality muddies the analogies. In any case, *Fugues* is an extremely droll and ingenious scrutiny of sexual politics whose humor, honorably, never hides the underlying cruelty or, still deeper down, the underlying pathos. With gallant gallows humor, Arnold wonders about this foursome: "If two wrongs don't make a right, maybe four *do?* "

It is the last play, *Widows and Children First!,* that rises to true heights and ties all the foregoing together. Ed is unhappily married to Laurel, has had a fight with her and is temporarily bunking *chez* Arnold, after whom he still hankers; Alan, who had been living with Arnold, has met a horrible, homosexual death; Arnold is trying to adopt legally a problem teenager, David, a tough, street-wise, homosexual kid, chock-full of precocious knowledge and sarcasm, but not without a touching residue of childishness. Into this *ménage,* on a visit from Florida, comes Mrs. Beckoff, Arnold's widowed mother. She knows about her son's homosexuality, but cannot really accept it, and keeps needling him. Mother and son try to love each other, but cannot quite make it; their defense, which is also an offense, is wit: her Jewish wit against his homosexual one. While they fumble for each other's affection out of one side of their mouths, they cleverly lacerate each other out of the other side. The combat, fought with bare tongues and occasional desperate gestures, is verbal Grand Guignol of matchless humor and horror.

It turns out that the two widowed creatures, mother and son, are, except for their different sexualities, deeply alike down to their very jokes. The Jewish ones, to be sure, suggest a sad, lonely stand-up comedian resorting to an almost metaphysical sardonicism; the homosexual ones suggest a sarcastic masquerader, flamboyantly theatricalizing everything. But they climax in a very similar, murderous and suicidal, bitchiness: envenomed chicken soup against poisoned paillettes. When mother accuses son of not knowing how to bring up David, Arnold answers: "What's there to know? Whenever there is a problem, I simply imagine how you would solve it.... And then I do the opposite!" But in fact□and here lies the play's subtlety□Arnold does the same, or

nearly. And sometimes he realizes it. Reminiscing about Alan, he says: "It's easier to love someone who's dead. They make so few mistakes. *Mother*: You have an unusual way of looking at things. *Arnold*: It runs in the family."

All values are inverted and subverted. *"Arnold*: What would you say if I went out and came home with a girl and told you I was straight? *Mother* (patronizingly): If you were happy, I'd be happy." There are ironies within ironies in this, a whole topsy-turvy world. And alongside the mother conflict are, cunningly and touchingly orchestrated, the David problem, the Ed problem, and even the Laurel problem. The author's ultimate achievement is the perfect blend of hard justice and warm empathy with which he embraces all characters, his own alter ego included. The performances by Joel Crothers, Diane Tarleton, Paul Joynt are very fine; more remarkable yet are Fierstein's Arnold, Matthew Broderick' s wryly abstracted David aroused to sudden spurts of insistence, and Estelle Getty's quintessential Jewish mother.

There are flaws. Arnold's source of income grows unclear: Could a drag-queen single parent adopt even as unwanted a kid as David? Alan was presented as a fling in the second play; the third makes him out to have been a beloved spouse. No matter: Peter Pope's staging and the production values are good; the play is better. What are you waiting for

Source: John Simon, "The Gay Desperado" in *New York,* Vol. 14, no. 49, December 14, 1981.

Adaptations

Torch Song Trilogy was made into a film in 1988. The screenplay was written by Fierstein and directed by Paul Bogart. The film stars many of the same actors from the stage production. Fierstein reprises his role as Arnold and Matthew Broderick, who originally played David on stage, plays Alan. Anne Bancroft plays Mrs. Beckoff and Brian Kerwin plays Ed. What is notable about the adaptation is that many characters who are only discussed in the play actually appear in the film.

Topics for Further Study

Discuss the impact of AIDS on the gay population in the United States.

Consider Arnold's pending adoption of David. Research the options for gay partners who wish to have children.

Using both the relationship between Ed and Laurel and the relationship between Arnold and his mother, describe Fierstein's depiction of the tensions between homosexuals and heterosexuals.

Although it is a comedy, there are many tragic elements present in *Torch Song Trilogy*. Explore this blending of humor and tragedy and discuss its effectiveness in relating Fierstein's themes.

Investigate the legal problems that gay marriages face. What kind of limitations do the law, society, and custom present to gay couples?

Compare and Contrast

1981: The prime interest rate is at 21.5% and President Reagan ask for $13 billion in government spending cuts. The biggest victims of these cuts are social welfare programs.

Today: The prime interest rate is 7.5% and the federal budget is as close to being balanced as it has been at any time in the last thirty years. Despite the relative prosperity, social programs are still in danger of being terminated. Many conservative politicians want to do away entirely with the funding of arts programs and many forms of social welfare.

1981: AIDS cases are beginning to be reported. Doctors in New York and in San Francisco are seeing an increasing number of new cases of this especially deadly disease which attacks the immune system, rendering the victim unable to fight off even simple infections. Within the next few years, nearly 60% of all cases will end in death.

Today: People with AIDS are living much longer, thanks to the discovery of new medications and a greater understanding of the body's immune system. Funding for research has made a critical difference in treating a disease that while still incurable is now treatable.

1981: The world's population reaches 4.5 billion people. Female infanticide is on the increase in the People's Republic of China, where parents are limited in the number of children they can have and boys are more desirable than girls.

Today: Female infanticide is still a problem in China, where male children are still greatly prized, but a greater effort is now being made to place infant Chinese girls for adoption in Western countries. The biggest benefit from this is that single, and often gay, parents can now adopt a child more easily.

What Do I Read Next?

Plato's *Phaedrus,* written c. 388 B.C., is a dialogue about love and passion. Although designed as an exploration of the subject of rhetoric, the examples used by Plato and Socrates are based on love. Plato's *Symposium,* written c. 370 B.C., explores the nature of beauty and examines the male response to male beauty.

Fierstein's *Safe Sex* is a trilogy of plays that was first performed in 1987. These combined one-act plays deal with the problems that homosexuals face when AIDS becomes a factor in dating and intimacy.

M. Butterfly (1988), by David Hwang is a play about a French diplomat who falls in love with an opera singer. The singer is a man disguised as a woman. Throughout the many years of their affair, the diplomat claimed not to recognize that his lover was male or that the singer was really a Chinese spy.

Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray,* published in 1891, is an early gothic romance about homosexual love that scandalized the British public when it was published.

Further Study

Brozan, Nadine. "When a Son or Daughter is a Homosexual" in the *New York Times*, March 12, 1984, p. B11. In this article, Brozan discusses the reactions of parents who have discovered that their child is gay.

Dynes, Wayne and Stephen Donaldson, editors*. Homosexuality and Homosexuals in the Arts,* Garland, 1992.

This book is the fourth volume in a series, "Studies in Homosexuality." This volume contains a selection of essays that examines the role of homosexuality in film, stage, and fiction.

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Pastore, Judith L., editor. *Confronting AIDS through Literature: The Responsibilities of Representation,* University of Illinois Press, 1993.

This is a collection of essays that examine the historyof AIDS in literature.

Summers, Claude. *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall: Studies in a Male Homosexual Literary Tradition,* Continuum, 1990. This anthology of twentieth-century fiction includes works by Oscar Wilde, Willa Cather, Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams,

James Baldwin, and several others.

Wilde, Oscar. *Novels and Fairy Tales*, Cosmopolitan, 1915. This book is a collection of Wilde's fiction, including *The Picture of Dorian Gray, The Canterville Ghost,* and *The Sphinx without a Secret*. All these works are considered seminal gay fiction.

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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

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

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