Y2K Study Guide

Y2K by Arthur L. Kopit

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

While *Y2K* does touch on the horror of identity theft and the dangers of privacy invasion in the digital age, the main theme is how revenge (in this case, Astrakhan's revenge upon Joseph, who has kicked Astrakhan out of his class) can take on a new form through technology. From his depiction of unscrupulous federal agents to his portrayal of an implacable computer hacker, Kopit shows that power corrupts. He places the focus on the abuse of authority, which happens simply because it is possible.

Author Biography

Born May 10, 1937, in New York City, New York, Arthur Kopit is a contemporary American playwright who is sensitive to the honor and the humiliation of the human condition. His first successful play, *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad,* debuted in 1960.

Kopit is the son of George and Maxine (Dubin) Kopit; his father was a jeweler in Long Island, New York. When Kopit enrolled in Harvard University, he was interested in engineering, but he soon found that he had a talent for the arts. During his college years, Kopit won two playwriting contests. He directed six of his seven plays that were produced at Harvard.

The Questioning of Nick, Kopit's first one-act drama, was a serious play about teenage rebellion written during the spring of 1957 for Dunster House Drama Workshop at Harvard University. *Don Juan in Texas,* Kopit's witty turn on the American Western, was also written in 1957. In 1958, Kopit wrote *On the Runway of Life, You Never Know What's Coming Off Next,* which features a fifteen-year-old boy seeking adventure in a carnival. In 1958 Kopit also wrote *Across the River and into the Jungle,* a parody of Ernest Hemingway's 1950 novel *Across the River and into the Trees.*

Other Kopit plays include *Gemini* (1957), *Aubad* (1959), *Sing to Me through Open Windows* (1959), *To Dwell in a Place of Strangers* (1959), *Asylum: or What the Gentlemen Are Up To, and As for the Ladies* (1963), *The Day the Whores Came Out to Play Tennis* (1965), *Indians* (1968), *Wings* (1978), *End of the World with Symposium to Follow* (1984), and *Road to Nirvana* (1991). For his musical Nine, Kopit won the Best Musical Tony award in 1982.

At the close of the twentieth century, Kopit wrote *Y2K*, which deals with the threat the Internet poses to personal privacy. According to the preface he wrote for the play, Kopit was inspired in 1999 by the investigation into then-president Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky. The play conveys the fear of having one's reality suddenly changed by outside forces.

Ranging from explorations of serious issues to satire, Kopit's plays expose the elements of daily life, whether they are cruel, whimsical, or threatening.

Kopit is married to Leslie Ann Garis and has three children: Alex, Ben, and Kathleen. He graduated cum laude with a bachelor's degree from Harvard University in 1959 and is a member of Phi Beta Kappa. He is also a member of the Writer's Guild of America, the Dramatists Guild, the Hasty Pudding Society, and the Signet Society.

Plot Summary

Astrakhan Enters

Y2K begins with Astrakhan in the spotlight on stage, stating that he is everywhere and on the hunt. Like the Greek chorus, Astrakhan introduces the play, explains the action, and concludes the drama.

Warehouse Scene

Secret Service agents Orin Slake and Dennis McAlvane have taken Joseph Elliot to an abandoned warehouse that smells of dead meat in New York City's Soho neighborhood. Just as in classic spy thrillers when the person being interrogated is under a bright light, Joseph is sitting under a single bulb.

The two agents allow Joseph to call his lawyer but refuse to give him their names. Slake and McAlvane ask Joseph apparently nonsensical questions about names and whether he has had any contact with someone who calls himself ISeeU. Joseph says that neither he nor his wife Joanne is acquainted with anyone who has identified himself in that way.

Living Room Scene 1

Astrakhan declares that he can see everything and that no one can hide from him.

The spotlight moves to the Elliots. Joseph tries to tell Joanne about his interrogation, but she tells him about his daughter Emma's receiving a crank call, which sounded as though it were in Joseph's voice.

The lights return to Astrakhan. With increasing arrogance, Astrakhan states that he is a "Master of Downloading." He admits to toying with others through his knowledge of computers.

As the action returns to the Elliots, Joseph explains his interrogation. Joanne reveals why she was unable to listen to Joseph earlier: she has had a run-in with her ex-husband, Francis Summerhays. An indication of Joseph's mistrust of his wife surfaces as he questions her as to whether she is still in love with Francis. After Joanne reassures him, the couple embraces.

Astrakhan returns to the spotlight and gives details on Joanne's history, including her supposed affair with Joseph while Joseph's wife was dying of cancer.

Office Interrogation

Slake and McAlvane appear in Joseph's office, and their questions about his computer use turn into threats of arrest. An interesting fact in this scene is that Joseph apparently publishes books that might attract the attention of the authorities. The book *Mapplethorpe* (an apparent reference to the controversial artist Robert Mapplethorpe, known for his homoerotic photographs) is one McAlvane thinks that Joseph should not be proud of. This gives possible support to Astrakhan's later claim that Joseph loved the plagiarized pornographic story that Astrakhan submitted in class as his own work.

During this second interrogation, Astrakhan interrupts from time to time to explain how he targets someone through a computer. At the end of the scene, he claims that he had a lurid affair with Joseph's wife after becoming one of Joseph's students in a writing class. His memory, Astrakhan says, becomes "clearer" each time he goes over the details, which is a hint that perhaps he is embellishing.

Astrakhan Sequence

This sequence is presented as a memory, but it is presented by Astrakhan; therefore, it is very likely that what actually happened is very different from what is presented.

Astrakhan arrives in the Elliots's living room. He claims that he is fifteen but that drug use has made him seem older. Instead of finding this alarming, Joseph is flattered into thinking that he has been responsible for stopping Astrakhan's drug use. Both Joseph and Joanne have read and are impressed by the pornographic story Astrakhan wrote for Joseph's class, and Joanne is particularly delighted by its filthiness. Soon she is seducing Astrakhan by displaying herself unclothed in front of him. Joanne says that Joseph tells his students, "Everything you invent is true," which seems to be something Astrakhan has adopted as his mantra. The sequence ends with Joanne's rejection of Astrakhan.

Living Room Scene 2

Joseph is even more suspicious of his wife, for he questions her about a trip she took to see her mother. He explains how he unintentionally gave Astrakhan access to their identities. When Joseph talks about connecting to Joanne's computer, it seems to be an allusion to his sexual possession of his wife, because he says that he found it stimulating.

In between drinks, Joseph tells Joanne that Astrakhan has usurped their identities and made her into a porno star and him into a child molester. Joanne immediately says that allegations of molestation against Joseph are ridiculous, but it is evident that Joseph half-believes the allegations against her. He produces photos, which she tries, unconvincingly, to discredit. Then Joseph tells her that Astrakhan has falsified records to make it look like he is the son of Joseph and his first wife.

Admitting that there is some truth in some of the things that Astrakhan has invented about him, Joseph tells Joanne he is sure that the situation is similar for her. Because they are penniless (Astrakhan has stolen all their money after stealing their identities), Joseph says that they are unable to follow Joanne's suggestion that they hire a private detective to find Astrakhan. Instead, he suggests that she resign from her job as he did from his. His mistrust of her is evident.

Astrakhan ends the scene as the spotlight moves to him. He is triumphant that things will be as he remembers them.

Part 1

Part 1 Summary

Y2K tells how a computer hacker destroys the lives of a successful businessman and his equally successful wife. Issues of trust, in people and in systems, are explored through the development of an increasingly suspenseful, chilling narrative that ultimately warns that too much trust, in anyone or anything, can lead to disaster.

Astrakhan speaks in a brief prologue about how he's invisible, everywhere and ruthless. Joseph comes into an interrogation area, accompanied by Slake and McAlvane. He seems surprised to be there, but the other two assure him they brought him in out of concern for his reputation. If other people see him being interrogated, they say, rumors might start. Joseph makes a joke about how easily that happens and then asks for a phone so that he can call his lawyer.

Slake hands him a cell phone, and Joseph makes the call. His conversation reveals that his lawyer is unavailable and that Slake and McAlvane are federal agents. When he discovers he can't receive a call back, Joseph makes a joke about how he's now in the hands of the gods, hangs up and refers to being unable to stay too long because he has an appointment. Slake tells him exactly where and when and what his appointment is, and then as Joseph reacts with surprise, Slake begins his interrogation. He starts by asking whether Joseph recognizes several names, including ISeeU, and whether he's ever corresponded in any way with anyone calling himself ISeeU. When Joseph says he can't recall whether he has or hasn't, the agents take him to mean he might have. Joseph admits it's possible, with conversation revealing that he works in a publishing house and that ISeeU might be one of the authors he works with. When the agents ask whether he's familiar with the name "Bunghole," Joseph makes jokes about how neither he nor his wife would be remotely familiar with anyone who goes by that name. Slake reveals that ISeeU knows Joseph's wife. Joseph angrily says he's lying.

Astrakhan reappears, talking about how he can see everything about people's lives, referring crudely to both bodies and bank accounts and talking about how we should believe him because wherever possible, he's honest.

Part 1 Analysis

This play is a modern fable, a story told about a specific individual or circumstance to illustrate a larger, universal point about human nature or society. The fable in this case is a warning against too much trust, on the most obvious level against too much trust in the security of the Internet but on a deeper and perhaps more disturbing level, against too much trust in individuals, both those we care about and those with whom we have an antagonistic relationship. Throughout the play, individuals manipulate the Internet and all its information, individuals who tell Joseph lies, truths and fables of their own in

order to achieve their goals and individuals who interfere in the marriage between Joseph and Joanne, who come to doubt each other's love and honesty.

Ultimately, however, the story focuses on the issue of trust - who does trust, who doesn't trust, who shouldn't have trusted and what happens when trust is misplaced, manipulated and destroyed. The dramatic action is anchored by the destruction of Joseph's identity, reputation and belief systems. He is, in effect, systematically "eaten" by Astrakhan, Slake, McAlvane and Joanne in the same way as, in one of the classic Aesop fables, a Mouse trying to cross the river is eaten after placing too much trust in a Fox, who said he would swim her across on his nose. Joseph is effectively destroyed by too much trust, and as such he embodies the play's thematic warning.

Aside from being individuals who, for various reasons, directly challenge Joseph's beliefs about himself, about his wife and about the way the world works, the characters of Astrakhan, Slake and McAlvane also function as symbols. They represent individuals, corporations and government agencies - anyone and everyone who has an interest in knowing an individual's habits, beliefs and personal data. Their eagerness for, and ruthless pursuit of, both information and control are important aspects of the play's warning, indications that it's both dangerous and foolish to trust anyone or anything.

Elements of foreshadowing here include Astrakhan's comments about his being everywhere, Joseph's joke about rumors and his being cut off from his lawyer (and by implication, the rest of the world) in the same way that he's eventually cut off from his identity. All of these elements foreshadow later developments in both his life and the play.

Part 2

Part 2 Summary

Joseph and Joanne have drinks as they talk about how bad their days have been. Conversation reveals that someone named Emma called from Paris to say she's had an obscene phone call from a man who sounded just like Joseph and also that Joseph's lawyer never called back.

Astrakhan interjects a short speech in which he talks about how he became interested in, and involved with, computer hacking (breaking into secure files and manipulating information). Anyone can do what he does. All they need is the courage.

Conversation between Joseph and Joanne resumes, with Joseph talking about how angry he is about the interrogation. A well-known author was in the office of the publishing house and found Joseph's story amusing, and Joseph is sure he's not in trouble. Joanne then talks about her bad day, starting with the news that she talked with her ex-husband Francis in spite of having told him she doesn't want to speak with him. She and Joseph make jokes about Francis being a vampire, and then Joanne mentions that Francis made inappropriately sexual comments over the phone. Joseph angrily asks whether she became aroused, and Joanne responds with equal anger that she didn't, adding that she sometimes has difficulty realizing how little Joseph truly understands her. Joseph jokes about how he enjoys not understanding her completely. She continues to respond with anger, and he asks whether anything else is wrong. She explains that when she came out of her office, Francis offered her a ride in his limousine, which she accepted because it was raining.

Joseph again becomes angry, saying she should have taken a cab and asking what happened during the ride. Angry at his apparent suspicion, Joanne tauntingly tells him that Francis fucked her, but then she admits that in fact he behaved like a gentleman and asked how Joseph was. She says she didn't tell him anything because she didn't want to risk Francis turning any remark into something nasty, which she says is a habit of his. She says that she and Francis eventually became silent with each other, and she saw him watching her. She apologizes for getting into the limousine.

Joseph says that Slake told him that ISeeU knows Joanne. Joanne assumes that he's suggesting that Francis is ISeeU and assures him it's not possible, saying Francis is too direct and too honest to play that kind of game. She adds that his honesty is his only positive trait. She and Joseph argue about why Joanne married Francis in the first place, with Joanne finally and angrily saying that she married him because she thought she could trust him. She says that Joseph is the only man she truly trusts and the only man she will ever truly love. She goes out, and after a moment she comes back in, apologizing for getting angry and speaking again about how she completely trusts and loves Joseph, but this time in more poetic language. They embrace.

Astrakhan appears, recounts unusually specific details about Joanne's life, her relationship with Francis, things he said to her and her meeting with Joseph. The audience learns that they met when they were both still married, Joanne to Francis and Joseph to a woman named Annabel, who at the time was dying of cancer. Astrakhan tells how Joanne and Joseph had an affair and married after Joanne got divorced and Annabel died. Emma is Annabel and Joseph's daughter and didn't come to the wedding, and four years after that Astrakhan first encountered Joanne. He says that Joseph became his "way in" and then admits that Joseph soon became much more than that.

Part 2 Analysis

The main purpose of this scene is to develop and define the complicated relationship between Joseph and Joanne. The audience sees Joseph's jealousy, Joanne's resentment and the way they're equally passionate with each other when it comes to both anger and sexual attraction. More relevantly to the fable, the audience also sees how protective Joanne is of her sense of self and her identity. This is illuminated through her increasing exasperation with Joseph and his suspicions, suspicions that never go away as we see in his confrontation with Joanne later in the play over what appear to be photos of her and Francis. In other words, Joseph's anger in this scene foreshadows his anger later, in the same way as Joanne's self-protectiveness foreshadows similar self-protectiveness in Joseph later in the play when he, and we, discover just how extensively his life has been tampered with.

Joanne's reference to trust is ironic in this scene for several reasons, mostly because the audience clearly sees in this scene how Joseph doesn't completely trust her. Also, later in the play, the trust that both she and Joseph have in themselves, each other and in the legal/ethical system in which they struggle to function is completely destroyed. In fact, the question of who to trust, when and under what circumstances, is the issue at the core of both the play's action and its theme, which relates to the fable-like warning against trusting too much.

Through the repeated interjections of Astrakhan, this scene also develops an atmospheric sense of impending doom that borders on creepiness. His biographical speech about Joanne is particularly unsettling, reinforcing the point he made earlier about how he's everywhere and also creating a powerful air of suspense about what else he knows and what he's prepared to do. By the conclusion of this speech, which contains far too many specific details about her life and relationships to seem reasonable, the audience is becoming extremely uneasy. This isn't just because we sense something awful is about to happen in the lives of Joseph and Joanne. It's also because we're all too aware that the watchful, manipulative, near-sociopathic hackers and organizations represented by Astrakhan could be out there waiting to do the same thing for us. Astrakhan is essentially a human computer virus, and by the end of his speech about Joanne, we're beginning to wonder when and whether he or someone like him is going to attack us. This is a very effective example of how a play's story can become personally and immediately and viscerally relevant to the lives of people in the audience watching it.

The reference to Annabel and to her illness foreshadows the only other time she's mentioned in the play - late in Part 5, when it's revealed that her illness played an indirect but vital role in Astrakhan's destruction of Joseph and Joanne's lives.

Part 3

Part 3 Summary

The setting is Joseph's office. Slake and McAlvane visit him, McAlvane carrying a small leather case. Joseph makes jokes about how nobody in the office could believe what he told them about being interrogated and about how he's planning to write and publish a book about the experience. Slake asks whether Joseph is worried about rumors starting, and McAlvane comments on how easily rumors can spread, a deliberate echo of the joke Joseph made at their first meeting. Joseph angrily asks what right they have to subject him to such questioning, but then he calms down and tells says that although his lawyer felt he didn't need to be there, he did say that if at any moment Joseph felt uncomfortable, he could tell Slake to stop. By law, he'd be required to. Slake tells him that's true and then asks how often Joseph uses his computer.

At this point, Astrakhan interjects the first of several short speeches in which he describes the process of getting hold of someone's personal information. He talks about finding a back door, or "bunghole," into a person's data and about what a sexual turn-on the whole experience is.

Joseph estimates that he uses his computer almost every day and says that today he probably won't touch it at all. Slake asks why it's turned on.

In a rambling speech, Astrakhan talks about how he's always honest, how his mother always lied, how the woman he thought was his mother wasn't his real mother and how the woman he thought was his mother was murdered.

Joseph says that he mostly uses the computer for email and that he enjoys old-fashioned means of communication like books. Slake refers to a large book nearby featuring a collection of photographs by Mapplethorpe, and he and McAlvane banter about whether Joseph is proud of having published it. Joseph assumes that the Mapplethorpe book is the reason they're there, and although Slake says it really isn't, he and McAlvane then admit that it's sort of close to the reason.

Astrakhan explains that entranceways are deliberately left open by computer and software manufacturers because they like to sneak in while the system's user is online and see how their systems are functioning. Slake and McAlvane ask about Joseph's use of the Internet, and when Joseph says he uses it as little as possible, they ask about how much he uses it on the weekends.

Astrakhan says that once entryways have been discovered, a hacker is like "a mouse in the woodwork," watching and waiting.

Joseph says that he rarely uses the Internet on weekends. Slake and McAlvane tell him that according to his usage records, he's online five or six hours at a time. When Joseph suggests they've mistaken him for someone else, Slake tells him that they haven't.

Astrakhan talks about how programs called "sniffers" are left behind in computers to give the hacker information about passwords.

Slake and McAlvane produce documentation of Joseph's computer usage, referring to a particular incident in which he was online for almost an entire weekend. He explains that he was trying to get help with his computer and asks what they think he did. Slake hands him a sheet of paper with a string of data. As Joseph looks at the paper, Astrakhan explains how the "sniffer" tricks users into revealing their passwords, saying that once the password has been discovered, that's "when the real fun begins." Joseph reacts angrily to what he sees on the paper. Slake tells him it's time to stop pretending, and McAlvane tells him that Joanne has also been pretending and offers to show him the contents of the folder. Slake says he's getting fed up with Joseph and threatens to send all their information to his lawyer. Joseph becomes angry, and Slake tells him that neither he nor Joanne will have to go to jail. McAlvane says that Joanne might have to, though. Joseph tells his secretary to get hold of his lawyer.

Part 3 Analysis

On a technical level, the most interesting aspect of this section is the way the short scenes are inter-cut, or spliced together. This functions on two levels. First, the brevity of the scenes and the quickness of the shifts between characters, time and place combine to create a sense of escalating tension and suspense. Second, the content of the scenes is given additional weight by the way they're placed. Meaning emerges from juxtaposition as much as from dialogue or action. Specifically, when placed next to the eagerly baleful interjections from Astrakhan, the interrogations of Slake and McAlvane seem to imply that Astrakhan has done something to Joseph's computer and his records. This takes the level of suspense generated by the inter-cutting even further, with the result that by the end of this section, the audience is becoming as desperate as Joseph to know exactly what's going on. This is an extremely effective way of, again, putting us into the emotional shoes of the characters and bringing home the play's thematic point about trusting too much. If Joseph can get in this much trouble from too much trust, so can we.

Mapplethorpe refers to Robert Mapplethorpe, an avant garde photographer in New York in the 1970s. Capable of producing beautiful still life pictures, particularly of flowers, he is notorious for also producing extremely erotic, highly sexual and very graphic photos, many with homosexual perspectives. Ever since they were first displayed and up to the present day, his photographs have generated controversy, even to the point of being banned by some art galleries and museums. The book referred to by Slake in this section would probably include more than a few of the erotic works and at least a few of the more extreme ones. The implication of Slake's questioning, therefore, is that Joseph is, if not gay, at least sexually outside the norm. This increases the level of suspense, suggesting that somehow Joseph has been linked to unusual sexual behavior, and it foreshadows the knowledge that he, and the audience, come to later - that that's exactly what's happened.

Part 4

Part 4 Summary

In a long speech, Astrakhan explains that he didn't set out to destroy Joseph's life. He only wanted to get into his extremely restricted writing class in order to meet a particular girl, and soon after getting in he met Joanne and began an affair with her. He also explains that to get into the class, a student had to submit a writing sample, and he admits that he submitted a very raw and very graphic piece of pornography written by someone else. He concludes by saying that the circumstances of his meeting Joseph are etched permanently into his memory. Each time he recalls them, new details emerge, and he says that it's funny how memory works. Throughout the speech, he refers to how honest he is.

The action shifts to Joseph's apartment, and as Astrakhan comes in and he and Joseph greet each other, the audience understands that the action has also shifted to the past. Conversation reveals that Joseph's home is in a wealthy neighborhood in New York. Astrakhan has ambitions to live in that kind of neighborhood, and he's originally from California. As Joseph pours them both drinks, he talks about how much he loved Astrakhan's story and asks how old he is. Astrakhan tells Joseph that he's fifteen but that he looks older because of the heavy drugs he's been doing, which he says he quit so he could focus on doing a good job in Joseph's class. He also asks Joseph whether he thinks there's too much sex in the story, saying that the high school English teacher he gave it to thought that there was FAR too much. When Joseph seems surprised he showed it to a teacher, Astrakhan tells him he wrote it as an assignment which was supposed to be about something important that happened during the previous summer. Joseph's disbelief increases when Astrakhan assures him that everything in the story happened. Astrakhan tells how when he read the story aloud in class, the teacher told him to stop. He told the teacher off and then asked her whether he should lie. He says that the teacher said he should, and as a result he immediately quit school and came to New York. When he asks how long Joseph thinks it will be until he's published, Joseph says his company doesn't publish pornography, suggesting that Astrakhan needs to get more experience. Astrakhan excitedly tells him that's the first piece of encouragement he's ever gotten.

Joanne comes in, drenched from having to run in the rain after being unable to get a cab. A fast-talking bundle of energy, she introduces herself to Astrakhan, and she and Joseph talk about how he's the student Joseph has been talking about. Joanne tells Astrakhan that she loved the story and also loves his hair. She seems shocked when Joseph tells her that the story is actually true, and she says she loves Astrakhan's shoes. When he says he stole them, she tells him to steal a pair for her. Joseph says dinner's ready, and Joanne runs off to take a quick shower and change. Astrakhan says that he's never met anyone like her. Joseph replies that not many people have.

Astrakhan turns to the audience, saying that he can remember Joseph starting a conversation but not what it was about. The audience hears Joseph's side of the conversation distantly as Astrakhan tells us that all he could think about was Joanne, that he told Joseph he wanted to freshen up and that he went to the bathroom and caught a glimpse of Joanne, nude and drying herself. As he narrates what he saw, we also see it - Joanne, nude, drying herself, looking over her shoulder at him, not hiding herself at all, and then turning away as she tells him the bathroom's at the other end of the hall. Astrakhan says he cannot remember exactly how quickly or slowly she turned, but he adds that he can remember it however he wants and that that memory becomes fact. He concludes by saying that Joanne came into the living room wearing a thin dress with nothing underneath, or at least that he imagines her wearing nothing underneath and that that's what defines the truth.

Joanne comes in wearing the kind of thin dress Astrakhan has described. She embraces Joseph, but she looks at Astrakhan. Astrakhan talks about a book he's been inspired to read after taking Joseph's class and his hopes for reading more. Joanne tells him he's got a lot of pleasure ahead of him, and Astrakhan looks straight at her as he says he's sure he does. Then he recites a quote that Joseph apparently uses in all his classes, "everything you invent is true."

Lights go off Joanne and Joseph as Astrakhan tells us when and where he and Joanne last had sex and how Joanne ended it. Joanne appears, saying that the affair has to be over. Astrakhan talks about how he forced her into having sex with him in order to prove it wasn't over. He waited and watched and then discovered Joseph's "secret." He then talks about how strange it is that people's lives intersect and change for no apparent reason, but when a situation is looked at closely, a reason appears.

Part 4 Analysis

In the first part of this section, the play's central irony is clearly established. Astrakhan talks repeatedly about how honest he is, but he also admits that he gets into Joseph's writing class under false pretenses and then tells further lies about what happened when he read the story aloud in class, something that never happened. The relatively minor irony of Astrakhan's "honesty" foreshadows a similar but much more troubling situation in which he creates a series of lies about Joseph and Joanne's lives. The audience gets the impression that Astrakhan is honest when it suits him and lies when it suits him, illuminating another aspect of the play's theme - that even when someone says they're honest, it's not always a good idea to trust them completely.

This central irony is developed further as the result of Astrakhan's repeated references to memory, which suggest that what truly happened isn't how he remembers it. This suggestion is in turn reiterated quite significantly by the quote from Joseph's class. We get the clear impression that Astrakhan has taken this quote very much to heart, applying it to his memories of Joanne but also, as we're about to find out, to the lives he invents for her and Joseph. An example of the way he's shaped memories occurs in the way Joanne behaves in this scene, which is clearly out of character in relation to the

way she behaves in the rest of the play. Her energy here is wild and uncontrolled, a vivid contrast to her energy in her other scenes which comes across as quite restrained. In other words, we see Joanne in this scene not as she was, but as Astrakhan desires to remember her.

This raises, of course, the question of whether anything Astrakhan tells us is true or whether it's all made up for effect. Specifically, it's not clear whether anything he says happened with Joanne really did happen or whether he's made it up as part of his attack on Joseph. To look at it in another way, because this entire section is recounted from Astrakhan's point of view, and because it's been established that he's a liar, it's impossible to know whether what we're watching truly happened. Did Joanne really look at Astrakhan while embracing Joseph? Were her comments about how he's in for a lot of pleasure as loaded with sexual innuendo as stage directions, and therefore Astrakhan's memory, hint? The audience is in doubt the whole time. It's certainly doubtful whether Astrakhan had sex with her as often or in the way he describes. All these doubts are confirmed later in the play (in Part 5) when Joseph reveals that Astrakhan really was a guest in their home, but at the same time as all the other students in the class. He was never there alone.

All of this suggests that it's possible Astrakhan does what he does to Joseph and Joanne for the reason he referred to earlier, because he can, and that they didn't do anything to get him angry or to make him want revenge. Later in the play, the audience gets the impression that revenge for being expelled from Joseph's class was in fact the reason Astrakhan did what he did, but at this point it seems he had no other motive other than opportunity. This idea works on two levels - worsening the sense of fearful suspense in us that we could easily experience the same thing and raising the possibility that it's unwise to trust life in general because one never knows when chaos or disorder will suddenly strike and change everything.

Part 5

Part 5 Summary

This lengthy scene takes place in Joseph and Joanne's living room. It's not immediately clear what time frame the action is in, the past or the present, but as Joanne comes in and asks why Joseph is sitting in the dark with a bottle of vodka, conversation reveals that it is the present. Joseph tells how he spent the day at his attorney's and vomited because he was so upset. As he pours Joanne some vodka, he tells her that neither he nor his attorney can understand how what happened, happened. Joseph makes Joanne drink her drink and pours her another as he talks about how his attorney believes he's innocent, or at least says he does. Joanne asks what he's supposed to be innocent of, and Joseph refers to charges that both he and Joanne are facing as a result of a mistake he made when Joanne was in Boston visiting her mother. Joanne asks what he means by a mistake.

Joseph then delivers a long speech in which he tells how he spent the weekend Joanne was away reading a book on the potential for problems with computers because of the transition to the year 2000 (Y2K). He says that he became convinced that the problems were real because as a "fuckup," as he calls it, the Y2K situation was beautiful, perfection, as awesome as the music of Mozart. He talks about how everything the world has become, "this exciting new global interconnected community" was all image, and about how everything we are as human beings has been reduced to data, the "zeroes and ones" of computer code. He then talks about how, at the same time as he was reading the book, he was trying to figure out how to use his new laptop computer. He says that a warning about a "fatal error" appeared on his screen and adds that he talked with someone at a help desk who suggested he might have a virus and that he should work on another computer. He goes on to say that he switched to Joanne's computer. When she says she didn't know she had one, he reminds her that he got her one for her birthday, and then he tells how he networked the two computers and got them both online. Joanne's monitor also showed a "fatal error" message, and he shut it down. In images that have echoes of life support systems being shut down in hospitals, they talk about how it was probably a good thing to shut down. Joanne would do the same thing for Joseph, and he's afraid she might have to shut him down sooner rather than later.

Joseph then explains that a computer technician in his attorney's office analyzed his laptop. He figures that at some point Joseph clicked on something or typed in something that he shouldn't have and that a hacker got in a back door and has since revised both his and Joanne's lives. The new lives aren't good. He says that the technician has an idea who it might be, which means it's possible to rectify the damage. The technician said everything the hacker did looks real, particularly Joseph's apparent involvement in child pornography - collecting it, selling it and appearing in it.

Joseph says that there are apparently receipts of hotel rooms he's been in, photos of him with children and records of phone calls, none of which are real events. He then tells Joanne that apparently she's a star of pornography, and he shows her the folder McAlvane had during their previous conversation. As Joanne looks through the photographs in the folder, becoming increasingly shocked, conversation reveals that Francis (Joanne's ex-husband) is also in the photos, as well as two other men. Joanne runs out, and the audience hears the sound of her vomiting.

When Joanne comes back in, she says that nothing in the pictures ever happened. Joseph says everything is all right. She says it's not, and he says that the woman in the pictures looks like her. He adds that if it really is her, it's okay. Joanne protests that it's not her, and he asks whether she can be sure. She tells him to trust her, reminding him that she trusted he was telling the truth about the children. She turns back to the photos, saying that she remembers being with Francis and being photographed, but she can't understand how anyone could get hold of the pictures. Joseph tells her that's not the point. Joanne says it's exactly the point, and Joseph says again it isn't, showing her a photo that they both find particularly disturbing.

As Joanne recovers from the shock, Joseph explains that the technician thinks they're being set up by a former student. Joanne suggests that Joseph had sex with her (the student), but then when Joseph reacts angrily, she remembers he said the hacker was a man. She says again that her relationship with Francis was years ago. The audience understands at this point that her accusation isn't truly meant, but is in fact retaliation for Joseph's earlier doubt about her claims of what passed between her and Francis. Joseph says the technician believes the hacker is a student named Costa Astrakhan, who was a guest in their home during a party for all the students in Joseph's class.

Joanne recalls that Astrakhan was the student Joseph expelled from the class for plagiarism, and Joseph says that Astrakhan claims he began an affair with Joanne at the party. Astrakhan claims the affair started after he saw Joanne nude after her shower, and he lists dates and times when they had sex. He then says Astrakhan is also claiming that Joseph is his long lost father, explaining that he has documents to support his claim. When Joanne asks how that's possible, Joseph tells her that Annabel's cancer diagnosis came when she was six months pregnant and that they decided to abort the fetus because of the dangers posed to it by the chemotherapy treatment Annabel would have to face. Rejecting Joanne's gestures of comfort, Joseph tells her Astrakhan somehow got hold of the records at the hospital where the procedure was done and doctored them to make them look as though the baby was actually born and given up for adoption.

Joanne describes Astrakhan as insane. Joseph agrees, and Joanne says that there has to be some way of proving what he did. Joseph tells her that it's unlikely that they will be able to find proof. There are mailboxes in Joseph's name all over the country to which child pornography has been sent, and there's no money to hire detectives because Astrakhan has taken all their stocks, closed their bank accounts and hidden all their cash. He has also, apparently, promised to "take care" of them. The technician believes Astrakhan has spent a long time putting the alternative material together, and he must

have had it all assembled and ready to go because the transformation was completed in the course of a single night. Finally, Joseph talks with reluctant admiration about how clever and complete the whole scheme is, describing it as a novel of zeroes and ones in which he and Joanne are the characters.

Joseph then tells Joanne that mixed in with the fake stuff is enough true stuff to make it look as though the fake stuff is real. He says there's nothing really awful in the true stuff, but at the same time it's nothing he'd be comfortable with being made public. He suggests that the same is true for Joanne, that there's enough truth mixed in with the lies to make the lies believable. He says he's quit his job and suggests that Joanne do the same, saying that everything's bound to become public and that there's even more to come, including recent videotapes. Joseph says he knows the woman appearing in the tapes isn't her, but she doesn't find him convincing and urges him again and again to say it until she can believe him. He doesn't quite make it, leading her to say how glad she is of his faith in her. It seems that he doesn't believe what she says either.

Astrakhan comes into the room. He says that like any homecoming, their reunion as a family will be difficult, but in time, their life and history will be as they remember it. He puts his arms around Joseph and Joanne and says he'll take care of them forever.

Part 5 Analysis

In this extended, climactic scene, all the foreshadowing and suspense established earlier pays off in a story of the destruction of two lives. Its abrupt and unresolved ending is particularly effective, in that it creates the sense that Joseph and Joanne's futures are just as mysterious as the way their pasts were so completely altered. Their story is all the more frightening not only because it seems completely plausible, particularly in this age of rampant identity theft, government monitoring of Internet usage and complete trust in the safety of Internet communications. The play's real fright comes as a result of it having been carefully crafted and shaped to bring their fright close to home, bringing us to the place of not only empathizing with Joseph and Joanne, but also believing that what happens to them could very easily happen to us. Our future is just as unknowable. Who knows whether, or when, our identities will be stolen? As a result, we see that the play's warnings about the dangers of too much trust have far greater reach than we thought. Not only can we not trust in the Internet, and not only should we not trust too much in each other, but there can be no trust in the future or even in the past, since as the play chillingly demonstrates, they are both far too open to manipulation.

On a personal/relationship level, the potential for destruction of trust of any kind is illustrated, throughout the scene but particularly in its final moments, by the way interpersonal trust between Joanne and Joseph is destroyed. The seeds for this are planted in Part 1, when Joseph appears mistrustful of everything Joanne says about Francis. By the end of the play, however, so much has happened that neither of them is able to take the word of the other for anything. As a result, the audience sees again the play's thematic point about the dangers of trusting too much, not just in the Internet but

in other people. This is evident by the revelations about the "true stuff" in Joseph and Joanne's lives, which come as just as much of a shock as the "untrue stuff" invented by Astrakhan, and for the same reason. They trusted each other in the same way as they trusted the Internet, but both kinds of trust have clearly been misplaced. Note that the true stuff in Joseph's life is the undefined "secret" Astrakhan spoke of at the end of Part 4, and its exact nature remains undefined.

On one level, the destruction of trust between Joseph and Joanne reinforces Astrakhan's earlier point about the importance of honesty. If they'd told each other the truth from the beginning, they wouldn't be so shocked, and their interpersonal trust wouldn't have been destroyed. They might have been able to face the future better. On another level, however, a deeply ironic and cynical one, the character of Astrakhan, who says he's honest but tells and creates abundant lies, suggests that even honesty isn't enough. In other words, no matter how honest we are or are not, no matter how much we trust or don't trust, we're helpless. This is yet another aspect to the play's thematic point.

The Y2K problem referred to at the beginning of this scene is a situation that arose in anticipation of the year 2000. Because so many of the world's older computer systems were programmed to register dates with the final two digits of the year (for example, 99 for 1999), potential problems would occur in 2000. Unless the programs were modified, the computer programs would assume the year was 1900. Countless hours and billions of dollars were taken up all over the world with converting systems and preparing for the chaos if the transition wasn't made smoothly, but all the preparations appeared to be successful, since 2000 began smoothly. It must be noted that at the time the play was written and first performed, the transition had not yet been made. In other words, the play was created at the height of cultural and societal fears that everything was going to fall apart at the stroke of midnight on January 1, 2000. This means that the reference toY2K is symbolic of chaos, or more specifically of the fear of chaos. As such it foreshadows the chaos that strikes the lives of Joseph and Joanne in the course of one evening, in the same way as the chaos that was feared at that fateful stroke of midnight would have taken place in one evening.

This chaos is also symbolized and foreshadowed by Joseph's repeated references to "fatal errors" that appeared on both his and Joanne's computers. The symbol here is that both he and Joanne made, as previously discussed, the "fatal error(s)" of trusting too much and of not being honest with each other.

As Astrakhan embraces Joseph and Joanne at the end of the play, the audience has completely identified with them, and we see clearly the extent of the chaos that such "fatal errors" can lead to. As a result, we become even more frightened. When are we going to be embraced by the sociopathic malevolence embodied by Astrakhan? When are we going to have our lives destroyed? Our future is just as unknowable and just as potentially frightening as theirs, but the play's ultimate point is there's nothing we can do about it. Trust is an empty word, useless in the face of someone who wants to destroy you ... just because they can.

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Characters

Costa Astrakhan

Astrakhan is a teenager who is obsessed with asserting his own importance. He associates nearly everything with sexuality, including his need to control others. As he strives to bolster his ego, Astrakhan is, in his own words, "as relentless as the wrath of God." But unlike God, Astrakhan does not care what the truth is; he would rather make up his own version of events. In Astrakhan, there is no recognition of factual reality, because whatever he says is "honest," according to him, whether it is completely contrived or partially accurate.

Astrakhan is nineteen, but he is so wasted and haunted that he looks more like he's in his middle twenties. His hair is neon blue; some actors, however, have chosen to portray him with hair sticking on up on end or wearing a peaked cap. His shoes are of electric green suede and his sunglasses are almond-shaped. He wears a T-shirt that says "Nemesis." His leather pants and leather jacket are reminiscent of those worn by Mel Gibson in *Road Warrior.*

Astrakhan provides many of the details about the Elliots, the main characters. As an unreliable source, he cannot be trusted to be giving completely accurate information, although Joseph recognizes that some of the details are factual.

A student in Joseph's writing class who was kicked out for plagiarism, Astrakhan does not seem to have a grasp on what is real and what is not. He makes up information, blending it with bits of truth until fact and fiction are almost indistinguishable. Joanne says that Astrakhan is obviously insane; if so, he is also very clever, for he is able to completely obliterate the Elliots's real identities as well as their bank accounts.

Astrakhan goes by several aliases. He has attracted the attention of the Secret Service by his ability to hack into computers and create digital identities. He creates identities for the Elliots that make them seem more despicable than they perhaps really are. He also makes it seem as if he is Joseph's son by his first wife.

BcuzICan

See Costa Astrakhan

Joanne Summerhays Elliot

Joanne is an enigmatic woman who wishes to be "tethered" to the one she loves. Her idea of love is of being "sheltered" by the strength of her lover. She seems to be constantly trying to reassure her husband that she is true to him while at the same time

being a bit defiant about it. Although she explains to Joseph that she loves him, she admits that at one time she loved her ex-husband.

Joanne is in her late thirties. Her maiden name is Joanne Elizabeth Simpson. Both her parents were university professors: her father taught moral philosophy and her mother taught the flute. There may be some irony in Joanne's background because it is so seemingly innocent and wholesome, yet Joanne displays a knowledge of coarse behavior that scarcely matches this picture.

If played by an American actress, Joanne is supposed to have been born October 15, 1961, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and to have graduated in 1983 from Princeton. If played by a British actress, she is supposed to have been born in a small town not far from the University of Manchester and to have graduated from Oxford. Her major was art history; she works at Sotheby's auction house as an administrative assistant specializing in jade and Chinese porcelain.

Joanne's first husband, Francis Summerhays, has been harassing her. He is a venture capitalist whom she met at an Asian art auction. The marriage lasted less than a year, and even though Francis supposedly has been calling Joanne incessantly and leaving disgusting messages, she still believes he is capable of acting like a perfect gentleman. Whether Francis is actually doing everything Joanne says he is, is difficult to determine. How much Joanne can be trusted is questionable since she admits to lying at least once in the play.

Joanne supposedly met and pursued Joseph while she and he were still married to their first partners. Information about her moral character is contradictory, so it seems possible, although not definite, that this is true. While she calls Joseph her rock and chastises him for blasphemy, she herself uses crass language. All in all, it is possible that her behavior may not be as pure as she would like Joseph to think.

According to Astrakhan, Joanne had an affair with him after she married Joseph. He says that she had eight encounters just to satisfy her lust and then told Astrakhan it was over. Also according to Astrakhan, Joanne loves filthy books; however, she shows a definite distaste for pornography.

Whether Joanne is without any moral scruples is hard to determine; that she is capable of committing adultery seems somewhat likely since she was willing to get into a limousine with her ex-husband and to lie to Joseph about it. Like Joseph, she seems to turn to vodka throughout the play. Also like Joseph, she seems fixated on sexual topics and crude language.

Joseph Elliot

Joseph is an editor at Random House. He seems concerned about whether his wife is faithful to him. Although he seems to want to believe that she is not capable of immoral behavior, he has his doubts. He tries to convince a Secret Service agent that his wife is not the kind of woman to use foul language, but he obviously knows this is not

necessarily the case, since at the same time he adds, "Who can say how her youth was spent?" Even though he is extremely defensive when the agent suggests that ISeeU (Astrakhan) knows his wife, Joseph's suspicions that Joanne is capable of cheating on him frequently surface. While he exhibits jealousy and questions his wife's actions, Joseph does not examine his own behaviors very closely.

Joseph is in his early fifties. He drinks quite a bit throughout the play, starting with a vodka and tonic and apparently ending with straight vodka. He also refers to having been drinking Bloody Marys on the day he inadvertently gave Astrakhan access to his computer. He seems to urge drinks on his wife throughout the play.

Joseph's first wife, Annabel, died of cancer. While she was undergoing chemotherapy, Annabel became pregnant and chose to have an abortion in Paris. Astrakhan claims the child was actually delivered; he has falsified documents to show that he is the child.

Joseph's daughter, Emma, is Annabel's daughter. She is in Paris when the play starts and tells Joanne that she has received an obscene phone call that sounded like her father's voice. At the age of twelve, Emma supposedly refused to attend her father's second wedding, which, if true, may indicate that Joseph's behavior to his first wife was less than exemplary.

Just how much Joseph tells the truth is somewhat obscured. When questioned by federal agents, he claims that he does not have much use for his computer; yet he not only has a computer, he also bought one for his wife. When talking to Joanne, he calls his computer a "lovely new machine" and admits that he likes visiting Web sites. Yet he tells Slake and McAlvane that he doesn't have difficulty resisting the urge to go online.

FlowBare

See Costa Astrakhan

ISeeU

See Costa Astrakhan

Dennis McAlvane

McAlvane is in the Secret Service and seems intent upon pleasing his superior, Slake. He is quick to speak in Slake's direction and quick to act at Slake's request. Without really showing a personality of his own, McAlvane is eager to display a knowledge of Slake's methods and desires. Slake calls him "Mac" and seems to look upon him as a promising protégé.

McAlvane is a bit younger than Slake, which would put him in his thirties. He is the junior federal agent investigating Astrakhan's activities. Described by Kopit as a trainee

trying to emulate Slake, McAlvane does not take the initiative in the two sessions in which he and Slake question Joseph. He is like an echo, repeating what Slake says and reinforcing his arguments. When he does take the lead in talking about sending the Elliots to jail, he receives a mild reproof from Slake. Immediately, McAlvane takes his cue, agreeing with Slake's adjustment to his statement about Joanne being the most likely one to be imprisoned as long as Joseph cooperates.

Orin Slake

Slake is supposed to look as if he is in his forties. Dressed in a dark, undistinguished suit and tie, he has an open, friendly face and easy smile. He even pretends that he would be willing to conduct the interview with Joseph in a restaurant. This demeanor is deceptive, however. Slake is very serious about his job, which is to investigate the computer fraud perpetrated by Astrakhan, otherwise known as "ISeeU" or "BCuzICan."

Like Astrakhan, Slake is not above snooping and knows that Joseph has a lunch appointment at the Gramercy Tavern in an hour. He also indicates that he has records as to exactly how much time Joseph spends on the Internet. His name, "Slake," may suggest that he must satisfy his desire to know all about the case.

Displaying a veneer of geniality that thinly masks his zeal for closing in on his prey, Slake tells Joseph to stop "pretending" and to admit the truth. He insinuates that Joanne is involved in something illegal and will be arrested even if Joseph is not. Slake's main role seems to be that of interrogator, the kind who assumes guilt whether it is present or not.

Themes

Appearances

Illusion is something magicians make a living creating, and Astrakhan makes a life of it. To himself, he appears bigger than life, almost godlike. In reality, he is a criminal whom federal agents are trying to apprehend. He toys with them, keeping up the appearance of power and control.

In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, the heroine, Rosalind, poses as a man and hides her true appearance from the man she loves. So too does Joanne keep back her true nature from her husband. She may have a scandalous past, as the pictures Joseph shows her seem to indicate, but she never admits to it. Although she complains to Joseph that she is "staggered at how little" he understands her, Joanne seems to prefer to maintain appearances that make it impossible for him to truly know her. Joseph also is interested in maintaining appearances. He is elusive about his computer use, claiming that he prefers to write things out by hand. It seems likely that he publishes works of dubious merit.

Infidelity

The question of faithfulness is key in the Elliots' marriage. They were not faithful to their first spouses, so how can they be sure they are faithful to each other? Joanne does seem to have a little more contact with her ex-husband, Francis, than is normal, and Joseph is fixated on whether she is cheating on him. He even asks her if she gets a charge from the indecent way Francis talks to her.

Jealousy is already Joseph's weak point, but Astrakhan adds fuel to the fire when he manufactures evidence (if it is manufactured) of a sexual liaison between himself and Joanne. Like Iago, who stirs up Othello's mistrust of Desdemona in Shakespeare's play *Othello,* Astrakhan incites Joseph's suspicions of his wife. These suspicions seem to be confirmed by the photos that Astrakhan has made available, though Joseph knows that Astrakhan has invented some incorrect information about his own fidelity.

Identity Theft

At the core of every human being is identity. People spend years defining who they are. They decide where to go to college, what to choose as a career, and whom to marry. They build reputations, assets, and credit histories. All that the Elliots have built is wiped out with Astrakhan's computer hacking. In changing their identities, Astrakhan is usurping them.

Troubled by a lack of self-esteem and recognition, Astrakhan decides that he is not satisfied with his parents. His mother, Glenda, was a dental hygienist and sometime

prostitute killed by her former husband, a tap dancer with Tourette's Syndrome (an inherited, neurological disorder characterized by repeated involuntary movements and uncontrollable vocal sounds, often including profanity). Astrakhan decides that they are not his real parents, so he rewrites history to become Joseph's son. He promises to take care of his new "parents" with the financial resources he has stolen from them. The Elliots lose their identities, and Astrakhan gains a new one.

Privacy and the Internet

Computer technology is a useful tool in *Y2K*. Joanne keeps a journal on the computer. Joseph uses it to research material he is about to publish. But as they go about using the technology, they become vulnerable. Their innermost thoughts and feelings are exposed for someone else to use against them.

As home computers become networked to global servers, society in the twenty-first century becomes increasingly threatened by privacy invasion. As Keith Regan points out in *E-Commerce Times*, if a person has an e-mail address, someone is selling information about that person to the highest bidder. People prefer to think that their information remains in one place. The Elliots apparently believed that until it was too late.

Though a company may assure customers that their personal data will not be sold to others, the fact is that when a company changes hands, most likely the information, too, will be sold. There is no telling exactly where the information will end up, as Joseph learns.

According to the Federal Trade Commission, although computer technology makes it easier for companies to share information, it also makes it easier for law enforcement to track down criminals and prevent fraud. It advises, however, that people take precautions as to how much information they submit online. Perhaps such a warning is too late for most people. In Kopit's *Y2K*, the damage was done quickly, and it was apparently irreversible.

Sexual Impropriety

A distrusting couple, the Elliots have both been married before and seem a little uncomfortable in their second marriage. Perhaps that is because they committed adultery together while they were married to their previous spouses. Or perhaps it is because neither one can resist sexual impropriety.

Joseph and Joanne accuse each other of sexual liaisons with other people. They use very coarse terms to communicate. Elyse Sommer points out in *CurtainUp* that the way Joseph and Joanne talk to each other is not the way people normally talk to each other.

Charles McNulty notes in *Village Voice* that *Y2K* is "erotically charged." Demonstrations of affection and love between Joseph and Joanne almost seem out of place, because

the language they use with each other is lewd rather than respectful. Whether the sexual impropriety is mostly just talk or whether there is substance behind it is not certain, but it is a prevalent theme that drives the play.

Style

Narrator

Y2K is a contemporary drama narrated by Astrakhan, a teenager with the ability to hack into computers but apparently with little else in the way of accomplishments. He invents a number of events and details, so he is not a reliable narrator. Since he is also the villain of the piece, his purpose seems to be to create the story as well as to tell it.

The play proceeds in a disjointed style, with past and present blending together. Astrakhan's version of reality becomes dominant, so that it is difficult to determine if he invented most of the events, especially those that are explicitly sexual. At the end of the drama, Astrakhan's version of what happened has become a digital reality that the Elliots must cope with.

Setting

Set at the end of 1999, *Y2K* takes place just before the new millennium. There is considerable concern that computers not programmed to function in years with dates beyond 1999 will disrupt many of the normal functions of society. A book Joseph is about to publish, *Crisis*, predicts doom. Joseph questions whether this prediction is accurate. The physical settings vary from the ordinary to the eerie. For the most part, the play takes place in the Elliots's living room or in Joseph's office. But the play starts in an abandoned warehouse, a setting in which the Secret Service agents seem comfortable but in which Joseph is not.

Subject

Y2K deals with sexual indiscretions and how destructive they can be when made public. Joseph Elliot discovers that the computer age makes both discovering and using such information easier; he compares the situation to a house of cards that is "ready to come toppling at the slightest wind." One of Astrakhan's aliases is "BCuzICan." Kopit shows that once this kind of ammunition exists, it will be used, simply because it can be. The subject matter of the play was inspired by Kenneth Starr's investigation into Bill Clinton's sexual indiscretions and his later testimony about them, according to Kopit's preface.

Historical Context

The Monica Lewinsky Scandal

In June 1995, Monica Lewinsky began an internship at the White House. In mid-January 1998, FBI agents questioned Lewinsky about whether she had had a sexual relationship with then-president Bill Clinton. The next day, in a deposition he gave in another case involving allegations of sexual misconduct with Paula Jones, Clinton denied that he had had sexual relations with Lewinsky. The story of a possible affair with Lewinsky, and lying to cover it up, broke to the media just four days later, and the scandal escalated from there.

Federal independent counsel Kenneth Starr expanded his investigation of the Paula Jones suit to include Lewinsky. He filed a motion on April 14, 1998, to compel testimony about Lewinsky's relationship with Clinton from Secret Service agents. Starr also wanted to question Lewinsky, and she agreed to answer Starr's questions in return for immunity from prosecution. She testified before a grand jury on August 6, 1998, that she had had a sexual relationship with Clinton.

After a lengthy and expensive investigation into his relationship with Lewinsky and into statements he had made under oath about that relationship, Clinton was impeached. On December 19, 1998, the House of Representatives passed two articles of impeachment against him, with eleven counts of perjury, obstruction of justice, and abuse of power. Clinton was the second president of the United States to be impeached while in office. (Andrew Johnson was impeached in 1868.)

Impeachment is one step in the process that may lead to a public official being removed from office, if the official is also convicted of the crimes for which he or she is impeached. Because Clinton was not convicted, he was not removed from office. As he finished his term in January 2001, Clinton avoided indictment for lying under oath by agreeing to pay $25,000 in fines and accepting a five-year suspension of his license to practice law.

Y2K Fears

Y2K stands for Year 2000. (K is an abbreviation for thousand.) In the late 1990s, there was growing fear that computers whose built-in, twodigit calendars were not programmed to recognize *00* as signifying the year 2000 would fail to operate beginning at midnight on January 1 of that year. Since computers are involved in providing most services necessary to modern cities, businesses, and residences, there was a great deal of concern about what systems would fail and what the results might be. Some of the concerns included loss of computer data, loss of utilities and power, loss of telephone services, breakdowns in transportation (including air-control systems), and the resulting social and economic chaos.

In *Time Bomb 2000*, written to help people prepare for the possible disruption in their lives, Edward and Jennifer Yourdon advised people to "spend the remaining months until the new millennium paring down and simplifying your life, so that you can face it with as much flexibility as possible." And they were among the more moderate voices. The anticipated problems did not develop, however. Virtually all computer systems were upgraded to recognize 00 as the year 2000 before the date changed. The new millennium was celebrated around the world with no major disruptions in services.

Critical Overview

Many reviewers regarded *Y2K* as inferior to Kopit's other notable works, such as *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad, Wings,* and *Indians*. John Simon wrote in *New York Magazine* that *Y2K* is not a believable story and not of the same quality as Kopit's respected works. McNulty observed in *Village Voice*, "Kopit makes things somewhat more confusing than he needs to." Sommer in *CurtainUp* called *Y2K* "a thriller that fails to thrill" and compared it unfavorably to John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation* and Craig Lucas's *Dying Gaul*, complaining that Kopit's play "has none of the complexity and depth of either." She concluded, "Presumably the resolution that never comes is intended to leave you pondering the issue of our eroding privacy. . . . In point of fact, you're simply left feeling you've had an unsatisfying meal that didn't even offer a dessert."

Writing in *Variety*, Charles Isherwood allowed, "The play turns on authentically disturbing questions. "He added, though, "Kopit doesn't deeply explore these issues. He's content to tell a scary story, without examining the larger issues it raises." Isherwood concluded by agreeing with Sommer that "the play seems slight indeed, and even a little half-baked."

On the other hand, some critics welcomed *Y2K* as an exploration of the moral risks of the information age. Jeffrey Eric Jenkins, writing in *Seattle Post-Intelligencer,* called the play "riveting, paranoic, and plausible." Martin F. Kohn of the *Detroit Free Press* described it as "a chilling play that taps into whatever millennial angst is floating nearby."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Schulthies is an editor who holds a master's degree in English literature and teaches English at the community college level. In the following essay, she examines surrealistic evil and its harmful effects in Kopit's play.

Arthur Kopit's contemporary drama *Y2K* creates a feeling of lurking evil in a surrealistic setting. Kopit suggests an ominous unreality that hints at, rather than shouts of, potential danger. The evil feels close at hand because it "lives" in personal computers, which people keep in their private homes. As people use their computers, they reveal personal information in e-mails and in their Internet use. In *Y2K*, Kopit poses the question, what if the most personal details of people's lives could be tapped into and used against them?

Computers "talk" to one another at high speeds, networks record messages sent and received, and information of all kinds is submitted and accepted. But, as Kopit points out, information is also being tracked. Personal profiles are collected and saved. "Cookies" store strings of text on a user's computer in order to monitor the user's activities. Servers record the Internet Protocol address of the user and sometimes link it to personal information. As his drama progresses, Kopit shows that as people are served by the computer, the computer is serving others who may be evil.

Kopit's *Y2K* shows the disastrous effects of privacy invasion in the technological age. When Joseph Elliot uses his computer, he is unaware of the lurking presence of someone bent on revenge. But other eyes can monitor his progress through a Web site and keep track of his preferences and personal data. Later Joseph is shocked to find out that using his computer opened the door to prying eyes, because, as he relates to his wife, he thought the computer was his "FRIEND."

Joseph and his wife learn that there are eyes eagerly compiling all the personal data they can. As their daily lives crumble like so many bits of scrambled data, the Elliots enter a surrealistic world, haunted by the fact that their personal identities are not their own.

Among the billions of people on the earth, many use computers on a daily basis. The scope for privacy invasion is vast and frightening. In Y2K, Kopit skims the surface of such a possibility, using a villain who respects no one and who recognizes no limits. Inspired by the way Kenneth Starr pursued Monica Lewinsky after her affair with President Clinton, Kopit displays a personal vendetta that destroys the lives of others.

In his preface to the drama, Kopit writes that he was impressed by what he called Starr's "fascism." Webster's dictionary defines fascism as "a strongly nationalistic regime characterized by regimentation, rigid censorship, and suppression of opposition." Kopit sees these qualities in the political environment that allowed Kenneth Starr to examine the most intimate details of Lewinsky's life.

Y2K starts off in an abandoned warehouse, where Joseph is being questioned by two Secret Service men. It is an unbelievable setting and an unbelievable circumstance; Joseph is being interrogated, but interrogated with unlikely, nonsensical questions that he does not appear to understand. This is followed by a scene in which Joseph learns that his daughter has called his apartment and said that she received an obscene phone call from someone who sounded like him.

Unreality follows unreality in such a tangle that it is hard to make sense of the facts. Most of the play takes place in the living room of Joseph and Joanne, who are both in their second marriage. In what is supposedly a private domain, the two are watched by the play's villain, the young and vindictive Costa Astrakhan.

Suffering from an apparent God complex, Astrakhan is an outrageous figure with neon hair and neon shoes. He has a taste for power that he is only able to satisfy through the computer. "And though you cannot see where I really am, I can see all of you," Astrakhan gloats.

Astrakhan is infuriated over being accused of cheating, though he admits to the audience he has cheated. Expelled from Joseph Elliot's class for plagiarism, Astrakhan decides that no one can hide from him. Through technology, he has the power to slake his desire for revenge.

As Kopit notes in his preface, the pursuit of Monica Lewinsky by Kenneth Starr was something Kopit found alarming. With his penchant for prying, Astrakhan seems to represent Kenneth Starr. If so, then Astrakhan's evil madness would reflect a kind of diabolical insanity that Kopit saw in Starr. Just as Starr based his investigation on actual events that were nonetheless denied, so too does Astrakhan base his attack on recorded facts.

Astrakhan is a demented figure of malice. His grasp of reality is so minimal that it is impossible to tell whether there is any real reason for his act of revenge or whether he invented it. Certainly he seems to have no conscience. Kopit seems to indicate that therein lies the danger: if someone has the ability to spy on others, he probably will, whether there is justification for it or not. Evil will take command.

The setting for the play feels unreal partly because what happens and what doesn't happen is unclear. The audience sees things that one character remembers but another does not. One moment the Elliots seem like a devoted couple, and the next they are insulting each other. At times there is warmth and understanding between them, and at others there is animosity. It is difficult to determine whether they are to be pitied; they almost seem to become part of the evil that is haunting them.

Kopit shows that reality is a fragile thing. Joanne admits to Joseph that she got into a limousine with her ex-husband, Francis Summerhays, because it was raining. Her husband finds his wife's behavior extraordinary and questions her on it. After all, she had just been comparing Francis to a vampire. Does Joanne really despise her ex-husband? Or is she fascinated by him? As for Joseph, he seems overly adamant about

how little he uses a computer. Does he really only turn on his computer only every once in awhile, or does he use it for something that might be embarrassing? What is true?

Unreal circumstances plague *Y2K*. Bits of reality mix with complete fiction in such a way that the real story is unclear. Both Joanne and Joseph are unsure of events, but so, too, is the audience. Did Joanne have an affair with Joseph's male student? She certainly seems to think it more likely that Joseph would have an affair with one of his female students. Do either of the Elliots know with certainty that the other is a moral, decent person? After all, they supposedly had an affair together while Joseph's first wife was dying of cancer.

Kopit seems to be saying that perhaps no one's life should be scrutinized too closely. Joseph and Joanne feel the impact on their personal relationships as they focus on how little they trust each other rather than on how they can start reclaiming their lives. Misery fills them, as neither knows how many of the lies Astrakhan invents have a basis in truth.

Joanne tells her husband that they can explain that all of the information is false—information on the computer that indicates that she is practically a prostitute and that he is a sex offender. But her husband replies, "But all of it is *not* fake. . . . Is it?"

All this doubt is substantiated by the slipperiness of *Y2K's* characters. There is no real reason to believe that Joanne and Joseph would not do any of the lewd things that are hinted at. After all, both of them use language that indicates a lack of sensitivity to each other, so it is not difficult to believe that they are inured to what is decent and what is not. On the other hand, there is quite a bit of evidence that the two genuinely care about each other, as when Joanne goes to comfort her husband when he is remembering his first wife's pregnancy during her chemotherapy. It seems unlikely that either would behave in a way calculated to hurt the other.

But the suspicion is there; evil has entered. When the incriminating photos make an appearance, Joanne at first denies they are real and then recalls that at least one of them may be. When she is asked if she really did make advances to Astrakhan, Joanne denies it, saying, "It's the sort of thing I generally remember. Joseph, have you lost your mind?"

Astrakhan is the supreme figure of evil in the play. He goes by a number of aliases, including "ISeeU." While he is watching others, Astrakhan clearly is not very much aware of himself. He invents a whole history in which he is the son of Joseph's first wife, Annabel. He plagiarizes a pornographic story and then claims it is an autobiography. He "remembers" having an affair with Joanne, who says she scarcely recalls meeting him. The question of how much of what he remembers is invention and how much is based on truth is never answered.

Strange as the circumstances are, the characters are stranger yet. They seem intent on sexual encounters, whether imagined or real, in a manner that seems to mirror the Starr investigation. The lines between what actually occurred and what didn't are blurred.

Joanne either went to see her mother or made up the trip as a cover for an illicit encounter; Joseph either used his computer as a paperweight or used it for something far less serviceable; Astrakhan either invented his encounters with, and dismissal by, Joanne or was simply recalling something Joanne preferred to forget.

If there was any clarity to the Elliots' lives to begin with, there certainly is none by the end of the play. The two become a mere invention, victims of the kind of abuse perpetrated by computer hackers. "We are nothing but abstractions now—strings of digits, signifying anything you want, floating in the ether," Joseph tells his wife.

Purposely playing on the fear of having identities recreated by someone with malignant intent, Kopit blends the known and the unknown so that the truth is impossible to detect. Unreality pervades, and evil is a felt but ill-defined presence. Reputation, finances, and trust vanish before the victims understand what is happening. The computer—the trusted and seemingly benign servant—has become a corrupt master.

Source: April Schulthies, Critical Essay on *Y2K,* in *Drama for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Poquette has a bachelor of arts degree in English and specializes in writing drama and film. In the following essay, Poquette explores Kopit's manipulation of truth and reality.

Today, as never before, ordinary people can acquire the power to reshape the reality of a person's life—by becoming computer hackers. In Kopit's *Y2K,* the playwright elevates hacking to an art form, in the process challenging the audience's definition of truth in the digital age.

The nineteen-year-old computer hacker in *Y2K,* Costa Astrakhan, who is also the play's narrator, addresses the audience early in the play: "With what I know, I can go anywhere, and you can too."

For the duration of the play, Astrakhan demonstrates to the audience exactly how to alter a person's life in cyberspace, using Joseph and Joanne Elliot as his real-life tutorial. By the end of the play, Astrakhan has revised the Elliots' respective lives so that Joseph, a Random House book editor and teacher, is a child pornographer, while Joanne, who works at Sotheby's, the famous art auction house, is "a kind of porno star." Says Joseph to his wife: "And now it seems he has revised my life. No, rewritten it. I've got a whole new history, Joanne."

It is an ironic twist of events for Joseph, a man who has made much of his fortune editing others' stories. He says as much to his wife:

If I could just step back, I would admire it. Because what he's done of course is written a kind of novel. Only not in the old fashioned linear one-sentencefollows-the-other sort of way, but, somehow, in all dimensions, simultaneously. A novel built of zeroes and ones. And we are its characters.

Through his computer hacking, Kopit arms Astrakhan with a new-age model for storytelling, a real-life story on a grand scale that surpasses the impact of any other medium. Books, plays, films—all of these artistic creations require the reader or viewer to transport themselves inside the world of the story. But in Astrakhan's digital story, the audience is the entire world, and the characters are real-life people who face real-life consequences—not figments of an author's imagination.

"We are nothing but abstractions now—strings of digits, signifying anything you want, floating in the ether," Joseph says to Joanne.

In this era of modern drama, where the boundaries of realism have been tested for more than a hundred years, Kopit breaks through into new territory, creating an art form for the new millennium—the scripting of reality itself. In the beginning, however, the audience watching Kopit's play doesn't suspect that this is what Astrakhan is doing, in part due to his style of keep-no-secrets narration. As Katie Hafner of the *New York* Times notes to Kopit in an e-mail interview, "[Astrakhan is] a classic unreliable narrator."

Throughout the play, Astrakhan seems to be upfront and honest, telling people both bad and good things about himself, when in fact he is a liar. As Kopit says in his e-mail interview, "Generally, we assume that when someone says something in a seemingly honest way, it's true—or at least what that person thinks is true." Astrakhan's forthright and direct manner is put in an even better light when contrasted with the Elliots, who aren't always truthful with each other. This helps to sway the audience into believing that Astrakhan's narration of current and past events—which the audience is seeing brought to life on stage—is in fact correct. For a large portion of the play, the audience assumes that Joanne has had an affair with Astrakhan, who describes the sordid details of their affair in vivid and specific detail. Says Astrakhan, "Am I being indiscrete? I'm sorry but there's no avoiding it. Not if honesty is to be our policy. And truth to be told."

It is a complete shock to the audience to find out that Joanne doesn't even recall meeting Astrakhan. Up until this point, the audience thinks they are getting more accurate information than the Elliots since Astrakhan confides in the audience constantly. This final, long scene, in which Joseph describes the particulars of how Astrakhan has ruined their lives, is the turning point in the play, where both the Elliots and the audience realize that they've been had. "Strategically, Kopit wants to challenge the solidity of both the Elliots' and the audience's sense of reality," said John Lahr in his review in the *New Yorker.*

Astrakhan's tendency to have false memories is particularly interesting since he is so adamant about telling the truth. The play is saturated with references to honesty and truth, and many of them are from Astrakhan, emphasizing to the audience that he is an honest person. Astrakhan addresses the audience: "I only tell the truth. That's because lying is obscene." And yet Astrakhan lies to himself and the audience, even when he is reenacting fake events from his past, such as when Joanne asks how old he is in a false memory. "Sixteen," he replies, having just told Joseph a few minutes ago that he is fifteen. When describing another event from his false past with the Elliots, Astrakhan hints at the narrative process that he uses to rewrite both his own history and that of the Elliots: "not a day passes that I don't bring it back to mind, with, somehow, each time, some new detail emerging, until now it seems even clearer than it was back then. Funny, how memory works."

The idea of real versus fictionalized memories is familiar territory for Kopit. Says Lahr, "*Y2K* . . . is another of Kopit's brilliant speculations informed by fact, an unnerving hall of mirrors that adds a new perspective to his obsession with memory and identity." Astrakhan takes his cue from a Flaubert quote that Joseph likes to quote to his writing class: "Everything you invent is true." This is certainly the case with Astrakhan's new brand of digital fiction, although it needs a kernel of truth upon which to support the digital narrative. In the case of the Elliots, this seed of truth is never disclosed to the audience. Although Joseph reveals one secret to Joanne, the fact that he and his ex-wife aborted their child during its last trimester when she was undergoing chemotherapy, this is not the other secret to which both he and Astrakhan refer. One suspects that the secret is most likely some dabbling in pornography since this is the major crime that Astrakhan pins on Joseph in the hacker's digital story. Says Joseph to Joanne: "Speaking for myself, there are things he has found—about me—and which

he's tucked in with all of the really dreadful 'invented' stuff—which is going to come out." Joseph suggests that Joanne has dark secrets as well, especially after seeing lurid photos of her with other men, some of which don't look fake. Whether Joanne is telling the truth to Joseph doesn't matter. In the digital age, the hacker's reality is the only one that anybody else will believe. "Astrakhan has the power to re-create the virtual universe at will in his own demented image," says Lahr.

So what is Astrakhan's image? What is the idea that he develops so carefully when he revises the Elliots' lives and his own memories? He wishes to be a part of the Elliots' family. And by manipulating their lives and scripting new histories for them, Astrakhan writes himself into their lives for good. Astrakhan tells the audience that Joseph was "his way in," then corrects himself: "No, let's be honest: to me he is far more than that. In fact, always has been. I just hadn't discovered it yet." Astrakhan's "discovery," is the aborted baby, and through the hacker's manipulation of hospital records, he brings the baby back to life and becomes that baby. Astrakhan foreshadows this turn of events at several points throughout the play, especially when he refers to Joseph as a kind of father figure. "If only someone like you had entered my life earlier, my life would be entirely different now," Astrakhan tells Joseph in a false memory.

In another false memory of his first visit to the Elliots' apartment, Astrakhan tells Joseph: "When I publish my first novel, I tell you this is where I'm gonna live." Astrakhan goes on to clarify that he didn't mean live with "you and your wife . . . nice as that might be!" Astrakhan does in fact publish his novel, at least in the digital sense, by creating the new life stories of the Elliots. And in the end, he does end up living with the Elliots, or at least the audience suspects that he will, based on the last few lines of the play:

Like any homecoming, it will be difficult at first. For all of us. So much to get used to! But we will. In time. And then . . . Yes . . . It will all be, once again, as I remember it. . . . And I will take care of them, forever and ever.

"The villain of Mr. Kopit's slender play is, in fact, quite a twisted piece of humanity," says Peter Marks in his *New York Times* review, and by the end of the play, the audience agrees. Joseph could try to fight the hacker by proving his innocence, but the tools at the hacker's disposal are too massive. Astrakhan has created such a large, intricate, digital history that it is almost impossible to disprove. Furthermore, to mount such a massive campaign would require funds that Joseph and Joanne no longer have because Astrakhan has made their bank accounts unattainable, as he himself is unattainable. As Joseph explains to Joanne: "Thompson says it's almost impossible to know where he actually is, his messages are all time-delayed and routed in a Byzantine way Thompson claims is like a work of art." For the Elliots, the unfortunate, unwilling characters in a hacker's digital story, reality is whatever their new puppetmaster says it is.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on *Y2K*, in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Semansky is an instructor of English literature and composition and writes regularly for literary magazines and journals. In this essay, he considers the idea of representation in Kopit's play.

On the surface, Kopit's play, *Y2K*, is a cautionary tale about computer technology taking over peoples' lives. In positioning technology as the enemy, Kopit raises questions about the representative power of words and images, suggesting that they hold the key to human identity.

In his preface, Kopit writes that he was inspired to write the play after being outraged by Special Investigator Kenneth Starr's intrusion into the private life of Monica Lewinsky during his investigation of her relationship with former president Bill Clinton. Like the Clinton-Lewinsky story, Kopit's play releases information incrementally, by different players at key points, essentially reshaping what the audience (the audience for the Clinton-Lewinsky story being the media-consuming public) believes to be the truth. Both stories change the audience perception of the central characters by throwing private actions into public light. *Y2K,* however, suggests that what happens to Joseph Elliot and his wife, Joanne, can happen to anyone.

In foregrounding the power of technology to reconstitute human identity, Kopit begs certain questions about what makes people who they are. Assumptions about human identity that have guided thinking in the industrialized world include the notion that identity is universal and is based on features such as character and personality, which are intrinsic to a person. In contrast, Kopit's play emphasizes the notion that identity rests primarily upon the idea of narrative, rather than anything intrinsic or essential. That is, the story of a person's life, in fact, is that person's life. Kopit underscores this idea by manipulating readers' expectations of the truth, so that characters such as Joseph and Joanne, who once seemed to be certain types of people, turn out (possibly) to be other types entirely. By putting stories inside stories inside stories, Kopit blurs the distinction between reality and fiction, creating a hall of mirrors in which characters can no longer recognize characters and readers must construct their own theories for what happened and why. There is no single demonstrable truth against standing behind the many versions of events.

The play opens with punk hacker Costa Astrakhan bragging about his power and his ubiquity. Telling the audience he is everywhere, "on the outskirts of your mind, in the ether, in the darkness," Astrakhan portrays himself as an arrogant and unreliable narrator. Astrakhan appears both as a realistic character in the play, interacting with Joanne and Joseph during a dinner at their apartment, and as a demonic presence, hovering over and commenting on the play's action. In the latter role, he is symbolic of technology's pervasive influence in peoples' lives. Astrakhan's speeches about his power, his hacking history, and his relationship with Joanne provide the explanation for much of what happens to Joanne and Joseph. In this way, the play is didactic, meaning that its purpose is to teach the audience something. What it teaches, however, is not so

clear. Ostensibly, the play is about the evils of computer technology; but it is also about trust, marital and generational, and the relationship between private and public realities.

Without Astrakhan's speeches, the play would be more of a mystery. By using Astrakhan as a symbolic character, Kopit introduces nonrealistic elements in the play. Nonrealistic plays differ from realistic plays in that they often distort character and time and use symbolic as opposed to realistic settings. Samuel Beckett's plays, for example, are nonrealistic plays, as they usually ignore both clock time and historical time and have absurd settings, such as cartoon-like characters inhabiting trashcans. Other nonrealistic playwrights include Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, and David J. LeMaster. By combining realistic elements such as believable settings and action with nonrealistic elements, Kopit further reinforces the idea that reality itself is an unstable phenomenon over which people often have little control.

Take the character of Joanne, for example. Kopit masterfully pits readers' knowledge of her, which they gain through seeing her interact with her husband, against Astrakhan's story of her life, which he puts together by hacking into computer systems, including her own and her husband's. At first, she appears to be a loving, if somewhat distracted, wife to Joseph, effervescent and with a dry sense of humor. The audience finds out through the couple's interaction that Joanne is fending off the advances of her ex-husband, Francis Summerhays, a wealthy and obsessive venture capitalist, whom Joseph despises. Astrakhan's representation of her mixes what appears to be fact—details of her birth, education, etc.—with a story of how they came to be lovers. However, even though readers have every reason to doubt Astrakhan's version of Joanne's life and especially of their "affair"—after all, he is a proven liar, plagiarist, drug abuser, and self-confessed hacker—they have no credible alternative to what really happened. Joanne's credibility has already been compromised. Joseph distrusts her, partly because of his own jealousy of Francis and partly because she was reluctant to provide complete information about her encounter with Francis. In addition, throughout most of the play, the characters drink heavily, causing the audience to question the truthfulness and motivation of their words.

As the audience re-evaluates the truthfulness of the various characters' versions of events in light of new information, they also begin to question the characters' motivation. This resembles the way in which the Clinton-Lewinsky affair unfolded and, indeed, the way in which many such situations unfold, where a secret is gradually brought to light by others not initially involved. In some ways, the play resembles a courtroom drama with evidence offered, stories presented and denied, intent and motivation probed, and a jury voting to believe one side's version of events versus another side's.

One of the primary theories that viewers and readers of *Y2K* must consider is the possibility that the entire play is a construct of Astrakhan's mind. His words frame the action, and his god-like presence during the course of events suggests that he controls what gets said and done. Although Astrakhan has claimed that he initially became interested in Joseph because he wanted to sleep with a girl in Joseph's writing class, readers are later told that his "true" motivation is to reunite with the Elliots, whom he

believes are his biological parents. But even this motivation for ruining their lives is questionable, given Astrakhan's previous explanations.

If readers consider the play as the machinations of Astrakhan's mind, complete with the invention of characters, self-referentiality, and stories inside stories, they must ask themselves what larger symbolic meaning this hacker fantasy holds. One explanation is that Astrakhan's story represents the vengeance of a younger generation upon an older one. As someone barely out of his teens (or so he says at the beginning of the play), Astrakhan stands in for what marketing demographers sometime refer to as Generation Y, those born between 1979 and 1994. The children of baby boomers, they are also sometimes referred to as Echo Boomers, or the Millennium Generation. Even more so than Generation X, which preceded them, Generation Y has something to prove. Often raised by parents who espouse the idealistic values of the 1960s, but with all the material privilege that the bull market of the 1980s and 1990s have given them, Generation Y'ers are the literal embodiment of deeply rooted contradictions.

Carving out their own identities, then, means grappling with the identity of their parents. Astrakhan, then, as hacker and playwright, "solves" this problem by first creating his parents, the Elliots, then destroying them, and then, in the play's final image, holding himself out as their possible salvation. As a Generation Y son of boomers, he creates the family he never had, and on his own terms. The fact that it is a virtual family is apropos for a generation raised on the (for Kopit, ironic) promise of computer technology to improve the quality of human life.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on *Y2K,* in *Drama for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #4

In the following interview, based on e-mail exchanges, Arthur Kopit discusses the ideas behind, research for, and technological context of his play Y2K.

KATIE HAFNER. How did you get the idea for "*Y2K*"?

ARTHUR KOPIT. From thinking about the way Kenneth Starr was pursuing Monica Lewinsky. Which is to say, I was not thinking about computers at all but invasion of privacy. And I was feeling outrage. And that outrage went completely off the charts when Starr tried to subpoena records showing what books Monica Lewinsky had bought. I thought, my God, there's no stopping him! If you're looking for a real threat to our country, this is it. And that led me to thinking about the ways all of us were vulnerable to such an assault in the future and right now. And those thoughts led to this play.

Q. The technical language spewed by Astrakhan, the hacker, is very impressive. Did you interview hackers?

A. Didn't need to. I found so much material on the Net—interviews with hackers, articles written by hackers, profiles of hackers, that getting the vocabulary right was not hard.

Q. And why the rather unusual name of Astrakhan for the hacker?

A. I modeled Astrakhan's renegade character, at least somewhat, on a wildly unpredictable, deeply gifted student I once had in a playwriting workshop I was giving. He was Armenian, or claimed he was. After a while, I began to suspect he was also a terrorist. He was a good reference point. I chose Astrakhan because my wife had just bought an Astrakhan hat, and the word jumped out at me. By the way, Astrakhan is not his real name. I'm not sure what his real name is. In the world he inhabits, no one knows his real name.

Q. He's the narrator in the play, which is intriguing because he's a classic unreliable narrator.

A. The question of "what is reliable information and what is not" is at the heart of the story. Generally, we assume that when someone says something in a seemingly honest way, it's true—or at least what that person thinks is true. I wanted to play with that idea to such a degree that the audience would suddenly understand that what they had been accepting as true was in fact totally in question. Because that's what happens to Joseph at the end, isn't it? Almost overnight, his whole world has become unreliable. And I wanted my audience to experience his state of shock.

Q. Have you had any experiences like this yourself, especially when it comes to electronic information?

A. Fortunately, no. I did get a virus though, and inadvertently sent it on. Then I realized I was "infected" and had to tell everyone I had been in contact with. And found it a bit

embarrassing. I mean, this really is sexual. Not literally, of course, but close. So, in that trivial way—my virus was the equivalent of a minor cold—I saw how easily one's entire life could be undone, the way a common cold can turn into pneumonia. And kill you.

Q. The play is erotic, from beginning to end. Why did you infuse it with so much eroticism?

A. I wanted the audience to be not only Joseph, watching his world collapse, but Astrakhan, on the hunt, powerful, almost invulnerable, and that meant having them experience the erotic thrill Astrakhan gets from invading Joseph's privacy. It's really a rape, isn't it? For which, by the way, he'll never get punished, even if he's caught. Because the National Security Agency will hire him. Or Microsoft. Because he's that good at this.

Q. I noticed that the *Y2K* computer glitch itself is hardly mentioned at all in the play. Why the title?

A. I'm using *Y2K* metaphorically, hoping it will suggest the deeper, more profound Year 2000 Problem: our potential loss of personal and political freedom through technology. We depend on these machines now for almost everything and are therefore vulnerable in ways we have never been. Our view of what is real and what is not, and what is inviolable and what is not, is going to have to change. So will the way we see ourselves. In a very short time, you'll be able to find out pretty much anything you want to know about anyone.

Q. Has this play made you less sanguine about the future?

A. Actually, I don't think I look at it any one way. It's a story isn't it—what we're living? So I'm mostly curious. To see how it's all going to play out. It's like a great epic drama. The next act is about to begin. We're coming back from intermission all abuzz. And we have no idea what we are going to see. Scary thought. Exciting thought.

Q. Speaking of intermissions, there isn't one in this play. Why is that?

A. The play's intentions don't allow for one. I was in an earthquake once, in Mexico, and it's startling how, instantly, what you had always believed was solid turns out not to be. That's why my play is so quick, and doesn't so much end as stop. It's about the suddenness of it all.

Q. In the end, Astrakhan's motive for ruining these two people's lives seems completely unclear.

A. I'm not sure he has a motive other than gratification. Anyway, I'm not sure how much we ever understand about motives. In any case, a motive would have let us off the hook. But for those who need motives, Astrakhan does give one. He says, "I do it because I can." It's one of the few places I think he's telling the truth.

Q. What do you think of the Internet? When did you first go online?

A. I went online in a serious way at the end of the summer before last, when I got the idea for this play. So I was a bit like Joseph with computers. Which was good for the play, because my inevitable mistakes I knew would be like his mistakes. I did crash my system during that time, which threw me no end, because I had only a narrow window of time to write the play. I spent three whole days talking to tech support people at I.B.M. and Microsoft, trying to figure out what I had done wrong so I could get my computer working again. In the end, I had to reformat my hard disk, erase everything and basically start over.

And then I saw how I could turn those three terrible lost days into three invaluable days of research. I simply used this incident in the play. And what happened to me happens now to Joseph, and is the pivotal event that allows Astrakhan to get in. That accident speeded things along. So, at the moment, I'm happy with the Internet. But that could end. I mean, it's not a solid relationship.

Source: Katie Hafner and Arthur Kopit, "Going Online and Finding a Window on the Times," in the *New York Times*, December 5, 1999, p. 7, section 2.

Topics for Further Study

At the end of the play, Astrakhan seems to get away with his crimes. Write a different ending in which he somehow has to pay for what he has done. Imitate Kopit's style so that your ending blends with the rest of the play and seems plausible.

Research Internet privacy. What kinds of security software solutions are available? Are they effective? What kinds of regulations govern the Internet? Are they sufficient? Write a one-page summary of your findings.

One of the themes in *Y2K* is revenge. The preface quotes Stalin's statement on the sweetness of vengeance, "To choose one's victims, to prepare one's plan minutely, to slake an implacable vengeance, and then to go to bed . . . there is nothing sweeter in the world." Is revenge sweet or is it bitter? Write an answer that draws on Kopit's play and on your own experience.

In the play, Costa Astrakhan repeatedly says that he is honest. Do you think that he is aware or unaware that he is dishonest? Explain why or why not.

Further Study

Berlant, Lauren, and Lisa Duggan, eds., *Our Monica, Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the Public Interest (Sexual Cultures)*, New York University Press, 2001.

This anthology criticizes the relationship between politics and sensationalism.

Eatwell, Roger, *Fascism: A History*, Allen Lane, 1996. Eatwell shows how fascist ideology succeeded in Italy and Germany and failed in France and England. He suggests that the preconditions for the future rise of fascism exist.

McLean, Deckle, *Privacy and Its Invasion,* Praeger, 1995.

McLean uses his background in communications to look at the erosion of privacy in the United States by corporations and institutions.

Peterson, Chris, *I Love the Internet, but I Want My Privacy, Too!*, Prima Publishing, 1998.

The author explores the advantages and disadvantages of shared information and looks at steps government and corporations are taking to ensure privacy.

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Isherwood, Charles, Review of *Y2K*, in *Variety*, December 13, 1999.

Jenkins, Jeffrey Eric, "Humana Fest Puts Its Stamp on a Fresh Crop of Plays," in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, March 25, 1999.

Kohn, Martin F., "Next Stop: Detroit," in the *Detroit Free Press*, April 4, 1999.

Lahr, John, "Open Secrets," in the *New Yorker*, Vol. 75, No. 39, December 20, 1999, pp. 100-101.

Marks, Peter, "He's Mad, He's Bad and He's Got Their Passwords," in the *New York Times*, December 8, 1999, p. 7.

McNulty, Charles, "On the Verge," in the *Village Voice*, March 31-April 6, 1999.

Regan, Keith, "Is Internet Privacy an Oxymoron," in *ECommerce Times* (http://www.newsfactor.com/perl/story/ 9318.html), April 27, 2001.

Simon, John, "Mystery Science Theatre 2000," in *New York Magazine*, December 20, 1999.

Sommer, Elyse, "A CurtainUp Review: *Y2K*," in *CurtainUp*, July 27, 2000.

Yourdon, Edward, and Jennifer Yourdon, *Time Bomb 2000*, Macmillan, 1997, pp. 506.

BOOKRAGS

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Project Editor
David Galens

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

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

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

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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