WASP Study Guide

WASP by Steve Martin

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Steve Martin's one act play, *WASP*, was first published in New York City in 1996. In this play, Martin presents his view of the traditional culture of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (hereafter referred to as W.A.S.P.s). The play's family is not an individual family, rather it is a family whose characteristics refer to typical W.A.S.P. values. The play's setting, a "fifties house," possibly indicates Martin's sense that the 1950s was the last decade in which this culture flourished in the United States in its traditional form.

As an exploration of traditional White Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture, *WASP* joins a great deal of art and scholarship on the subject. W.A.S.P. culture, in its U.S. (as opposed to British) variant, is interesting to scholars and artists for many reasons. The major reason is that W.A.S.P. values have significantly shaped U.S. culture. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants were the dominant ethnicity when the nation was in its infancy, and this culture remained influential for a very long time afterwards.

This play touches on Martin's familiar themes. For example, he shows that the father is the dominant parent in the household. The mother's lesser status points to the gender inequality of traditional W.A.S.P. culture, of which Martin's play is critical. *WASP* also makes much of its characters' secret yearnings for passion and intimacy. With this, Martin points to another common criticism of traditional W.A.S.P. culture, namely its valuing of emotional reticence; critics say this is an unhealthy repression.

Martin's first play, *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, fared much better than *WASP* did with audiences and critics. Nonetheless, as critics say, *WASP* has its strong points. It remains in print along with other plays by Martin in an edition published by Samuel French, Inc., in 1998.

Author Biography

Steve Martin was born in Waco, Texas, on August 14, 1945. In 1955, his family moved to Southern California. After completing high school, Martin attended California State University at Long Beach and the University of California at Los Angeles. He eventually chose philosophy as his major. Martin later changed his major to theater arts, but he did not complete this degree either. Instead, Martin left school in 1968 to write for a television comedy show, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. Entertainment had been an abiding interest for Martin, since he worked as an actor and magician both in high school and during his college years.

Although Martin was well paid for his writing work, and even won an Emmy award in 1969 for his writing, his ambition was to be a headlining comic in his own right. For this reason, he continued to hone his comic persona in nightclub acts and the like while working as a writer. Martin came into prominence as a major U.S. comic in 1975. Beginning that year, Martin made a number of appearances on the comedy show *Saturday Night Live*, whose regular cast then featured John Belushi, Gilda Radner, and Bill Murray, among others. Once established as a comic, Martin began producing comedy albums, winning Grammy Awards in 1978 for *Let's Get Small*, and for *A Wild and Crazy Guy* in 1979.

Martin's popularity propelled him into film work. He began starring in mostly comic films and writing screenplays for films in which he also acted. In the 1990s, he started writing fiction and drama. His first book, *Cruel Shoes* (1977), was a limited edition of short stories. In a different edition, this small book became a bestseller. His second fiction narrative is a novella, *Shopgirl* (2000), which is in production as of 2004 as a film. His third fiction narrative is a novel, *The Pleasure of My Company*, which was published in 2003.

Martin's playwrighting career began with *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* (1996), a play for which he won two New York Critics Outer Circle Awards in 1996, for best play and best playwright. *WASP* (1998), an examination of a typical White Anglo-Saxon Protestant family in the United States, is a one act play that has been staged on its own, and also with three other Martin one acts: *The Zig-Zag Woman*, *Patter for the Floating Lady*, and *Guillotine*.

Plot Summary

Scene 1

The opening setting of Martin's play, *WASP*, is a "kitchen in a fifties' house," in which the characters of Dad, Mom, Sis, and Son are eating. Dad is saying grace. Son asks him where heaven is. Dad replies that it is seventeen miles above earth. Son responds by citing his school science learning, which appears to him to refute Dad's certainty about the location of heaven. Dad derides science as un-Christian.

Next, Dad receives a phone call. It appears to be bad news about one of his business ventures. The family begins to quake in fear, evidently expecting the brunt of Dad's wrath. But the telephone conversation ends with Dad laughing, so they all "relax."

Next, Mom gets a call. It is good news for her. She returns to the table talking about her call, but nobody pays her any attention. Dad begins talking over her, and Mom is silenced, mid-story.

The family by now is eating dessert. Mango, Son learns, is in the Jell-O. He is horrified at the prospect of having to consume something unfamiliar. He gags and succumbs to hysteria. In desperation, he excuses himself from the table.

Mom and Dad discuss their neighbors' complaints about Dad's "lawn jockeys," which are representations of African Americans in servile roles made for Anglo-American consumption. The neighbors want them removed. Dad decides the solution is to paint half of them white.

Sis enters dressed for choir practice, announcing that it is time for her "choir molestation." Dad cannot remember her name, even though she has her name, "Kathy," stitched on the back of her gown.

Alone with Dad, Mom confides that she is fearful of her mental health. She has been feeling generally unconnected to all things. Dad consoles her with clichés, but she appears to be satisfied.

Next, Mom is featured alone. She summons a "Female Voice" and converses with the voice. The scene ends.

Scene 2: Lepton

The setting of scene 2 is Son's room. Dad enters, and Son asks for a bicycle. Dad asks how Son is going to buy it. Son does not know, and Dad tells him he will have to work for it by building a seven-story building. Dad then launches into a number of lengthy speeches. First, he explains what luxury items, including bikes, are and what they mean

to him. They are things people acquire to make other people feel envious and bad. The boy listens attentively and agrees to erect the building. Dad then leaves the room.

Son now puts on a special pendent, takes out a small radio, and dials a frequency. The sound of "solar wind" is heard, and Son begins to communicate with the voice of "Premier," the ruler of Lepton. Premier is represented by a "cheesy spaceman" who walks out on stage. The boy wants to hear, "again," how he is special and has been given the "Vision." He wants to hear what he can expect in life. Premier describes how he will share tender love with women but that women will betray him. Premier says Son will find solace in the desire to work.

Scene 3: Choir

Scene 3 presents Sis at choir practice, where she announced she was going in scene 1. She stands on a riser and a conductor figure faces her, conducting an invisible choir. Sis is singing a typical Christmas song. She then shifts to a song of her own. It is a song from the point of view of a man in love with a teenage girl.

Sis next thinks about her beautiful body, how she could be on a poster advertising sunglasses, elegant and cool. She fantasizes that she is a famous beauty, one who might walk into a ball with cameras flashing at her, in an exquisite dress that is difficult to wear. Then she doubts the power of her body's beauty and thinks instead that her personality and force of will are what fascinates people. She wonders why her influence is not felt within her family circle.

Next, Sis fantasizes that she is the Virgin Mary, mother of Christ. First, nurturing the infant Christ fulfills her. Then, with the boy grown, he becomes her husband, and she ecstatically witnesses his influence in the world, feeling proud. Then, in his old age, she nurtures him like an infant again.

As Sis breaks out into the Christmas song one last time, the choirmaster, who has told her twice that she is not paying attention, tells her to see him after class. Sis appears to have been waiting for this moment to meet with the choirmaster alone.

Scene 4: Ye Faithful

The scene is Christmas morning. Son unwraps a bike; he built his building. Sis enters the room and, quite without Christmas spirit, declares: "Oh, Christmas! Goddamn us, every one." Mom brings in an elaborately cooked goose and all mumble that they've already eaten. They all begin to say the Christian Ten Commandants but cannot remember them. Dad tells Son to mow the lawn, never mind it being Christmas Day, and Dad goes off to play golf with friends. As soon as he leaves, Mom, Sis and Son begin speaking in "upper-class English" accents. In their guise as Britons, they are urbane, witty, cosmopolitan, enjoying instead of detesting mango, and so forth.

The children leave the scene and Mom calls on her voices. The Female Voice responds and says that she will answer Mom's question about what her husband means when he says he loves her. The Female Voice says Dad yearns to give himself to Mom but fears that she will drown his personality.

Next, the Female Voice materializes as a woman dressed in a "conservative" designer suit. Mom and she have tea together. In response to Mom's question as to how she would feel if she left her husband, Female Voice says she would regret it.

Scene 5: The Logic of the Lie

The setting is once again the family dining room. Mom, Sis, and Son listen to Dad recount his golf exploits. They are not interested but pretend that they are, flattering and pampering him. Dad gets up. He calls for his voices, but none answers. He is on his own, he says. He begins to speak at length, saying that he knows that his values are questionable but that the key to his success has been his ability to quell all doubt and to stay the course. Dad says that he knows of his wife's yearnings, but refuses to be the person she wants him to be. For Dad, love and feelings are treacherous, both best managed by a program of action that leaves one impervious to their influence. This means a life of little pleasure, but this safe road of denial is what he chooses. Dad returns to the dinner table. Over the sound of the family eating, the curtain drops.

Characters

Choirmaster

The Choirmaster character has a small role in Scene 3 of Martin's play. Sis is at choir practice, and a figure of a male choirmaster, his back to the audience, is on stage directing the (unseen) singers. He chastises Sis once or twice, as she is not singing along with the others. At the end of the scene, the Choirmaster tells Sis that she needs to stay after practice. Ostensibly, she must stay to be punished for not following the lesson. Yet, the nature of Sis's response to the Choirmaster, along with previous comments she has made about choir practice, lead the audience to wonder whether she and he are involved in an affair.

Dad

Dad is one of the four major characters of Martin's play; he is one member of the play's four-person family. He is not a realist character; that is, he is not supposed to resemble a real human being. He is a representative character□Martin's exaggerated, caricature of a typical, traditional, W.A.S.P. father. Most everything Dad says and does is excessive. His Christianity is absurdly fundamentalist, his dedication to the Protestant work ethic involves having his son build a seven-story building in order to earn a bicycle, he amasses things in order to make his neighbors jealous, and so forth. Martin pays particular attention to the way in which Dad, as a W.A.S.P. man, represses his emotions and capacity for love and passion. Dad believes that showing any affection for his wife or family will give them unrealistic expectations as to what they can expect from life. Emotionalism to him also is a distraction from work, which he believes he must pursue with cold determination. Yet, at the end of the play, Martin's depiction of Dad shows some sympathy for W.A.S.P. fathers. There is the suggestion that Dad sticks to his value system unwaveringly out of a drive to support and give direction to his family and that his problem is a lack of any other cultural model to follow.

Diane

See Mom

Female Voice

At the end of Scene 1, and then again in Scene 4, Mom is featured speaking to a Female Voice. In Scene 4, the Female Voice appears briefly in human form. This voice is an omniscient, all-knowing character, who listens to Mom patiently and occasionally answers, albeit ambiguously, any question Mom might has. Female Voice, Premier, and Sis's fantasizing point to how these characters have learned to keep their feelings to

themselves. Following the W.A.S.P. rule of carefully controlled emotions, they vent their emotions privately, in their secret lives.

Jim

See Dad

Kathryn

See Sis

Kathy

See Sis

Mom

Mom, like Dad, is a type of character rather than a fully fleshed-out person. She is Martin's version of a typical W.A.S.P. mother and wife. As such, she is under Dad's authority, like his children. It is Dad, and not she, who determines what the family will do and believe. Martin connects her lack of authority to the way in which her children and husband are uninterested in the details of her life. When she attempts to express herself or share details about her day, her children and husband appear not to hear her speaking. Further, they show little appreciation for her domestic efforts, taking her work entirely for granted. When she is featured alone, talking to her voices, she expresses a yearning for real closeness to her husband and a longing for romance. She also expresses her true thoughts and opinions during these moments, demonstrating that her views differ considerably from her husband's. Her husband is unaware of her true convictions, as she has learned, like her children, to defer to Dad and keep her thoughts to herself.

Premier

Premier appears in Scene 2, which focuses on Son. Premier is an inhabitant of Son's imaginary world, Lepton. He is asked by Son to tell the boy about the "Vision," which Son imagines he has been specially granted. In a few lengthy monologues, Premier intones this Vision. It appears to be a synopsis of what Son's adulthood will be like. This adulthood, according to Premier, is that Son will experience the delights and thrills of love. However, love will also betray Son, which will embitter him. W.A.S.P., says Premier, is a term for W.A.S.P. men and women alike, yet it is women who are the real W.A.S.P.s, for their betrayals and control of men's feelings are painful. Premier concludes his speeches by saying that Son will manage his betrayals and pain through a dedication to work, which is a gift of great solace.

Roger

In Scene 4, Roger appears briefly as an "English butler." He interacts with Mom, Sis, and Son in a brief interlude in which they appear as an upper class British (W.A.S.P.) family. In contrast to their behavior as U.S. W.A.S.P.s, as Britons the family is harmonious and urbane. Roger serves them tea, and they ask for special foods since it is Christmas.

Sis

Sis appears throughout the play as Martin's version of a typical W.A.S.P. teenage girl. In Scene 3, which focuses on Sis, her sense of herself is conveyed. She is obsessed with how boys and men view her, as she sings a song about a beautiful girl that is written from the point of view of an admiring male. Further, she fantasizes about being a beautiful young female celebrity, or starlet, alighting from a limousine with all eyes glued on her. She also identifies with the Virgin Mary, in her role as nurturer and caretaker of Christ. These details suggest that Sis is being groomed to please and serve men, as opposed to herself. Thus, she is confused by how her sense of her own power dissolves when she is at home. Yet, since home is the place in Martin's play where the W.A.S.P. social order is being strictly maintained, and since this order in its traditional form allots social power primarily to men, it is unlikely that she would feel powerful at home. Indeed, as is seen in Scene 1, Dad cannot even recall his daughter's name.

Son

Son appears throughout the play and is featured in Scene 2. Younger than Sis, Son has a less intense and more childish imaginary secret life. Further, Son is securely under Dad's thumb, absorbing Dad's lessons eagerly and taking pleasure in obeying his father. Martin's portrayal of Son emphasizes the way in which the child is on his way to becoming his father. The figure Son conjures to speak to him in Scene 2, Premier, narrates, essentially, an adulthood for the boy that could just as easily be a description of Dad. Just as Dad has distanced himself from his wife, so Son, according to Premier, will distance himself from women after a short period of passionate involvement with them. Premier also says, Son will dedicate his energies to work above all.

Martin also uses Son to demonstrate a fear of cultural difference. This is seen through Son's hysterical rejection of an exotic fruit Mom serves at dinner. Yet, in the interlude in which Son appears as a British W.A.S.P., he makes a special request for the exotic fruit. This suggests Martin's sense that W.A.S.P. culture in the United States is more provincial and less cosmopolitan than its European manifestations.

Themes

Tradition and the Family

The opening setting of *WASP* is described by Martin as "*A kitchen in a fifties' house*." On the one hand, the words "fifties' house" suggest a play designed to be a period piece, depicting a U.S. household of the 1950s. In this case, the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant family of the play is no longer necessarily representative of a contemporary W.A.S.P. family. Yet, in declining to state specifically that his play is a period piece, Martin allows his ambiguous words to be taken symbolically. The "fifties house" of the play would then refer to the contemporary "house" of U.S. culture, as yet thoroughly permeated by traditional, but outmoded, W.A.S.P. values. In either case, of concern to Martin is W.A.S.P. cultural tradition, the way in which traditions are maintained, and the way in which they must be constantly revised in order to adapt to changing world circumstances. In Martin's take on W.A.S.P. culture, fathers of families are the primary upholders and transmitters of W.A.S.P. values, as Mom lacks authority and Dad is put forward as the sole and uncontested head of family. Indeed, why would Martin's Mom be the one primarily interested in upholding a system in which she is considered the secondary adult gender? Thus, the audience witnesses Dad, and not Mom, lecturing Son, and not Sis, as to what Son should believe and do throughout the play. Son mostly, if not always, happily conforms, thanks to the fatherly approbation his obedience elicits. Appropriately, Martin depicts the family unit as a busy learning center, in which youngsters learn their societal roles by mimicking their parents, within a gendered context. Thus, Son is on his way to becoming Dad, and Sis is on her way to becoming Mom.

Fear of Change

Martin's play is humorous, so, despite its trenchant critique of W.A.S.P. culture, we feel some sympathy for its characters□even Dad, and even when they are being roundly criticized. Further, near the end of the play, Martin portrays Dad in a somewhat less ridiculous and scathing light than previously in the play. In this final scene, Dad, like Mom and Son before him, tries to summon voices, but he finds that his voices have abandoned him. This symbolizes his thorough immersion in the way of life he has chosen for himself, in which he has long given up yearning for anything different. Yet, attempt to summon these old voices Dad does, and so there is the sense that, even if only very occasionally, some doubt about the soundness of his chosen path plagues Dad. What Dad's speeches in the closing scene of the play suggest is that his decision to maintain W.A.S.P. tradition without modification derives, in part, from a simple fear of change. There is the sense that Dad lacks any alternative cultural models to follow, and that his decision to uphold the status quo follows form his belief that, without a coherent set of values for himself and his family, he and they would be overcome by confusion about how to act in the world.

Repression

Mom is a character on the edge, confiding to Dad in the first scene that she is overcome at times with nameless fears and a feeling of general "distance." She feels unconnected to the world around her and cut off from her husband. Her conversations with her voices point to her yearning for romance with her husband. Yet, as we see through Dad's character, Martin believes that W.A.S.P. men eschew romance and passion and impose this regime of emotional repression on the women and children in their lives. Martin provides an explanation for W.A.S.P. repression in the final scene of his play, as Dad mulls over why he is like he is. For Dad, the difficulties of financial survival require a coldness of purpose that any experience of deep emotion would weaken. His speech conveys that he knows of his wife's yearnings but cannot allow himself to satisfy them or yearn as she does:

Oh, I know what she [his wife] goes through. She aches with desire. She reaches out for nothing and nothing comes back. She is bound by walls of feeling. They surround me too, but I must reach through the walls and *provide*. There is no providing on a lingering summer's walk; there is no providing in a caress. I have been to the place she wants me to go. (*Bitterly*.) I have seen how the king of feeling, the great god romance seats us in his giant hand and thrusts us upward and slowly turns us under the sky. But it is given to us only for minutes, and we spend the rest of our lives paying for those few moments. Love moves through three stages: attraction, desire, need. The third stage is the place I cannot go.

Continuing his speech, which is interrupted by Son asking to be excused from the dinner table, Dad says:

Finish your meal. (*Back to his soliloquy*.) If I can't be excused, why should he? The denial of my affection will make him strong like me. I would love to feel the emotions I have heard so much about, but I may as well try to reassemble a dandelion.

The study of cultures has progressed to the point where it is clear that cultures that value emotional expressiveness and passion do not, in turn, eschew the duty to work and provide decently for oneself or one's family. Martin's play is informed by this knowledge, as he clearly wishes that, as a W.A.S.P. child, he had been brought up in a more emotionally free and communicative family.

Style

The Absurd

Absurdism in literature first developed at the beginning of the twentieth century, contrasting sharply with the realism that had dominated for much of the previous century in Europe and the United States, in which characters were presented as faithful representations of real persons living real lives. Absurdist literature, by contrast□as its apt label suggests□is playful and unrealistic. Absurdism's strange, pathetic, and ridiculous characters suffer both ominous and less painful twists of fate, feeling doleful when happenings are particularly alarming or bad, but on the whole cheerfully hoping for the best. The playfulness and unrealism of absurdism reflects a cautious relativism, a propensity to question and explore problems and ideas instead of espousing systems and delivering final judgments. Absurdist writers attempt to juggle a number of ideas simultaneously, as opposed to narrating the personal lives of their characters. The unexpected and exaggerated nature and behavior of Martin's characters contribute a great deal to the absurdism of the play. For example, in scene 5, Dad, Sis, and Son wake up on Christmas morning to find that Mom is already sailing out of the kitchen with a fully, elaborately cooked holiday dinner, like some mis-firing domestic robot.

Parody

Parody is adopting a particular way of writing, or telling a story, or point of view, and making it seem ridiculous in order to contest its basic assumptions or judgments. Martin's four major characters are, at least in part, parodies of the types they represent. As W.A.S.P. types, Mom, Sis, and Son are less thoroughly parodied than is Dad. Martin often drops his parody and absurdist treatment of Mom, Sis, and Son, presenting them in brief vignettes as realistic characters, driven by touching hopes and fears. Martin reserves the play's most thoroughgoing parody for the character of Dad, undoubtedly because, within the logic of the play, Dad is the primary transmitter and upholder of the values Martin is criticizing. Thus, Dad's Protestantism is exaggerated and fundamentalist, and he is an extremely traditional W.A.S.P. father. Martin achieves his parody of the fundamentalist and traditional male W.A.S.P. types by focusing on the most implausible and outdated cornerstones of these types' belief systems. He dwells for example on Dad's refusal to transmute the text of the Bible into a set of lessons and myths to be adopted or discarded on the basis of their continuing usefulness to contemporary life. He shows Dad espousing the literal letter of the Bible despite the various modern circumstances and facts which invalidate so much of what was, at the time the Bible was written, believed to be true or considered factual.

Historical Context

White Anglo Saxon Protestants

The acronym W.A.S.P. (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) in the United States refers to a descendent of the Caucasian Protestant Christians from England who began immigrating to the Americas in the seventeenth century. This was one the first foreign-born ethnic groups to gain a secure foothold in U.S. territory, displacing the Native American populations. At first, in the seventeenth century, W.A.S.P.s lived in the United States as British citizens, because the Northeastern areas in which they settled were colonies of England's growing world empire. Later, the colonies became independent of England, in the War of Independence in the late-eighteenth century. Another sizable foreign, population was Africans, who came involuntarily, bought and sold as slaves to work as laborers on U.S. farms. Since these laborers were not given the same opportunities and rights as W.A.S.P.s, W.A.S.P.s became the dominant ethnicity in the United States, with their values shaping the institutions of the new and rapidly growing nation. However, like the slaves' African-influenced cultures, the cultures of many later immigrant groups eventually posed a challenge to W.A.S.P. cultural dominance. For example, the Irish and Italians brought their Catholic Christianity with them, along with other differences. Asians brought religions entirely different than Christianity. Central and South Americans have added other strains to U.S. life. Thus, whether W.A.S.P. cultural values are still the most dominant values in the United States is a subject of debate. Do the descendents of new immigrant groups take on W.A.S.P. cultural values, or do the changes they undergo reflect a change to values that are an amalgam of all of the different cultures in the United States of America?

In the arenas of business and politics, if not culture, W.A.S.P. male dominance seems, as of the early 2000s, secure. Does the fact that W.A.S.P. males still control the majority of this nation's wealth reflect merely their long history in this country? As time goes by, will their control wane as more women and minorities climb their way up? Or, as some people argue, are W.A.S.P. men careful to pass on only a minimum of the most important jobs to W.A.S.P. women and to women and men of other ethnicities, reserving the majority of the highest positions in business and government for themselves? Certainly, there have been few presidents of the United States who have not been W.A.S.P. men. President John F. Kennedy, who was an Irish Catholic, is one exception.

W.A.S.P.s under the Microscope

After World War II, and especially in the 1960s and 1970s, explorations of W.A.S.P. culture began to appear with great frequency. This was the period when other U.S. cultures began to be explored, and so W.A.S.P. culture appeared as one among many. The culture was analyzed and compared to other cultures, with scholars asking a great number of questions. What is good about W.A.S.P. culture? What are its limitations? How would a change in values enhance the life of W.A.S.P.s and of those who live with

them in the United States? Which values are outdated? Have W.A.S.P. families adjusted to modern times in the last decades of the twentieth century? While the industriousness of W.A.S.P. culture has always been admired, a frequent criticism of the culture is nevertheless said to be its obsession with work, the pursuit of which is seen as more than simply one's duty, or perhaps even a potential source of pleasure. Also questioned is the W.A.S.P. prizing of a type of emotional reserve. The consequence of this, critics say, is unhealthy repression and a lifetime of yearning for intimacy and passion□a life of quietly endured desperation. Further, traditional W.A.S.P. culture, like so many others, assumes the superiority of men over women. Has this aspect of W.A.S.P. culture definitively changed? Are women now fully accepted as men's equals, with women welcome at the top tiers of all professions□and with women's traditional work now seen as important as men's?

Cultures and Ethnicities

When the cultural and ethnic diversity of the United States first became a subject, commentators thought that the country was a "melting pot"□a place where the cultures and ethnicities of all of its immigrants were blending together. Other commentators questioned this view, saying that the notion of blending encouraged new immigrant groups to shed their specificity and conform to W.A.S.P. values. Blending, they said, was blending-in, a way of saying "be like W.A.S.P.s." These persons felt that immigrant groups and their descendents should feel free to retain whichever of their original cultural values they liked, as long as they could conform to the laws of their new, adopted country. Yet, most commentators agree that the descendents of immigrants become distanced from the culture of their ancestors' homelands, retaining only selected traditions and beliefs. Culture is thought of as something that changes over time, with individual cultures constantly mutating as they come into contact with others.

Critical Overview

Since Martin's major focus is acting in and writing for movies, he does not produce a great deal of writing apart from screenplays. Consequently, his few dramatic pieces and few narratives (short stories, one novella and one novel) have attracted little scholarly attention. *WASP*, in particular, has received mostly brief periodical and newspaper reviews, which appear whenever it is staged.

The reviews following *WASP*'s first staging at New York's Joseph Papp Public Theater in 1995, which took place as an evening including three other one acts by Martin, were not as favorable as those which he received for *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*. In New York's *Village Voice* review, critic Michael Feingold states, of the evening as a whole, "What Steve Martin wishes to devote his playwriting career to is also anyone's guess. Does he in fact really want one? His four one-acts at the Public Theater, which range from a weak blackout sketch to a long meander through the Middle American mind, don't offer much of an answer." Of *WASP*, Feingold writes further that it "has a few funny bits, some authorial and some actor-induced, and many more bits that are pointless, pallidly amusing, too old to get laughs, or so interesting that they might have been worth weaving into a sustained work." Also writing about this first Public Theater staging, David Patrick Stearns, in a *USA Today* review, states that "The tactful word for [*WASP*] is 'experimental.' The more candid one is 'self-indulgent.'"

Other critics echo Feingold's sense that Martin's particular exploration of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant mind adds little to what seems to be many already-existing explorations of the subject in the arts and social sciences. *Chicago Tribune* chief critic Richard Christiansen, for instance, writes, "As the title suggests, [*WASP*] is a satire of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant ethic, a somewhat dead horse that Martin tries to kick into life through darker, deeper scenes that go beyond the usual send-ups of the straight-arrow All-American family."

Yet, *WASP* has its defenders and admirers, critics who believe that the family dynamics, and implied larger society, of the play still speak to a broad, contemporary U.S. condition. For example, writing about a 2002 production of the play in the Theater Beat section of the *Los Angeles Times*, F. Kathleen Foley writes:

Deft and incongruous, the play yields plenty of laughter but has a serious point to make about the dark side of the American family. If the characters chatter circuitously, that's fitting, given their wrenching emotional disconnection. Isolated occupants of this family Babel, they speak no common language, share no psychic connection.

In response to an interview question posed by Linda MacColl and published in *American Theatre* about whether *WASP* is autobiographical (about his own family and immediate society growing up in Garden Grove, California), Martin replies that it is only partly so. He says that the play is about "many topics," "about love and romance," and about "many families who are uncommunicative."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Dell'Amico is an instructor of English literature and composition. In this essay, Dell'Amico explores Martin's critique of traditional W.A.S.P. values.

The title of Steve Martin's play *WASP* is an acronym of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, and his play is an exploration of the values of this particular U.S. ethnicity and culture. Martin's play conveys mostly his criticism of W.A.S.P. values, with which he grew up. One thing he questions is the W.A.S.P. value of emotional reticence. Like most commentators on W.A.S.P. culture, Martin sees the culture's anti-emotionalism as a type of unhealthy repression, as opposed to a healthy form of adult self-control. Thus, Martin's play dwells throughout on its W.A.S.P. characters' desperate, secret yearnings for intimacy and passion. The religious underpinnings of traditional W.A.S.P. culture, its Protestantism, is also explored and critiqued in Martin's play. For example, the play parodies Dad's outmoded, fundamentalist, literal interpretation of the Bible, and Martin connects the inequality of genders in traditional W.A.S.P. culture to an unrevised Christianity. He shows the budding W.A.S.P. girl, Sis, fantasizing about being the Virgin Mary, the nurturing mother of the infant Christ, the protector of the young Jesus, and the caretaker of the adult Christ. Despite the girl's conflicting sense that she is a genius in her own right, she sees her greatest genius to be in fostering of genius in men. Mom is an older version of Sis, deferring to Dad and finding that neither he nor her children are particularly interested in her life and doings. Martin's W.A.S.P. family is also fearful and dismissive of cultural and racial difference. Son gags on foreign foods and Dad cannot understand why his vast collection of lawn jockeys□slave-era caricatures of African Americans□offends his more enlightened and non-W.A.S.P. neighbors.

WASP is a one act play divided into five scenes. The first scene presents us with the subjects of the play at dinner□the four family members, Dad, Mom, Sis (sixteen), and Son (fourteen). The first scene also presents Mom alone, talking to voices. Three of the remaining four scenes follow the same strategy. They begin with an interlude in which the family or some members of the family are interacting and then end with a one member being singled out for attention. Each family member at some point in the play is featured singly, with Mom being featured twice. Sis's scene, scene 3, is the one that is structured differently, as it opens with her not at home with other family members, but at choir practice. She is the sole focus of the entire episode. Furthermore, where Mom, Son, and Dad call to "voices" when they are alone, Sis fantasizes about being special and admired. The voice and fantasy sequences in *WASP* are among the strongest, most original parts of the play, and they are one major way Martin strikes out against W.A.S.P. repression. The common thread in the fantasy sequences are their characters' hateful secrecy and longing for the passion lacking in their daily lives. The common form and theme of these scenes give the play its consistency and ties it together.

As Dad lays down the literal letter of the Bible in the play's opening, his family listens, incredulous and uncomfortable. But regardless of their obvious disbelief in what he is saying, they do not contest his views. Instead, they are prone to quake in Dad's presence, fearing his anger. The fear is shown especially when the family members

believe they will receive the brunt of Dad's wrath, while he is receiving bad news from a telephone call he takes during their meal. Martin's stage directions say: "(MOM, SIS, AND SON begin to quake, rattling dishes and cutlery. MOM starts to clear dishes, shaking her way with cups and saucers to the sink. DAD emits a cheery laugh; the family relaxes)." Contributing to our sense that Dad's top position in the family is tantamount to a nasty dictatorship is Mom's invisibility. She, too, receives a phone call at dinner, though hers is good news. She returns to the dinner table speaking excitedly about what her friend has told her, but her family cannot be bothered to pay attention. Dad, indeed, begins speaking as if she were not, successfully drowning her out.

Scene 1 depicts the family's dinner, a brief after-dinner interlude between Mom and Dad and then a closing interlude when Mom talks to voices. The disembodied voice that responds to her is a female of about her same age—an alter ego and oracle of sorts. This voice is clearly her companion, to whom she communicates her true feelings and opinions and her deepest fears and longings. She asks anxiously if she is still pretty and is told that beauty is happiness. She asks if there is a heartland and is told that she is living in it, because the hearts can be heard breaking. She asks what melancholy is and is told: "Wouldn't you love to dance with him in the moonlight?" The scene ends with Mom's final question remaining unanswered: "Voices, when he says he loves me, what does he mean?" Most poignantly, the ending interlude of Scene 1 conveys Mom's desire for closeness to her husband.

Scene 2 begins with Dad and Son interacting. Son declares that he would like a bicycle. Dad replies that bicycles are "luxury" items and proceeds to explain what luxury items are. These are things that one buys not for oneself, or one's own enjoyment, but to make one's neighbors jealous. Furthermore, Dad says, Son must work for his bicycle. He must build a seven-story building. Son acquiesces happily to the program; Dad leaves Son's room.

This conversation conveys more criticism of W.A.S.P. culture—a critique of what is known as the "Protestant work ethic"—as well as the W.A.S.P. propensity for "conspicuous consumption." Typical W.A.S.P. culture, that is, is known for an industriousness mustered to the end of competitive acquisition, as opposed to the end of enhancing the pleasure or quality of life. Dad is dour; life is a fight; pleasure is impossible; work is penance; neighbors are less friends than persons with whom one is competing.

Once Dad has left Son's room, Son summons his voice. His confidante is "Premier," apparently the ruler of Son's imaginary planet-world, "Lepton." He appears on stage as a "cheesy spaceman," and the two converse. Son wants to hear "it" again. "It" is the story of how he has been granted the "Vision." This vision is that he will know the myriad delights of love, the soft flesh of women, and romance. He will also know betrayal, which will change him and make him deny love and romance. Further, he will be given a gift, which will console him in the bitterness of betrayal and denial. This gift and solace will be his "desire to work." Son, then, is on his way to becoming Dad. He will briefly love women passionately, then distance himself from them as Dad has

distanced himself from his lonely wife. Son's primary purpose in life will be to work, a pursuit to which he will dedicate himself utterly.

The scene that explores Sis, or young, traditional, W.A.S.P. womanhood, takes place at what Sis, in Scene 1, calls "choir molestation." (After dinner, she leaves the house for choir practice, in her choir gown). Sis's choice of words□"choir molestation"□strikes the audience in Scene 1 as a maudlin joke, i.e., as a reference to church sex scandals. But the words begin to connote different meaning in Scene 3. On stage in this scene is Sis, facing the audience, on a riser. A choirmaster figure with his back to the audience is conducting. There are no actors representing the other choir singers; their presence is left to the audience's imagination. Sis sings a personal song, clearly ignoring what she is supposed to be doing. As a consequence of her disobedience, she is more than once admonished by the choirmaster. At the end of the scene, which coincides with the end of choir practice, the master announces that Sis must stay after class, as if to be spoken to about, or punished for, her inattention. In response to the choirmaster's words, Sis says, oddly and intensely, "Finally." It is as if she has been waiting for the chance to be alone with the choirmaster. With this, Martin conveys the idea that these two have a relationship and that "choir molestation" is more than just a maudlin joke.

Sis does not speak to voices in her scene like Mom and Son; she fantasizes instead. Her fantasies are lurid. In one, she is climbing out of a limousine, arriving at a gala, in a fine gown, and cameras are flashing. All eyes are on her, admiring, desiring, awestruck. In another fantasy, she morphs into a Virgin Mary figure, the caretaker and handmaiden of Jesus Christ, to whom she dedicates her life. It is a wonderful role, full of pathos and passion. Sis also muses. She thinks that she is immensely powerful and is amazed at her potential. She wonders why she lacks the same sense of power at home. The irony of the scene rests on the contrast between Sis's wonderful fantasies and the future she can actually expect. If she does not begin to live for herself, instead of for men, she will not be an admired public figure; she will, instead, be Mom□married to the one to whom she has dedicated her life, forgotten in her own self, and so, not living life on a pedestal at all.

In the brief, final, fifth scene of *WASP*, Dad is featured alone. Yet, when he attempts to summon voices, he finds that they have abandoned him. His inability to communicate with his voices conveys the idea that he has denied any desire for anything different for so long, that any change in his nature is impossible. His soliloquies convey his worldview, or "The Logic of the Lie," as Martin names this scene. Dad is the upholder of traditional W.A.S.P. values in the play, and as such he is the play's most perfectly formed representative of the culture.

Most literature on W.A.S.P. culture, whether fictional or nonfictional, appeared when the society lost broad-based cultural, if not economic and political, dominance in the United States from the 1960s through the 1970s. This literature explored most of the issues that Martin's play does. It is for these reasons that more than one critic of the play accuses the play of being belated. Yet, the play is not only an exploration and critique of W.A.S.P. values. The stylistic absurdism of the play, plus the unlikely and often hilarious

situations, give the play a particular tone which communicates, beyond its criticisms, Martin's accepting, if doubtful, stance towards his cultural heritage.

Source: Carol Dell'Amico, Critical Essay on *WASP*, in *Drama for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Topics for Further Study

Write an ethnographic research paper (an ethnography is a study of an ethnicity or culture). Interview two people who identify with two different, non-W.A.S.P., cultural traditions. Think of questions about their lives that will help you to understand each person's cultural values. Videotape, audiotape, or take notes as you interview. Report on your findings, comparing your subjects' values to your own. How are they different? How are they similar?

Is Martin's play about traditional W.A.S.P. culture a period piece□a play about a 1950s family? Or does it suggest that this traditional W.A.S.P. culture is still the norm for ethnic White Anglo-Saxon Protestant families? On what in the play do you base your judgment?

What would you say are U.S. cultural values? How does the United Sates define itself as a nation, in your opinion? Are these values W.A.S.P. values, or do they derive from W.A.S.P. values, as these values are depicted in Martin's play?

Martin's play is feminist. He criticizes W.A.S.P. culture in the name of Mom and Sis. Has contemporary U.S. society, in your opinion, righted the wrongs that Martin points to? Equal opportunity for women has certainly been strengthened. Are there aspects of U.S. culture that can still be improved for girls and women?

The United States is a multi-ethnic, multicultural nation. What does multiculturalism mean to you?

Some people think of culture as a set of traditions passed down from generation to generation. Others think of culture as that which is always in process, as different cultures clash and interact. How do you think of culture?

With communication media, such as television and the Internet, becoming accessible to more and more people around the globe, it is said that discrete cultures are crumbling and that people are becoming the same. Others argue that only traditional cultures are crumbling, and that a myriad of newly-developing, micro-cultures are springing up. What is your view?

What Do I Read Next?

Like *WASP*, *The Zig-Zag Woman*, *Patter for the Floating Lady*, and *Guillotine* are one act plays by Martin. *WASP* was first staged along with these three other plays, and they were published together in 1998.

The full-length comedic drama *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* (1996) was Martin's first play to be staged. It was a great success with both audiences and critics.

Some critics compare Martin's dramatic style to the absurdism of playwright Samuel Beckett. Beckett's most well-known absurdist work is *Waiting for Godot* (1952). Despite his English-language Irish background, Beckett wrote most of his works in French, before translating them into English. Beckett lived in Paris most of his adult life, and *Waiting for Godot* was first staged there in 1953.

A Room with a View (1908), by the British novelist E. M. Forster, is about a group of Britons on vacation in Italy. Forster uses the novel's contrast of cultures to present his views about British Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture. Some of Forster's views are similar to Martin's notions about North American White Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture.

The novella *Shopgirl* (2000) is a departure for Martin, as it is not a comedic piece of fiction. It explores the life of a young woman as she struggles to gain a sense of herself as an adult in the world.

Further Study

Esslin, Martin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3d ed., Penguin, 1983.

Esslin's definitive study of absurdist theater is a classic of literary criticism.

Lenburg, Greg, Randy Skretvedt, and Jeff Lenburg, *Steve Martin: The Unauthorized Biography*, St. Martin's Press, 1980.

To date, this is the only biography of Martin. It was not authorized, or contributed to, by Martin, but it provides basic facts about Martin's childhood, young adulthood, and early career.

Weber, Max, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons, with an introduction by Anthony Giddens, Routledge, 2001.

This classic, early sociological text was originally published in 1930, in German. Nonetheless, Weber's book has influenced many scholars. Weber makes connections between Protestantism and what was, in the 1930s, a spreading and consolidating "spirit of capitalism" in Protestant-dominated countries.

Woodward, Bob, *Wired: The Short Life and Times of John Belushi*, Pocket Books, 1984.

Woodward is a well-known U.S. journalist and author (made famous by his investigations of wrongdoings in the Richard M. Nixon presidency). This biography of John Belushi, a brilliant *Saturday Night Live* comedian, covers the period of *Saturday Night Live* when Martin was a regular guest and host.

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Christiansen, Richard, Review of *WASP*, in the *Chicago Tribune*, June 27, 1997, p. 2.

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MacColl, Linda, "A Different Me," Interview with Steve Martin, in *American Theatre*, Vol. 11, No. 9, November 1994, p. 34.

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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.

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

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

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

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

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

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