The Young Man from Atlanta Study Guide

The Young Man from Atlanta by Horton Foote

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Introduction

Foote's writing career began in the late 1930s, so *The Young Man from Atlanta* is obviously one of the later works in his oeuvre. As an experienced writer, Foote does not shy away from sensitive and contemporary themes. In *The Young Man from Atlanta*, Foote explores grief, religious faith, homosexuality, suicide, race relations, the American dream, and deceit. As Ben Brantley remarked in his 1997 review for the *New York Times*, Foote is "a sly, compelling quiet playwright" who "operates from the assumption that life is a slow, steady series of unanswerable questions and losses against which there is finally no protection." According to Brantley, much of Foote's work is informed by the precept that "if you don't talk about the darkest aspects of life, then they don't exist." Indeed, Foote leaves much in this work unsaid, and for some, that is its greatest strength.

Author Biography

Horton Foote was born on March 14, 1916, in Wharton, Texas, to Albert and Hallie Foote. Foote is one of America's most prolific and well-known stage, television, and screen writers. As a young man, Foote pursued the stage as a performer and published his first play while he was working as an actor in 1939. From 1933 to 1935, he studied at the Pasadena Playhouse School of Theatre, and from 1937 to 1939, he attended the Tamara Darkarhovna School of Theatre. Foote later worked as an elevator man on Park Avenue and a teacher prior to starting a Washington D.C. theatre school and theatre with his wife and theatrical producer, Lillian Vallish. Foote married Vallish in 1945; the couple had four children.

Following their time in Washington D.C., the Footes returned to New York, where eventually Foote's career took off. Some of his plays are *Laura Dennis* (1996), *Taking Pictures* (1996), *Night Seasons* (1996), and *The Last of the Thorntons* (2000). Foote's more than sixty works have earned him great praise, including an Emmy Award nomination in 1958 for *Old Man*; a best screenplay Academy Award for *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) as well as a nomination for *Tender Mercies* (1985). He received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *The Young Man from Atlanta* in 1995.

As Foote approached his seventies and eighties, he continued to earn accolades and numerous awards including an Academy Award nomination for best screenplay and an Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences for *The Trip to Bountiful*(1985), a Screen Laurel Award from the Writers Guild of America (1993), a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Writers Guild of America (1999), a Master American Dramatist Award of the Pen American Center (2000), and the National Medal of Arts (2000). In addition, Foote was inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame in 1996 and into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1998. Foote has also received honorary degrees from Drew University, Austin College, Spalding University, and the American Film Institute.

Plot Summary

Scene 1

The first scene of *The Young Man from Atlanta* opens with one of the main characters, Will Kidder, having a conversation with his co-worker, Tom Jackson, at their office at the Sunshine Southern Wholesale Grocery. While reviewing the architectural plans for his new house, Will boasts that his home is worth more than two hundred thousand dollars. Will becomes winded and tells Tom that his doctor told him that he has a slight heart condition. Tom asks Will why he wanted to build such a big house when there are only Will and his wife living in it. Will replies that it is because he grew up very poor after the death of his father and now only wants "the biggest and best" of everything. Their conversation then turns to the state of the company. Tom expresses concern that the company is no longer doing very well, while Will assures him that with Will's competitive spirit, the company will right itself. Will then shows Tom a picture of his son, Bill, who has passed away recently. Will describes Bill as nothing like himself, but with a keen mind for math and education. After volunteering for the Air Force, in which he was a bombardier, Bill returned to the United States and took up work in Atlanta. Will recounts that during a business trip to Florida, Bill, who could not swim, walked into a lake and drowned. Will believes that his son committed suicide. During their conversation, Will's secretary interrupts to let him know that his son's former roommate from Atlanta, Randy Carter, is calling again. Will refuses to take the call and learns that Randy is in Houston staying at the YMCA. As their conversation continues, Will tells Tom that he is buying his wife a new car to celebrate the new house. Tom tells Will that their company has lost another three accounts, including Carnation Milk, which had been with the company since the beginning. Surprised that he was not told about the loss of Carnation, Will continues to assure Tom that the company survived the depression and that everything will work out. Will and Tom's boss, Ted Cleveland Jr., then comes into the office and asks for time alone with Will. Ted tells Will that the Carnation account left because of him and that the company needs younger men to do business successfully. Ted gives Will three-months notice. However, Will says that he'd like to leave right away to start his own business. Will cancels the order for his wife's new car and confides in Tom that his release from the company is coming at a financially difficult time. He trusts his relationships with the banks will help him with his new venture and that Tom will join him one day. Tom lets Will know that despite his efforts to help Will, Ted has given Will's job to him. The scene ends with Will contacting a bank to discuss financing.

Scene 2

Scene 2 opens the next evening in the Kidders' new den, where Lily Dale, Pete, and Will have gathered after dinner. Lily Dale recounts that during WWII, Eleanor Roosevelt organized the maids in Houston to not show up for work for new employers as a way to purposely "disappoint white people." Will argues that such a thing never occurred and then relinquishes his protest when Lily Dale assures him her facts are correct. Will,

obviously affected by the previous day's events, tells Lily Dale that her new car will have to wait until he pays off the house and the new furnishings. Before Will goes off to bed, he tells Lily Dale that Randy is in Houston and that she should tell him that they want nothing to do with him if he calls. Lily Dale is perplexed by Will's attitude toward Randy and proceeds to admit to Pete that she likes Randy, has been in contact with him, and has given him money. Lily Dale and Pete also discuss Lily Dale's encounter with Alice Temple, an atheist friend, who asks Lily Dale how God could have allowed Bill to commit suicide. While recounting this event, Lily Dale insists that Bill's death was an accident. Just as Lily Dale tells Pete that Randy has been to the house twice that day, Will returns to the den unable to sleep and tells Lily Dale about the previous day's events. He tells her that the money ($100,000) he had given to Bill was spent and then asks to borrow the money ($75,000) that he had given to her over the past fifteen Christmases. Will goes back to bed, and after admitting that she had given $35,000 to Randy, Lily Dale asks Pete if she can borrow the same amount from him so that she can give the money to Will. Pete agrees; however, Will returns for a second time and requests to borrow $35,000 from Pete. Lily Dale begins to cry and admits to Will that she gave $35,000 to Randy as a gift. Will is very angry that Lily Dale lied to him and that Randy duped her with stories of his job loss, mother's surgery, and his sister's husband running out on their three children. Will storms out and Pete follows him only to quickly return to ask Lily Dale to phone Will's doctor. Will has suffered a heart attack.

Scene 3

A week later in the Kidders' study, Lily Dale tells Clara how horribly she feels about being deceived by Randy and about being dishonest with her husband. Clara assures Lily Dale that God will take care of her. The women are soon joined by Pete and Carson, Pete's great-nephew, who is just in from Atlanta. Will is up out of bed just as Tom Jackson rings at the door with flowers for him. To Lily Dale's delight, Clara confirms that her friend Lucille had heard about the Disappointment Clubs. Will tells Tom that he is not having any luck with the banks, but that he will not be able to work for some time anyway. Randy comes to the door and Clara is told to tell him that the family is busy and not to come again. Will tells Tom that he would rather not have Ted stop by the house, and Carson confirms that Randy is "bad news." After Tom leaves, Will admits that he has hard feelings for Tom and laments that he should have saved more money. Lily Dale tells Will that she put the money in his account and Will tells Pete that he does not need his money now. Will asks not to have Tom's flowers in his sight, and as the scene ends, he tears up the three-month's severance check that Tom left for him.

Scene 4

The next day, in the Kidders' study, Clara tells Lily Dale that she met Etta Doris Meneffree, a woman who used to work for the Kidders when Bill was a baby. Pete and Carson come down, and Pete tells Lily Dale that the doctor has told Will that he cannot work for six months. Pete also tells her that he is going to take a trip to Atlanta with Carson, and he is going to loan Carson's sister at least $5,000 and help Carson pay for

school. When Will comes downstairs, he asks to have Carson drive him downtown to First Commerce Bank, who phoned him about his loan request. Will asks Pete for the $35,000 again and Pete tells him that he has promised some money to Carson and his sister because Will had said he did not need the money. Pete talks Will into accepting $25,000, and despite Lily Dale's protests that he should not go downtown, Will and Carson leave for the bank. At the same time, Clara enters to announce that Etta Doris has come by to say hello. Lily Dale heads out of the house to go downtown alone and says goodbye to Pete, who is leaving for Atlanta.

Scene 5

Later that afternoon, Will and Carson return. Will was denied by the bank and is surprised that he thanked his old boss for offering him a job. After making polite conversation with Etta Doris, Will calls Tom Jackson and tells him that once he is feeling better he may come in to talk with Ted about the position Tom mentioned. Pete and Carson depart for Atlanta after Carson helps Will back to bed.

Scene 6

In the final scene, Lily Dale and Clara are again in the Kidders' den. Clara tells Lily Dale that she talked with her friend again and that she had not heard that Mrs. Roosevelt was involved with the Disappointment Clubs. Lily Dale admits that she spoke with Randy again because he was waiting in the Kidders' driveway as she pulled the car out to go downtown. They drove all over Houston together and Randy refuted everything that Carson told the Kidders about him, qualifying his denial with the statement that Carson "is known as a notorious liar all over Atlanta." Convinced that he was telling the truth, Lily Dale hides Randy in her car in the hopes she can get Will to talk with him. Will comes into the den and apologizes to Lily Dale for his ill temper. Will and Lily Dale have a heart-to- heart talk and Will tells her that he believes that Bill killed himself. Will tells Lily Dale that he feels that he failed his son and that he never got to know him as he should have. In the midst of the conversation, Lily Dale admits that she once brought two men back to the house with her cousin, Mary Cunningham. She also confides in Will that Mary Cunningham and their other cousin, Mabel Thornton, claimed that Pete once made advances toward them when he was married to Lily Dale's mother. Will tells Lily Dale that he may swallow his pride and talk to his old boss about the position Tom mentioned, and Lily Dale says that she may start teaching music to help the family financially. In the end, Will still refuses to talk with Randy because he fears that should they meet he would have to make certain inquiries that he would rather not know the answers to. He also tells Lily Dale that in Bill's safety deposit box Will found canceled checks totaling $100,000 made out to Randy. Lily Dale sends Randy away, and Will calls Tom and sets up a time for the next day to come in to talk to him.

Scene 1

Scene 1 Summary

In the spring of 1950, Will sits at his desk at work, looking at house plans. Tom comes in, and Will shows him the plans, commenting that the house costs a fortune but it's the finest house in Houston and that his family deserves the best of everything. He suddenly becomes short of breath and apologizes, admitting he's got a heart condition. As he looks at the plans, Tom asks why Will wanted such a large house if there's only him and his wife to live in it. Will says he's wanted the biggest and the best ever since he was a child, unlike his brother who only looked as far as his next bottle of whisky. Will says he warned his son Bill to not become like that. He proudly says that Bill never touched alcohol and then shows Tom a picture of Bill. Will talks at length about Bill. He was a whiz at Math, and he survived the war and led what Will calls a charmed life. Then Bill walked into the middle of a lake one day, even though he couldn't swim, and drowned. Will says he believes Bill committed suicide but doesn't understand why. When Tom asks whether Bill had any children, Will says that Bill never married but was a good and considerate son. Will adds that his wife has become intensely religious since his death.

A secretary comes in and tells Will he has a phone call from "that same young man." Will says to tell the man that she doesn't know when he'll be in. When she's gone, Will tells Tom that the young man was Bill's roommate in Atlanta. He came to the funeral and cried more than Bill's mother, and ever since then he's been calling repeatedly. Will then observes that Bill's mother, who was always interested in music, hasn't gone near a piano since Bill's death. The secretary returns with a phone number the young man gave her. Will takes it and realizes that it's a Houston number. He tries to call to tell the young man to stay away. It turns out that the number is for the local YMCA, and the young man is out. Will declines to leave a message. He then says he asked his wife's step-father Pete, who was originally from Atlanta but now lives with them, whether he knew the young man. Pete said he didn't. Will pauses and then apologizes for telling Tom all this, but he says that Tom has always been like a son to him.

As Will and Tom make small talk about Tom's family, Will says that family is the most important thing a man can have, even when it's down to only two people. He talks about buying a new car for his wife to celebrate their new home. Tom broaches the subject that he came into the office to talk about. The company has been losing business. Will talks about how the company has survived tough times before. At that moment Ted, the head of the company, comes in. Will talks proudly about the way that he and Ted's father started the company and built it into a thriving business despite Roosevelt, the Democrats and the New Deal. Ted asks Tom to leave them alone, and Tom goes out.

Ted asks how Will's wife is doing since Bill's death. Will asks Ted how his wife is, and then Ted brings up the subject he came in to discuss. He refers to the company losing money and business, explaining reluctantly that Will's way of working is the reason a

few clients have left. Will says he's not afraid of competition and changing with the times, but Ted says he's decided to let Will go, giving him three months' notice. After talking about how handsome Will's new house looks and commiserating again about Bill's death, he thanks Will for being understanding and for all the work he's done for the company over the years. As Ted leaves, Will tells him he's planning to start his own company. Ted suggests that under the circumstances, Will may want to leave the company right away, and Will agrees. Ted goes out, wishing him luck.

Will calls the car company and cancels the order for the new car and then calls Tom into his office. He tells Tom what Ted said and asks him to be part of his new company. He adds that it'll be tight financially, but he's got contacts with every bank in Houston and is sure he can get a loan. Tom reveals that he's been offered Will's job. Tom apologizes, but Will abruptly cuts him off, saying he's got to make some phone calls about his financing. Tom goes out, and Will makes his first call.

Scene 1 Analysis

This scene is primarily about exposition, or establishing the play's factual and emotional context. In particular, the conversations about Bill's death and Will's insistence upon having the best in life clearly define the circumstances of the play's central conflict. That conflict, between what Will believes and what he experiences, is dramatized in this scene in the conversation with Ted. He believes in loyalty, but he experiences disloyalty. As a result, he goes through a profound loss of faith, a process that repeats itself again and again. Will becomes more and more disconnected from more and more facets of his life that up to now have sustained him through difficult times. This journey of negative transformation leaves him spiritually empty, making the play's thematic statement that blind optimism, such as Will's conviction that he has the best and deserves the best, obscures important truths. The specific nature of those truths becomes clearer as the action of the play unfolds.

There is also an important element of social context in this play. The 1950s, the time in which the play is set, were years of great optimism and economic prosperity in America. Will's belief in being the best, deserving the best and having the best was common in homes and businesses across the country. Family and a positive public image were at the core of everything that was said, done and felt. The house and the car, in the play as in the life of the time, are potent symbols of those values. The play, primarily focused on Will's journey of negative transformation, can be interpreted as a comment on the emptiness and artificiality of those values, suggesting that Will's loss of faith is in fact an awakening to a reality that he doesn't necessarily want to be aware of. This idea is developed not only by the way that Will is repeatedly turned down by the banks he approaches, but most importantly by the way he's forced into an awareness of secrets in the lives of both his son and his wife.

There are several elements of foreshadowing in this scene. The young man from Atlanta's phone call foreshadows his continuing efforts to contact Will and his wife. Will's comments about his relationships with the banks foreshadow his ongoing efforts to get

money. The comments about Roosevelt foreshadow the obsession that Will's wife has with the wrongdoings of Roosevelt's wife Eleanor.

A particular motif, or recurring image, is that of fathers and sons. Several relationships in the play represent aspects of the loyalties, illusions, needs and disappointments that ebb and flow between this most fundamental of male affiliations. The relationships between Will and Bill, between Bill and his roommate, between Will and Tom (whom Will himself refers to as a surrogate son) and between Ted and his father all function in this way.

Scene 2

Scene 2 Summary

In the living room of his new home, Will sits alone. His wife Lily Dale, Pete and their black maid Clara come in. Clara pours coffee as Lily Dale talks about how Eleanor Roosevelt got the maids in Houston to participate in the Disappointment Club, a group of maids that arranged to prepare and serve meals but never showed up. Will says he doubts that Mrs. Roosevelt would do that, but Lily Dale refuses to believe him. She then talks to Pete about how Will, whom she refers to as Daddy, always takes good care of her. She asks Will when her new car will arrive and talks about how much she misses Bill. She says that she hasn't played the piano or composed since he died. Will abruptly gets up and says he's going to bed, but before he goes, he asks Lily Dale whether that young man from Atlanta has called. Lily Dale says he hasn't. Will says he doesn't want them to have anything to do with him, and Lily Dale says she doesn't understand why. Will says he has his reasons and goes out.

Lily Dale says to Pete that she can't understand why Will is so against the young man. She says he's been a real comfort to her since Bill died. She talks about a friend of hers who committed suicide. This friend was an atheist and asked her why God would let her son kill himself. Lily Dale says that Bill just had an accident. She talks about how the young man from Atlanta told her just how much faith in God Bill had. She confesses that she frequently talks to the young man, that whenever she feels sad about Bill she calls him up. She also says she's been loaning him money saved from the Christmas gifts Will gave her over the years. She explains that the young man told her Bill was going to name him as the beneficiary of his life insurance policy and would have wanted her to give him money. She then asks Pete whether he knows what's troubling Will. Pete says he knows but can't tell her. He's sure Will will tell her when he's ready. She says she won't be able to sleep from worrying, but then she confesses that she's got another worry. She already knew that Bill's friend was in town. He's come out to see her, and she has hopes that Will will be able to give him a job.

Will comes back in, unable to sleep. Lily Dale asks what's bothering him, and Will says he's got something to tell her. He confesses that he's been fired and that Tom has been given his job. He plans to start his own company, and he wants to use her money as start up funds. Lily Dale asks about the money he gave Bill, but Will says it's all gone. He doesn't know what it was spent on, adding that Bill's life insurance barely paid the funeral expenses. He asks whether Lily Dale has spent her Christmas money, and she tells him she hasn't. He goes back to bed, reassured.

Lily Dale confesses to Pete that half her Christmas money is gone, given away to the young man from Atlanta. She asks Pete to loan her some money, and he says all he's got is the money he was saving for his retirement. She pleads with him and promises to pay him back, and he finally agrees to give it to her. Will comes back in and asks Pete what he's got in his savings. Pete says if Will needs money he can start paying room

and board, but Will says he won't hear of it. He then confesses that the banks have all turned him down for a loan, and he needs cash to start up his company. Lily Dale starts to cry. Pete finally tells Will that most of Lily Dale's Christmas money is gone, and Pete's agreed to lend her his savings. Will asks Lily Dale whether she gave the money as a loan, and when she says it was a gift, he demands to know who she gave it to. She confesses that she gave it to the young man from Atlanta, and Will loses his temper. He says she's been taken advantage of and vows to sell the house and fire Clara. He storms out, and Lily Dale asks Pete to go after him. He does, but then Pete comes back in and asks Lily Dale to call the doctor, saying Will's having problems with his heart.

Scene 2 Analysis

Will goes through the play experiencing continual disillusionment and loss of faith, but the character of Lily Dale is a complete contrast. Her faith in God, in people and in her beliefs about life appears unshakeable to the point where she might seem unbalanced. Her comments about Eleanor Roosevelt represent and define this aspect of her character, as her mini-obsession with the Disappointment Club becomes a running subplot throughout the play. The name of the club is clearly symbolic, given that Will is in the process of becoming a member of the disappointment-with-life club. Lily Dale's faith, however, blinds her to certain truths, particularly the circumstances of Bill's death as recounted in conflicting stories by Will and the young man from Atlanta. With the introduction of the young man from Atlanta's story, the play's intentions become difficult to discern. Is the young man from Atlanta, or another young man introduced in the following scene, to be believed?

Lily Dale is clearly lonely and vulnerable. It is easy to agree with Will that the stories of the young man from Atlanta are told to manipulate her into giving him money. However, both Will and Lily Dale tell stories of the young man's grief at Bill's funeral. These stories are clearly true, and they give the impression that the young man is highly emotional. Whether that makes him a liar is open to question.

Another question is what exactly the young man's relationship with Bill was. Several aspects of the descriptions of both him and Bill sound like stereotypical comments made about homosexual men. They are sensitive, emotional and good sons. This suggests the possibility that Bill and the young man were not just roommates but were homosexual lovers. Since in the 1950s, homosexuality was not only viewed with societal disgust but also considered a mental illness, this may be an explanation for Bill's suicide, his intense praying and the intensity of the young man's grief. The word homosexual is never used in the play (The term "gay" wasn't in common usage at the time the play is set), nor is that aspect of the relationship overtly hinted at. It must be remembered, however, that in the 1950s the subject wasn't discussed nearly as commonly or as openly as it is today, which means that characters in a play set in the '50s wouldn't discuss it either.

The bottom line is that whatever the relationship was, Bill's death leaves Will with the sense that in spite of believing himself to have been a good father he didn't know his

son at all. This aspect of Will's circumstances is another way in which he loses faith and becomes disillusioned. Through this experience, he moves further along his journey of negative transformation.

Scene 3

Scene 3 Summary

Clara is dusting the living room as Lily Dale comes in. Clara says that the young man from Atlanta came by to see her. Lily Dale confesses that she feels betrayed, telling Clara about believing the young man's stories and giving him money. She feels even worse because she didn't tell Will, and when she did tell Will he had a heart attack and almost died. Clara reminds her that Will's getting better, but Lily Dale is still upset, saying that a distant relative of Pete's named Carson has come from Atlanta and is full of information. Lily Dale says that Carson has known Bill's friend, the young man from Atlanta all his life. Carson doesn't care for him and says that the young man has no living family. Carson lived in the same boarding house as Bill and never once heard him pray in the way that the young man says he did. As Clara comforts her, Lily Dale goes on to say that Will isn't speaking to her. Pete has told her that the financial situation is very bad. Clara tells her that God will take care of her, saying that some mornings she can hardly get out of bed but God somehow gives her the strength. She reminds Lily Dale to look around at her beautiful home and take strength and security from that.

Pete comes in with Carson and introduces him to Lily Dale. After some small talk about Carson's family tree, Lily Dale asks him about Bill. Carson tells her that Bill was a fine fellow, but his roommate never worked and was a braggart. Will comes in, dressed in pajamas and a robe. Pete introduces him to Carson. While Carson and Will are making small talk about the YMCA, Lily Dale asks Clara whether she ever heard about Eleanor Roosevelt being behind the Disappointment Club. As Clara says she never did, Will says he knew that Mrs. Roosevelt couldn't have been involved. The doorbell rings, and Clara goes to answer it. A moment later she shows in Tom, who has brought a bouquet of flowers. Everyone is introduced, and Lily Dale says she can't understand how Will's company could have let him go after so many years. Will repeatedly tells her to change the subject, and finally Lily Dale calls Clara to put the flowers in water. Clara says she talked to her friend about the Disappointment Clubs. Her friend has heard of them but won't have anything to do with them. Lily Dale tells Clara to find out from her friend whether she ever heard about Mrs. Roosevelt being involved, and Clara says she will.

Meanwhile, Will talks about how the banks seem to be running disappointment clubs. He can't get a loan. Tom says that Ted told him there may be a chance for another job for Will in the firm, but Will says he'll never go back. As Pete and Carson talk about how Carson used to work on the railways and how he wouldn't recognize Atlanta because he's been away for so long, the doorbell rings. A moment later Clara comes in and says the young man from Atlanta is back. Lily Dale says to tell him that they're all busy, and Will gets up to tell him himself. Lily Dale tells him to keep calm and not exert himself. Carson comments that the young man is bad news. Lily Dale starts to cry and goes out.

Carson says again that the young man is no good, but Pete tells him to change the subject. Tom tells Will that Ted was thinking of coming by to see him, but Will says he'd

feel better if he didn't. Tom then says his good-byes and goes out. Will speaks angrily about how Tom took his job, and says he doesn't understand how Bill could have spent all the money he gave him. Pete tells him to calm down. Lily Dale comes back in just as Clara brings in Tom's flowers in a vase. Will tells her to take them home with her. He doesn't want them anywhere near him. He speaks, again angrily, about how worthless Ted is compared to his father. Will says he put a lot of work into the company, and he should have saved more than he spent. He says he really doesn't need things like big houses or new cars. Lily Dale tells him that she's put what money she has left into his account, and Pete offers to give Will his savings. Will refuses it, saying he needs to get well again before he can think about starting a business.

Clara returns with an envelope Tom left behind for Will. He opens it and discovers that it contains a check for three months salary. He says he'd like to be able to return it, but he can't because he needs the money too badly. Then, he starts to cry. Pete tries to comfort him, but Will gets into an argument with Carson about which southern city, Houston or Atlanta, is going to be the most prosperous. Lily Dale tries to intervene, but Will indicates that he doesn't want to hear from her and goes out of the room. Lily Dale tells Carson to go with him and make sure he's all right. Carson goes out, and he and Will are heard arguing offstage. Carson comes back in and reassures Lily Dale that Will is okay. Will comes in a moment later, says that there's no way he's going to take the check, and tells Lily Dale to give it to her boyfriend. Lily Dale bursts into tears and runs out. Will rips the check in half and throws it out.

Scene 3 Analysis

At first glance, there appears to be a great deal of small talk in this play and particularly in this scene. On closer examination, however, it seems possible that such conversations are actually attempts by the characters to act as though nothing is wrong. Even when what's wrong is discussed, issues and feelings are not explored in any real depth. This might suggest underdeveloped writing to some, but it may be another way in which everyone is struggling to live up to the important 50s ideal of keeping up appearances. The dramatic value in this apparently casual superficiality is that when intense emotions do surface, they are all the more powerful. Will's weeping and his sudden flare-ups of anger are key examples of this. Lily Dale's tears are less effective in this context, given her tendency to be tearful anyway, but her husband's outpourings of emotion indicate just how extreme his despair is. A man of that era and of that temperament bursting into tears is, to put it plainly, a very big deal, especially when contrasted with the aforementioned efforts to make everything seem normal.

The second young man from Atlanta, Carson, enters in this scene. Everything about him suggests that his stories are more real than those of the other young man. He's got pictures, dates, names and a great deal of evidence to prove that he is what he says he is and that his experiences and observations are accurate. This raises an important question. Why is the other young man from Atlanta never seen or given a chance to convince Will, and us, that he's telling the truth? The answer lies in the character's value as a symbol, as opposed to his existence as an actual person.

Throughout the play, the main characters are forced to deal with aspects of life they don't want to face. Will has to deal with rejection from his employer and the banks, his bad health, his wife's lies and a secret from her past. Lily Dale has to confront her grief, her gullibility, the fact that Eleanor Roosevelt wasn't responsible for the Disappointment Clubs and the aforementioned secret. Both are confronted with their lack of awareness of who their son was. In his persistence and in the story he tells, the young man from Atlanta is a symbol of all these uncomfortable truths that demand to be faced. This means that Carson's different view of the young man is a manifestation of both distaste for such uncomfortable truths and the lengths to which people will go to conceal them. Carson's appearance and comments foreshadow the end of the play, in which Will chooses to avoid dealing with his discomfort, returning to a job he originally refused in order to make everything "all right" again. Will's insistence upon ignoring the young man and the fact that the play doesn't give the young man a chance to be seen represent the way that troublesome truth must be denied if the 50s ideal of preserving appearances and living "the best" is to be maintained.

Scene 4

Scene 4 Summary

Lily Dale sits reading her Bible as Clara comes in with news that she ran into one of their former maids, Etta Doris. They talk about Etta Doris' memories of living and working with the family, and Clara says Etta Doris asked about Lily Dale's music and sent condolences about Bill's death. Lily Dale asks whether Will, Pete and Carson are up and whether they've eaten. Then, she asks about the weather. Clara patiently answers all her questions.

Pete and Carson come in and make small talk about how they slept and whether Will is up. Pete tells Lily Dale that he's planning to go to Atlanta for a visit and will leave later that day. When Carson goes out with Clara to get some coffee, Pete asks Lily Dale whether Will told her what the doctor said about his condition. Lily Dale says that Will still isn't talking to her, and Pete tells her that the doctor said Will shouldn't work for six months or so. He says that he's offered to lend Will some money, saying he can't spare as much as he originally thought. He needs to lend Carson's sister money for an operation and Carson some money for an education.

Will comes in, and Pete tells him about his plans to visit Atlanta. Lily Dale then tells him what Clara told her about Etta Doris, and Will says he doesn't remember her. Pete talks at length about how his wife refused to have a maid. He says she wanted to take care of her family herself. The day Pete discovered his wife dead, he went into the kitchen to call Lily Dale with the news and found dinner waiting for him in the oven. Will asks whether Carson can drive, saying he got called in to a meeting at a bank and wants Carson to drive him. Pete says he can still lend Will a little money, explaining why he can't lend as much as he originally planned. Will says he won't take any of it. He's sure the bank will give him everything he needs. Pete insists, and Will finally agrees.

Carson returns. He comments on a photo of Bill that is in the kitchen, saying how good it is. They were in the same boarding house in Atlanta and never realized they were almost family. He agrees to drive Will to the bank, and Will goes out to get dressed. Lily Dale wonders whether she should tell his doctor about the trip downtown, and when Pete says she should, she goes out to make the call. While she's gone, Carson tells Pete that the Bill in the picture doesn't look much like the Bill he knew in the boarding house. He makes a joke about the family's last name of Kidder. He then talks about how Bill's roommate liked to go to the movies the same way he did, but Bill preferred to stay in his room.

Lily Dale comes back in, saying the doctor told her that Will shouldn't go to his meeting. She asks Pete to tell him, but Pete says she should tell him. Carson says he met the young man from Atlanta at the YMCA. The young man recognized him and wondered if Carson knew why the family had turned against him. Will comes in, ready to go to his

meeting. Lily Dale tells him what the doctor said, but Will says he's going to his meeting anyway. He and Carson go out, and Pete assures Lily Dale that Will will be all right.

Clara comes in and says that Etta Doris has called for a visit. Lily Dale tells Clara to bring her in and then explains to Pete who Etta Doris is. Etta Doris comes in with Clara and talks about how Lily Dale hasn't changed a bit. Their brief conversation touches on Bill's death, Lily Dale's music and Will's health. Etta Doris says she was just walking by, took a chance on Lily Dale's being home and wanted to say hello. Now, she has to get going. She and Lily Dale say their good-byes and promise to pray for each other, and then Etta Doris goes out. Pete goes out to pack for his trip. Lily Dale calls Clara in to find out whether Etta Doris has left yet. When Clara says Etta Doris hasn't left, Lily Dale asks Clara to find out whether Etta Doris knows anything about the Disappointment Clubs. Clara says she will and goes out. Pete comes back in, having packed quickly because he doesn't have that much to take. Clara comes back in, saying that Etta Doris doesn't know anything about the Clubs either. Lily Dale tells her she's going downtown for awhile and to tell Will she'll be back in time for supper. She goes out.

Scene 4 Analysis

Two important elements are introduced in this scene. The first is the character of Etta Doris, whose primary function is to remind Lily Dale, and Will in the following scene, of the joys of the life they had before it was disrupted by reality. The second is Carson's perspective on Bill, which represents exactly the kind of reality that has proven to be so disruptive. More and more, the play is creating the sense that Will and Lily Dale have gone through their lives creating and living a certain image without a clear sense of what each other, themselves, their family or life in general are really like. This sense is developed further as the action of the play continues to unfold and Lily Dale reveals to Will a part of her life that she has kept secret for years.

Meanwhile, the plot is moving Will, or Will is moving the plot, closer to another disappointment as he makes his trip to the bank. This juxtaposes with Lily Dale's continued pursuit of the Disappointment Club question to represent the way that both of them are desperate to hold on their beliefs and illusions about the past and their lives. As a result, we see even more clearly the play's central dramatic tension between the emergence of, and the denial of, uncomfortable truths.

Carson's requests of Pete are clearly a parallel to the young man's requests from Lily Dale. Another parallel is suggested by Pete's story of his wife's death. Her leaving dinner behind for him echoes the way that Bill apparently wanted to leave money behind for the young man. In other words, both people who died wanted to make sure their loved ones were taken care of. The question, of course, is what these parallels represent.

Later in the play, the young man from Atlanta accuses Carson of exactly the same things that Carson has accused him of, lying and manipulation for material gain. The young man also accuses Carson of being jealous of his relationship with Bill, which

raises the possibility that Carson is also a homosexual. Once again, there is no overt discussion of this possibility, but if it is in fact the case then the two parallels mentioned above become easier to understand. The parallel between the two sets of requests becomes a case of projection. Carson projects his own bad character onto someone else in order to make that other person look bad and gain advantage for himself.

The parallel between the two deaths suggests that the young man's relationship with Bill was similar to the relationship between Pete and his wife, which we understand was loving. There is another layer to this, however, which arises with Lily Dale's hints that Pete was, at the very least, a flirt and quite possibly a philanderer. If Lily Dale's story is true and the relationship between Pete and his wife is intended to parallel that between Bill and the young man, the possibility exists that the young man is a philanderer as well. This possibility is, in turn, reinforced by Carson's information. He and the young man both liked going to the movies, which is where homosexuals in the 50s met to engage in anonymous sexual encounters. This then reinforces the possibility that Carson is himself a homosexual and even implies that he and the young man had an affair. All of this is speculation, since nothing in the text supports these ideas outright. On the other hand, the parallels are clearly presented, presumably for a reason connected to the play's theme. Because that theme is related to the avoidance of difficult truths, the above explanation, threaded with just such truths, may be as good an explanation as any.

Scene 5

Scene 5 Summary

That afternoon, Pete is waiting in the living room. Will and Carson come in. Pete comments on how long they've been and asks Will how it went at the bank. Will says it was a courtesy call. He talked to a man younger than Carson who said that in the bank's opinion, the time wasn't right to start a new business. Because Will had such a long history with them, they felt it only right to give him the news in person. Will says he ran into Ted, and Ted repeated his offer of a job. Will said he'd think about it. He then asks where Lily Dale is. When Pete tells him she's gone downtown, Will assumes she's gone to meet the young man from Atlanta. He apologizes for being mean to her, explaining that he's been unwell and that that's made him short-tempered. Pete and Carson go out to the kitchen and have lunch.

Clara brings Etta Doris in to say hello. Will says he doesn't remember her. Etta Doris comments on how nice the new house is and how the old one has been torn down. She offers her condolences about Bill and talks about how good and kind he was to her. She says the last time she saw him, she asked if he remembered her, and he said he remembered her well. She then goes out, saying she's sorry she never got a chance to see Bill after that. When she's gone, Will calls Tom to say that when his health is better he'll come in and talk to Ted about the job. He asks whether Tom knows what Ted has in mind, and after Tom tells him, Will says goodbye. Pete and Carson come in, done with lunch and on their way to Atlanta. Will asks Carson to help him into his room, and Carson helps him out.

Scene 5 Analysis

Echoes of Will's past appear in this scene in the form of the courtesy shown him by the young man at the bank and, more importantly, in the memories of Etta Doris. For the most part, these echoes remind him that the past wasn't completely bad. The bank officer's comments indicate that Will has earned a degree of respect, and Etta Doris' comments suggest that even though Will's image of his son has changed, there is still happiness to be found in remembering what he was as a child. On the other hand, her comparisons between the old and new houses reminds him that this new life is in fact empty of what made the old house a home - security, trust and joy. It's very possible that the last point, more than what happened at the bank, is what sends Will to bed at the end of the scene.

Once again in this scene casual conversations are used to camouflage deeper emotional issues and sustain the increasingly desperate fazade of normalcy. At the same time, the mention of Lily Dale's trip downtown foreshadows the final disillusionment to come in the play's next, climactic scene.

Scene 6

Scene 6 Summary

Lily Dale is in the drawing room. Clara comes and says that her friend says that Mrs. Roosevelt has nothing to do with the Disappointment Club. Lily Dale asks whether Will is in. Clara says he's resting, and Pete and Carson have gone to Atlanta. Lily Dale confesses that she spent the afternoon with the young man from Atlanta who told her that Carson was a liar and that Carson said what he said because he's angry he wasn't Bill's friend. The young man said that everybody in Atlanta knows Carson is a liar. She says the young man is out in the car, and she hopes she can talk Will into talking to him.

Will comes in and asks where she was. She says she was downtown window-shopping, and then she asks how things went at the bank. He says it was just a courtesy call. He then apologizes for being angry with Lily Dale and says he's lost his spirit. Lily Dale tries to cheer him up, but he continues to insist he's got no fight left. He then asks Clara to leave. When she's gone, he asks Lily Dale why she gave the young man from Atlanta her money. She says she felt sorry for him, adding that she feels bad for deceiving Will. She had only deceived him once before in her life. She tells a long story of how she and her cousin Mary once had two men over to the house while Will was gone on a business trip. She explains that sometimes she got lonely and says that she got lonely again after Bill died. That's why she stayed in contact with the young man. She says the young man told her there was no way Bill could have killed himself because they spoke the night before he died, and all Bill talked about was God. Will says again that the young man is a liar. Lily Dale says that even if that is true, she finds comfort in what he says, and she needs comfort.

Will says that Bill did kill himself. Lily Dale refuses to believe it. Will insists, and Lily Dale continues to deny it. Will talks about having failed Bill, wanting him to be the same kind of man he was and not understanding who Bill was on his own terms. He confesses that he wants his son back, and Lily Dale says she does as well. She then says she saw the young man and repeats what he said about Carson. She adds that the reason she doesn't see Mary anymore is that Mary told her Pete once tried to kiss her, and another cousin said he'd done the same thing to her. She says she doesn't know who or what to believe anymore, about anything, and pleads with Will to meet with the young man.

Will tells Lily Dale that he saw Ted at the bank and was offered a job. Lily Dale says she's been thinking about teaching piano lessons. Will takes her hand and assures her they're going to be all right. She says she believes they will and then asks him again to meet with the young man. She tells him he's in the car outside. Will refuses. She pleads, and he refuses again, saying that if he did there would be questions that he had to ask that he doesn't want to know the answers to. He confesses that he lied about finding no trace of the money he gave to Bill over the years, saying that he found in a safety deposit box a series of canceled checks signed over to the young man. He says whether the young man used them for a sick sister or whether he didn't, there was a Bill

that he and Lily Dale knew and that's the Bill he wants to remember, not the Bill they didn't know. He tells Lily Dale to tell the young man to go away and leave them alone, and Lily Dale goes out. While she's gone, Will calls Tom and tells him he'll come in for a meeting the next day.

Lily Dale comes back in and tells Will that the young man cried when she told him to go. She says he told her that Bill gave him the money to buy nice things, that Bill was like a father to him and that if he could he would have drowned with Bill. That's how much he loved and missed him. She breaks down and cries. Will tells her everything is going to be all right. He'll go back to work. She'll teach piano, and everything will be all right.

Scene 6 Analysis

The symbolic value of several important elements of the play are either clarified or revealed in this scene. To begin with, there is the fact that Will and Bill share similar names. The implication is that they are both named William. By itself, this suggests that on some level they share similar characteristics, an idea reinforced by the young man's assertion that Bill used his money to buy nice things for him, which is one way Will used his money, to buy nice things for Lily Dale. The way gifts of money are used in the two central relationships as tokens of affection combines with the fact of the similar names to increase the spiritual resemblance between father and son. This therefore increases the likelihood that the young man is telling the truth and that he and Bill were lovers.

The end of this scene also reveals that money has a second symbolic value, in that it represents to Will the simple image-oriented life devoid of uncomfortable truths. Throughout the play money, job and house represent success. Will's final lines referring to both he and Lily Dale going back to work suggests that by focusing on work and striving to recreate their previous life, uncomfortable truths like that of his son and his secret-keeping wife can be ignored. He is so desperate for this to happen that he's prepared to accept a demeaning job and even let his wife earn money for the first time in her life. In other words, rather than learning to live with his disillusionment and face reality, he makes choices that he believes will enable him to believe that everything really is going to be all right.

There's little doubt that Lily Dale will be more than willing to go along with Will, even though she's been faced with her own uncomfortable truths as represented by the final word from Clara about the Disappointment Club and by her refusal to believe what she was told about Pete. Her decision to return to music is another symbol whose meaning becomes clear in this scene. In the play's final moments, we come to understand that for Lily Dale, music is like Will's job, a way of focusing her attention on something other than reality. We also understand that when confronted with the reality of the death of her son, she feels unable to continue playing. Reality is too powerful. Now that she's again faced with the need to keep a reality even more uncomfortable than her son's death at bay, she finds herself able to go back to her music.

All of this relates to the previous discussion of the possibility that this play is a comment on, and extended metaphor for, the evolution of society in America since the 1950s. In some ways, 50s' society reacted to uncomfortable truths in the same way as Will and Lily Dale, who refuse to believe what they don't want to believe. This is certainly a universal truth. There are individuals and cultures everywhere and in every period of history for which willful blindness has led to significant consequences. Because this is an American play and because the 1950s are representative of a set of values that for many people define, or should define, American society, *The Young Man from Atlanta* can justifiably be seen as a culturally specific commentary.

One lingering question remains, that of the symbolic value of God. On the one hand, Lily Dale appears to take great comfort in her faith in His presence, and if the young man from Atlanta is to be believed, Bill did as well. It's even possible that Bill saw killing himself as a way to meet God, perhaps the only way if he was in fact a homosexual and bought into the premise that homosexuals are sinners and therefore ungodly. Looked at from another angle, however, this set of circumstances could suggest that such faith is in fact another way of avoiding confrontation with difficult truths. Lily Dale doesn't want to encounter them, and it could be argued that by killing himself, Bill was committing the ultimate act of avoidance. This leads back to the play's central thematic statement, that blind optimism, or hope, obscures not just what is uncomfortable, but what is important.

Bibliography

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Characters

Carson

Carson arrives in Houston and tells Pete that he is his great-nephew. Carson is responsible for exposing what he claims to be the lies that Randy has told to Lily Dale about Bill. Primarily, he tells her that, having known Randy for his entire life, he is certain that Randy has no living relatives and that Randy's claim about Bill's religious fervor is false. Carson tells Pete and the Kidders that he lived in the same boardinghouse with Bill and Randy and that no one ever heard Bill praying and that Randy is "bad news." The Kidders and Pete believe Carson not only about Randy but about his claim to be Pete's great nephew. All of this comes into question, however, at the end of the play when Lily Dale has a final conversation with Randy. According to Randy, Carson is "known as a notorious liar all over Atlanta." This revelation, which may or may not be true, becomes interesting in light of the fact that Pete "wouldn't have recognized" his own sister in the picture that Carson brought to Houston and the fact that Carson and his sister stand to benefit financially from Carson's newly formed relationship with Pete. Carson says that he is twenty-seven years old.

Clara

Clara is the Kidders' maid and cook. She serves as Lily Dale's confidante throughout the play, offering her reassurance and comfort. As the Kidders' domestic help, Clara must also have direct contact with Randy Carter when he comes to call at the Kidder home. In all cases, Clara is asked to tell Randy that the Kidders will not see him□that they are busy or not at home. At Lily Dale's request, Clara also does research for Lily Dale about the Disappointment Clubs that Lily Dale believes Eleanor Roosevelt established in Houston during the war because of her dislike for the South. Clara's friend, Lucille, confirms that she had heard about the clubs but that she was not involved in them and did not know about Mrs. Roosevelt's participation in them. The 1950s were a politically and socially charged time in the United States due to the issue of civil rights for blacks. The characters of Clara and Etta Doris, along with Lily Dale's persistent inquiry into the Disappointment Clubs, play an important role in exposing one slice of life perspective on the day-to-day happenings between blacks and whites during this time.

Ted Cleveland Jr.

Ted Cleveland Jr. is Will Kidder and Tom Jackson's boss at the Sunshine Southern Wholesale Grocery. Ted's father originally hired Will, and together they grew the company through the depression and World War II. Following the death of his father, Ted took over the company. Not much of Ted is seen in the play; however, his actions reflect his desire to prevent his father's company from failing. Despite Will Kidder's

loyalty to his father and the company for nearly forty years, Ted lets Will go for what appears to be performance issues with at least one of the company's largest accounts, Carnation Milk. Although Sunshine loses the Carnation account because of Will, Ted gives him three-month's notice and later extends an offer to him for another, albeit lower-ranking, position with the company. Ted appoints Tom to Will's previous position because he feels that more youthful leadership will be a boon for his family's company.

Pete Davenport

Pete Davenport is Lily Dale's stepfather. He is originally from Atlanta; however, he has lived in Houston for thirty years. Pete's wife (Lily Dale's mother) passed away ten years prior and Pete has just come to live with Will and Lily Dale. Through Pete's conversation with Carson, who claims to be Pete's great-nephew, the audience learns that Pete was a Southern Pacific Engineer and that he began working at the age of fourteen with just a seventh grade education. Pete says that he never had a drink in his life, and he appears to be a respectable, hard-working, honest man. He helps Lily Dale navigate her communication with Will about her financial dishonesty. Nonetheless, toward the end of the play, Lily Dale confides in Will that her two cousins, Mary Cunningham and Mabel Thornton, claim that Pete made passes at them while he was married to Lily Dale's mother. Likewise, although Pete appears to have sound judgment in his counsel to Lily Dale, his judgment about Carson is called into question by Randy Carter's claims that Carson is a known liar throughout Atlanta. Early in the play, Pete tells Will that Randy is certainly not a relation of his from Atlanta, even a distant one. If he were, Pete claims that he would recognize a likeness in him. Later, however, when Carson arrives in Houston with a picture of Pete's sister (Carson's grandmother), Pete says that he "wouldn't have recognized her." Pete's lack of recognition does two things. First, it calls into question whether or not Randy may be a distant relative of Pete's. Second, it calls into question whether or not Carson is truly his great-nephew or someone who is simply playing Pete for a gullible old fool.

Etta Doris

Etta Doris is a past domestic employee of the Kidders. She comes by the Kidders' new house to see the family and to express her condolences regarding Bill's death. Through Etta's remembrances and conversations with Lily Dale and Will, the audience learns more about Bill as a child. She remembers him fondly as a friendly and polite boy, who despite his father's attempts, was not athletic.

Tom Jackson

Tom is Will Kidder's coworker at the Sunshine Southern Wholesale Grocery who is given Will's job after Will is let go from the company. Foote describes Tom in the scene's opening description as a thirty-five year old "colleague and close friend" of Will's. Will hired and trained Tom and obviously feels close to him professionally and personally. In

the opening scene, Will confides in Tom, telling him that he believes that his son's death was a suicide. Will also tells Tom that he thinks of him as a son. Tom demonstrates loyalty to Will when he tells him that their boss told him that there was nothing Tom could do to save Will's job. Tom brings flowers to Will after his heart attack, and despite his previous relationship with Tom, Will admits to his family that he has hard feelings for Tom. Nevertheless, in the end, Tom is the person whom Will contacts about possibly coming back to resume a new position with Sunshine Southern Wholesale Grocery.

Lily Dale Kidder

Lily Dale is one of the main characters in *The Young Man from Atlanta*. She is the wife of Will Kidder and the mother of Bill Kidder, their deceased son. She is also Pete Davenport's stepdaughter. In the wake of her son's death she is said to have become religious. Lily Dale's primary action in the play takes place offstage when she has secret meetings with Randy Carter, Bill's former roommate from Atlanta. During these meetings, Lily Dale gives the young man $35,000, money that she received as Christmas gifts from her husband. Lily Dale meets with Randy behind her husband's back and ultimately has to confess to the meetings, as well as to the amount of the financial gifts that she has given to Randy. Lily Dale's main moral dilemma revolves around her need to feel close to someone who professes to have been very close to her son and her need to be a dutiful and honest wife. Lily Dale has been financially well taken care of by her husband and appears to some readers and critics to be a spoiled housewife who is both gullible and naïve. In his review for the*New York Times*, critic Ben Brantley characterizes Lily Dale as "a woman frozen in the role of petulant, spoiled child bride." Despite the couple's dire financial situation, one of her main concerns during the play is to figure out if Eleanor Roosevelt was responsible for organizing civil disobedience among the domestic workers in Houston during World War II. In the end, Lily Dale comes to some understanding about their financial reality and offers to take up teaching music to contribute to the household's income. In another turnabout, Lily Dale puts her husband above her own needs when she sends Randy away, presumably ending her relationship with him.

Will Kidder

Will Kidder is one of the main characters in *The Young Man from Atlanta*. He is the father of Bill Kidder, who dies prior to the play beginning, and is the husband of Lily Dale. At the opening of the play, Will works for the Sunshine Southern Wholesale Grocery, a company he has been with for thirty-eight years. In the first scene, he is let go from the company and rejects his superior's offer to stay for another three months. Instead, Will says he will leave the company immediately so that he can start his own business venture. Having just finished building and furnishing a $200,000 home, Will finds himself hard pressed for cash and asks his wife to give him back some of the money that he has gifted to her over the years. In the unfolding events, Will learns that she has no longer has the full amount because she has given it to their son's ex-roommate, Randy Carter. Lily Dale's actions are an affront to Will, not only because he

has developed a strong inclination against Randy but because her actions were dishonest and contrary to his repeated requests that she not have contact with the young man.

Will is a proud and boastful man, who grew up in an impoverished life after the death of his father and vowed to only have the best of everything. In the beginning of the play, sixty-four year old Will believes that he is invincible□financially, professionally, and personally. As the play unfolds, however, the audience watches as he comes to face some difficult truths. Eventually, Will realizes that, instead of spending his personal assets, he should have saved more of them. He also comes to terms with the fact that, at his age, his marketable skills and professional prospects are not what they used to be. Lastly, Will must confront the fact that his son's suspected suicide is likely linked to a lifestyle involving Randy that Will never wants to know about. While Foote never makes the statement outright, Will's reluctance to meet with Randy seems based in his belief that his son was gay. In the end, Will regains a bit of his earlier optimism, telling Lily Dale, "everything will be all right." While hopeful, even this final statement is measured by Will's new understanding of himself and his current realities.

Themes

Dishonesty and Deception

Dishonesty and deception are central themes in *The Young Man from Atlanta*. In fact, all of the relationships between the central characters seem to involve one or the other. In some cases, it is clear that someone has lied to or deceived another. In other cases, the audience viewers must decide for themselves if someone is lying or telling the truth.

Lily Dale's dishonesty with her husband, as evidenced through her later confessions, is very clear. She lies to Will about having the money that he gave her over many Christmases, and she also lies to him about her having had contact with Randy.

Will's struggle with dishonesty and deception seems to be primarily with himself. From the beginning, one gets the feeling that he is deceiving himself about his career and his professional capabilities. While he is at first boastful and confident about his abilities, in the end he claims to have lost his spirit and his youthful outlook. Though he recovers his hope to a certain degree by the end of the play, his call to Tom about the position with his old employer reveals a man grounded in the reality of his circumstance rather than a man who is proud and naïvely optimistic about his ability to go into business for himself for the first time at the age of sixty-four. Despite Will's self deception on the career front, he seems to be more honest about his son's relationship with Randy and the nature of his death. Whereas Lily Dale convinces herself that Bill's death was an accident, Will admits that it was likely suicide. While Lily Dale never hints that there may have been a homosexual relationship between Bill and Randy, Will notes that there were things about his son that he would prefer not to know. Although Will's denial suggests his interest in continuing to live without knowing the truth about his son, his willingness to admit his denial proves him to be more in tune with the truth than his wife.

Randy Carter and Carson are also clearly central to the development of the themes of dishonesty and deception. Both characters claim that the other is lying to the Kidders and each can be seen as having something to gain from his deception. In Randy's case, the potential dishonesty about Bill comforts Lily Dale and encourages her kindly donation of thousands of dollars to him. In the case of Carson, his potential dishonesty allows him to forge an alliance with the Kidder family and prevents the family from unquestioningly believing Randy's revelations about Carson. Carson's new relationship clearly benefits him, as well as his sister, in terms of educational funding. Interestingly, the play ends without a clear resolution about who is indeed telling the truth and who is not, leaving the decision for the audience to ponder.

Suicide and Death

Suicide and death are pervasive in *The Young Man from Atlanta*. In addition to the central suicide of Bill Kidder, Lily Dale's friend, Alice Temple, and her husband both

commit suicide. Additionally, Ted Cleveland Sr., Lily Dale's father, Will's father, and Pete's wife (Lily Dale's mother) also die. Interestingly, suicide and death act as catalysts for the action in the play. Bill's death puts Randy's contact with the Kidders into motion and enables Randy to benefit from Lily Dale's compassion. At the same time, his contact also inspires Lily Dale to be dishonest with her husband. Ted Cleveland Sr.'s death ultimately triggers Will's termination and puts him in a financially dour situation. As a result, by the end of the play, Will is forced to be more honest with himself about his professional prospects and capabilities. Following the death of his wife, Pete eventually comes to live with the Kidders. His presence in the Kidder home facilitates honesty and communication between Lily Dale and her husband. It also allows Carson to enter their lives, which in the short term unites the couple in the belief that Randy deceived Lily Dale. Later, the couple's conversation about Randy's assertion that Carson is a liar inspires Will to be more honest with Lily Dale, telling her that there are things about his son he would rather not know.

Race Relations and Civil Rights

One of the more subtle themes in *The Young Man from Atlanta* entails race relations and civil rights. Lily Dale makes persistent and often inappropriately timed inquiries about the Disappointment Clubs, which she believes Eleanor Roosevelt started in Houston because of her strong dislike for the South and her desire "to disappoint white people." The clubs, Lily Dale claims, were set up to encourage domestic help to engage with new employers and then not show up for work. Interestingly, Roosevelt was in fact a strong proponent and advocate for civil rights who was known for her support of civil disobedience. In 1945, Roosevelt served on the board of directors for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Congress of Racial Equality and had a clear concern about race relations and employment. In fact, she took her concerns directly to the top and lobbied President Truman's administration to create a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC). Roosevelt's involvement with these organizations proves that, contrary to Lily Dale's opinion, the previous first lady was not motivated by her dislike for the South, but rather by her strong belief in racial equality. Lily Dale's superficial understanding about the clubs as well as Will's somewhat curt demeanor with Etta Doris demonstrate the couple's less than progressive attitude toward the treatment of black people. Foote perhaps included this element to reinforce the idea that the Kidders are conservative people who are not likely to embrace change or values that are nontraditional. This characterization of the couple fits well with Will's wish not to learn more about Bill's life and particularly his life as it involved Randy.

Style

Exposition

In drama, exposition is a technique that playwrights use to inform the audience about past events that are relevant to their understanding of the play. For example, exposition is common in the historical plays of William Shakespeare, where Shakespeare uses his characters early in each play to describe or discuss historical events that are pertinent to the action that ensues. In *The Young Man from Atlanta*, the clearest example of exposition occurs in the first scene during Will's conversation with Tom. Through this conversation, the audience learns about Bill's death and Will's belief that it was a suicide. The audience also learns that Will recently spent a significant amount of money building the Kidders' new home. This conversation also allows Foote to reveal some information about Will's tenure with Sunshine Southern Wholesale Grocery. Another example of exposition in *The Young Man from Atlanta* occurs while Lily Dale confides in Clara and Pete. During these confessional scenes, the audience learns about Lily Dale's personal and financial dealings with Randy.

Climax and Crisis

In drama, the climax of a play, or the point at which all of the problems and complications culminate, is brought on by a series of crises. In *The Young Man from Atlanta*, the crises begin with Bill's death and continue with Will losing his job and his discovery that Lily Dale has given a large sum of money to Randy. The progression of these crises is called the rising action. The climax in *The Young Man from Atlanta* occurs when Will has his offstage heart attack.

Denouement

Denouement is a French term that describes the unraveling or sorting out of a play's main plot problems or conflicts. In the case of *The Young Man from Atlanta*, much of the denouement involves Will and his realizations about himself personally and professionally. In the final scenes, Will comes to the understanding that he will not be able to start his own business and that, despite his pride, he will need to approach Sunshine Southern Wholesale Grocery for a lesser position. Another important moment in the play's denouement occurs when Will admits to Lily Dale that he believes their son's death was a suicide and that there are things about his son he would rather never know.

Historical Context

The 1940s and 1950s in the United States

Following the end of World War II in 1945, the United States found itself embroiled in a period of massive military demobilization. With 35,000 service personnel being discharged per day in 1946, the country faced short-term economic and social problems, including inflation, consumer goods shortages, and strained labor relations. On the political front, conflict continued despite the end of the war. By the 1950s, the Cold War was well underway. In 1950, the United States announced that it had the H-Bomb under development shortly after Russia touted its ownership of the A-Bomb. Tensions mounted between East and West, and on the home front, Senator Joseph McCarthy fueled the fear of communism by claiming that communists were not just abroad, but working side-by-side with America's best democracy-loving citizens. McCarthy even claimed to know the names of communists working in the State Department of the United States government. Investigations ensued and fear continued to grow as people began to suspect even their friends, neighbors, and colleagues of being communists. Despite such challenges and anxieties, Lois and Alan Gordon note in *American Chronicle: Year by Year through the Twentieth Century*, "a peacetime ethos of the pursuit of personal happiness replaced the wartime one of sacrifice." With an accumulation of personal savings, Americans began to spend and spend well. (The price of a loaf of bread in 1950 was fourteen cents and a pound of coffee cost fifty-five cents). Traditional values reigned, the suburbs grew, and the American dream took strong root in the nation's communal consciousness. By the spring of 1950, however, the United States was on the brink of another war. This time, communist North Korea had invaded South Korea. Despite President Truman's optimistic projection that the United States' involvement in the conflict would be swift, communist China (Russia's ally) came to the aid of North Korea and the war continued well beyond the nation's expectations. As a result of this turmoil, in 1952, according to Lois and Alan Gordon, "Dwight Eisenhower swept into office on a campaign against Korea, Communism, and Corruption."

In the eyes of many, communists were not the only threat to American security. Lizabeth Cohen and Mark Tebeau note in the *Encyclopedia of the United States in the Twentieth Century*,

In the context of the Cold War, supporters of traditional family norms cast homosexuality as a menace to the American moral order. In their eyes, not only were homosexuals moral perverts, they were also national security risks. In the 1940s and 1950s, homosexuals were clearly considered deviant and their lifestyle threatened traditional heterosexual family values.

During the 1940s and 1950s, civil rights issues were also heating up in the United States. In 1941, President Harry Truman, fearing a march on Washington, signed Executive Order 8802, which outlawed the prejudicial treatment of blacks working in the

federal government and defense industries. With membership in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People reaching 500,000 during World War II, the organization was gaining political clout. In 1948, Truman signed two additional executive orders (9980 and 9981), which prohibited racial discrimination in the civil service and required equal treatment and opportunity for all of the people in the armed forces. That same year, the NAACP endorsed a policy of integration rather than the separate but equal doctrine that had governed race relations since the late 1800s. All of this was of course laying the groundwork for the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in the *Brown vs. The Board of Education* case, which made the doctrine of separate but equal unconstitutional in public schools.

The 1990s in the United States

The early 1990s were a time of growing international political stability and declining economic conditions for the United States. In 1989, the Cold War ended, and in 1993, President Bill Clinton and Soviet leader Boris Yeltsin signed the Start II missile reduction treaty. Despite these successes, the United States had a new battle on its hands. Recession and high national debt were current concerns. Mainstay companies, such as the top three automakers, were posting record losses and corporate icons, such as the investment bank Drexel Burnham, were declaring bankruptcy. To the country's great dissatisfaction, George H. Bush raised taxes in an effort to reduce the deficit by $500 billion despite his earlier pledge that such taxation would not occur. Despite Bush's successful liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi invasion, Bill Clinton won the presidency in 1992. By the mid-nineties, the economy was on an improved footing, posting the best economic indicators in close to thirty years.

On the social and cultural front, the country was still a nation divided. Rodney King's beating by four Los Angeles police officers in 1991 and the race riots that followed their acquittals bespoke a vehement demand for racial equality and justice in the United States. Civil rights had come a long way from the times of racial segregation, separate-but-equal policies, and integration efforts; however, for many, the struggle was still a day-to-day fact of life. For homosexuals, as with racial minorities, equality and acceptance were still not the status quo. Although the AIDS epidemic brought homosexuality into the popular consciousness of the nation, many in the United States were not yet ready to view the lifestyle as valid. In 1990, new medical studies suggested that the genetic and physiological basis for homosexuality, and topically, it was becoming more mainstream. In 1993, *Angels in America*, which explores homosexuality, AIDS, and politics, won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, yet close to this same time, Clinton endorsed the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy about gays and homosexuals in the United States military. With the GOP's sweep of Congress in 1994, conservatives like Trent Lott continued to endorse a conservative picture of family values that clearly excluded homosexual lifestyle.

Critical Overview

While these critics and Foote's Pulitzer Prize for the work attest to the merits of this play, other critics have been perplexed by the praise. In a scathing review of the 1995 production, John Simon wrote in the *New York* Magazine, "How many times can he, as prolific as Miss Oates and nearly 80, keep writing the same sentimental, pathetic, old-fashioned, terminally boring play?" More sedately, Michael Feingold noted that same year in the *The Village Voice* that *The Young Man from Atlanta* is "a very sparse return for the ticket price, yet Foote's plays keep getting produced, applauded, praised." Critic John Lahr would concur. Writing for the *New Yorker* about the 1997 production, he notes that *The Young Man from Atlanta* "opened to high□and somewhat bewildering□praise. The drama is a house of cards propped up on the foundation of powerful performances by Rip Torn and Shirley Knight." He further commented that, "despite Foote's wry compassion, there's less here than meets the eye."

Writing similarly unfavorable critiques, critics Robert L. King and Greg Evans took issue with specific aspects of the play that they found lacking. In the *North American Review*, King notes that Boston's Huntington Theatre production was not well received, saying that "the Boston audience felt so put upon that many began laughing at the play's predictability, including Will's offstage heart attack." For Evans, writing for *Variety* in 1997, Foote's characters were the problem. He wrote that "Carson is a device, and an awkward one at that, his arrival in town too coincidental, his character too thin." He then goes on to say that Foote's other "disparate characters and their respective loose ends lend the play a rather meandering feel, and some of the encounters seem more padding than substance." Stefan Kanfer, writing for the *New Leader* in 1997, found fault with Foote for not exploring many of the plays compelling problems or questions and notes that sadly, "The cast far outshines this inadequate material." For him "inspiration, like the piano that Lily Dale refuses to play, is nowhere to be seen."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Robeson is a freelance writer with a master's degree in English. In this essay, Robeson discusses the ways in which Lily Dale and Will Kidder inspire compassion and disdain in audiences and readers.

In *The Young Man from Atlanta*, Foote explores the issue of death and its impact on the lives of parents. In the process, he delves into the lives of his living characters and seems to ask the question, what type of a life is worth living? For Will and Lily Dale Kidder, life seems divorced from many realities. Michael Feingold, who reviewed the play in 1995 for the *Village Voice*, posed an interesting question. He asked, the "desperate desire not to face reality is certainly very American, but does Foote want us to indict it or empathize with it?" In the end, Foote creates two characters who inspire both empathy and contempt from audiences and readers.

For Lily Dale, living a life that is not grounded in reality is the status quo. Ben Brantley, writing in the *New York Times*, calls her a "petulant, spoiled child bride." Indeed, Lily Dale's life is much like that of a spoiled child rather than a mature adult. She calls her husband "daddy" and tells Pete that "anything I ever wanted, Will got for me." Lily Dale so easily parts with $35,000 that one might easily criticize her for having a juvenile understanding of the value of money (particularly in light of the fact that the average annual salary in 1950 was less than $3,000). In addition to living a sheltered and pampered life that freed her from most adult responsibilities and thus adult realities, Lily Dale seems ill equipped to deal with some of life's larger and more serious issues, including civil rights and the nature of her son's death.

As alluded to in earlier commentary about the play's themes, Lily Dale has a superficial understanding of race relations. This lack of awareness surfaces when she discusses the Disappointment Clubs that she believes Eleanor Roosevelt started in Houston during World War II. For Lily Dale, Roosevelt was motivated by her desire to "disappoint white people" and she "took out all her personal unhappiness on the South." In reality, however, Roosevelt was deeply committed to social justice and the rights of black people in America. Clearly, Roosevelt's cause and the plight of black Americans are lost on the self-centered Lily Dale. When it comes to the death of her son, much seems similarly lost on her. When her friend Alice Temple questions her religious faith in light of Bill's suicide, Lily Dale is shocked. She insists, "His death was an accident" and fails to grasp the very real possibility that Bill did indeed take his own life.

Despite Lily Dale's narcissistic and sheltered life, audiences and readers are likely to feel some compassion for her. It is often said that the death of a child is one of the most difficult losses that a person can experience. Lily Dale's grief is palpable in her raw vulnerability and is expressed in her uncontrollable need to connect with Randy. Of her conversation with Alice she tells Pete,

And she upset me so, Pete, that I couldn't stop trembling and my heart started racing so, I thought I would have a heart attack. And I just had to call that sweet roommate of

his in Atlanta, even though Daddy had told me never to, and I told him exactly what Alice had told me. He said there was not a world of truth in it. . . . I felt very relieved after that, and I thanked God, got on my knees and thanked God for sending this sweet friend of Bill's to tell me once again of Bill's faith in God.

Lily Dale desperately misses her son and will do anything to touch a piece of him. In scene 2, she confides in Pete, "Every time I feel blue over missing Bill, I call his friend and I ask him to tell me again about Bill and his prayers and he does so so sweetly." Lily Dale's need to connect with someone that she believes was close to Bill is understandable. However, her actions are not without a cost□a cost that ends the empathy that most might initially feel for her.

Although Lily Dale's grief moves audiences to be somewhat forgiving of her childishness and self-centeredness, in the end, she does not inspire long-term empathy. Lily Dale's need to connect with Randy is understandable; however, her willful dishonesty with Will is not. Her relationship with Randy and her donation to his questionable causes is damaging to her marriage, both emotionally and financially. For this, many audiences and readers tend to hold her accountable. Instead of looking vulnerable and grief stricken, her actions make her appear shallow, unintelligent, and gullible. Ironically, even when Lily Dale comes to grips with the error of her ways, it is difficult to feel compassion for her. She says, "I have been deceived, I have been so deceived it has broken my heart. . . . I feel so betrayed, so hurt, so humiliated." Although she blames herself for Will's heart attack, she fails to recognize that her feelings of betrayal must be nothing compared to those that her husband might be feeling about her dishonesty with him. In the end, Will's assessment of her comes through as absolutely correct: she had "been taken for a fool," because of her unwillingness to accept some difficult truths about her son and Randy. Because of her selfishness and less than admirable handling of her relationship with her husband, Lily Dale's lowest moment in the play, is likely the time that audiences feel the least amount of compassion for her.

While audiences and readers come to dislike Lily Dale as the play progresses, Will seems to inspire a somewhat different reaction. At first, he lives in a world outside of reality that makes him come across as boastful and overly confident, particularly as it comes to his perceptions about his career. Despite Will's claims that his clients respect him and that he is "a born competitor," he can no longer perform in the competitive marketplace. As his boss, Ted, puts it, "It's a new age. . . . It's a different ball game, Will. What worked forty years ago, or twenty, or ten, doesn't work anymore." Following his termination, Will's self-delusion persists. Although he left the Sunshine Southern Wholesale Grocery to pursue his own business venture, Will is unable to secure funding from the banks. This is proof yet again that Will had an inflated, if not wholly inaccurate, understanding of his professional relationships. In this case, none of the financial institutions with whom he has worked over the years would extend credit to him for a new business.

In addition to the fact that Will has a professional life that is not grounded in reality, his personal life seems similarly tainted. In his initial conversation with Tom, Will boasts that he has "the best of everything." Will includes his career, his house, and his wife in this

assessment. Sadly, as with his career, Will comes to find out that not everything in his life is what it appears to be on the surface. Not only does he realize that he has overestimated himself professionally, but the cost of building his house has put him in severe financial straits given his termination. Further, he learns that his wife, "the finest wife a man could have," has been dishonest with him. Ironically, these realizations help make Will a more likable character who is possibly more deserving of empathy than contempt.

As Will's world of artifice comes tumbling down, he becomes a more humble and honest man. In the midst of facing realities about his professional capabilities and prospects, he must also come to terms with his financial affairs, his marriage, and of course, the facts surrounding his son's life and death. Although Will comes to terms with all of these issues, one might argue that he falls a bit short when it comes to Bill. Although Will readily admits that he believed Bill's death was a suicide very early in the play, he refuses to explore the nature of his son's involvement with Randy. The unspoken assumption that permeates this play is that Bill and Randy were involved in a homosexual relationship. Of Bill, Will says to Lily Dale, "there was a Bill I knew and a Bill you knew and that's the only Bill I care to know about." He refuses to meet with Randy because he says, "there are things I'd have to ask him and I don't want to know the answers." One can read this final decision of Will's as the last vestige of denial that prevents him from living fully in reality. Were he to confront the issue of his son's sexuality, all that he had previously denied, ignored, or lied to himself about would be cleared up; however, he refuses the meeting and asks Lily Dale to send Randy away for the final time.

Interestingly, Will's refusal demonstrates his clear desire to stay in the dark about his son's sexuality, and in one sense this does indicate another way in which he will continue to live in a world that is not based in reality. At the same time, Will's admissions to Lily Dale indicate that he has to some extent already reached an understanding about his son's lifestyle and sexual preferences. By refusing to meet with Randy, Will demonstrates that he is indeed already aware that Bill and Randy's relationship was more than a simple friendship.

Lily Dale and Will inspire both compassion and disdain. They live within a shroud of ignorance and denial and are thus difficult to admire or even like. As the play progresses, however, each gives audiences and readers reasons to relate and empathize with them. But are these reasons enough to redeem them? In the end, Foote leaves that question for his viewers and readers to answer. Most likely, people who encounter this play will find themselves with divided opinions. Perhaps Foote's lasting point is that one's ability to face reality is not a consistent trait, and thus progress and failure to do so are both an inherent part of the reality in which everyone lives. In this way then, Lily Dale and Will are, in fact, more of a reflection of reality than an exception to it.

Source: Dustie Robeson, Critical Essay on *The Young Man from Atlanta*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Fernando is a freelance writer and editor in Seattle, Washington. In this essay, Fernando argues that Foote's play is a deconstruction of the American dream.

The Young Man from Atlanta opens with Will Kidder, age 64, sitting in his office at the produce firm for which he has worked since his early twenties, examining the plans for a luxurious new home he has just finished building for himself and his wife, Lily Dale Kidder. When his colleague Tom questions him about the extravagance of the new house, Will answers "I want the best. The biggest and the best. I always have. Since I was a boy. We were dirt poor after my father died and I said to myself then I'm not going to live like this the rest of my life."

This short bit of dialogue succinctly and clearly establishes Will Kidder as a rags-to-riches character—that is, a person who has moved from poverty to material wealth and, therefore, happiness and fulfillment. The rags-to-riches character is a type that is echoed throughout American folklore and history—from the true story of Andrew Carnegie to the wildly successful early twentieth-century formulaic novels by Horatio Alger—and reflects the ideal of the American dream, which is that anyone, no matter what his/her background, has the equal opportunity to attain financial success. Kidder has indeed attained the American dream of material success. His attainment of wealth is merely a prologue to the plot of the play: Kidder's complete loss of that wealth and financial security and how this loss changes his life. In effect, Foote creates a riches-to-rags story, rather than a rags-to-riches story, thereby accomplishing a deconstruction of that mainstay of American storytelling. By turning upside-down the rags-to-riches convention, Foote effectively deconstructs two intertwined ideologies that it presumes: the virtuousness of the competitive drive for the acquisition of material wealth and the value placed on material wealth itself as the ultimate form of happiness. The pursuit of the happiness promised by wealth has not necessarily made the Kidders happy and has instead led them to emotional losses in their relationships with each other.

The opportunity to compete freely for business is an essential component of a free market economy like that of the United States. In the formulaic American rags-to-riches stories, the equal opportunity to compete for wealth is an assumed constant, and, most importantly, the ability to make the most of opportunity is regarded as a moral virtue and is therefore rewarded with material wealth. Will is a wholehearted believer in opportunism and the free competitive economic system. In the opening scene, Will admires the plans for his extravagant new home, as if basking in the wealth he has managed to amass during his career at the Sunshine Southern Wholesale Grocery. Will has been rewarded with wealth for succeeding in the competitive market. He says to his colleague Tom

We have the best products in the city of Houston, and those we don't have we just have to aggressively compete for. I'm a competitor, son. A born competitor. Nothing fires me up like competition. . . . My brother, may his soul rest in peace, wasn't [competitive]. He

didn't have a competitive bone in his body. All he ever thought about was where his next drink of whiskey was coming from.

Will's belief and participation in the system reveals his unquestioned belief not only that the economic system is morally and ethically sound but also that subscribing to it is a guaranteed way to attain financial success. On the other hand, he blames a lack of financial success on a lack of competitive drive, which he places on par with the vice of alcoholism. He sees the failure to attain financial success as a direct indication of a lack of the virtue of competitiveness.

Will's view of the competitive system is idealistic; it echoes the idealism with which other rags-to-riches stories exalt the opportunism of the competitive free market economy. But idealization, as is its nature, simplifies and narrows one's outlook. As soon as Will's idealization of the system is established, the play begins the deconstruction of his one-dimensional view of the competitive marketplace. The process of deconstruction is started when he is fired from his thirty-eight-year position at the Sunshine Southern Wholesale Grocery by Ted Cleveland Jr., the son of the first owner of the produce chain.

Ted says to Will: "It's a new age, Will. My father wouldn't recognize business the way it's done today. Very competitive." When Will protests that he is a proven competitor, Ted explains that he is no longer competitive enough: "My hands are tied, Will. . . . We're not competing any longer. . . . We need younger men in charge here."

In this conversation between Ted and Will, Foote employs a very blunt irony that contrasts Ted's particular language with Will's ideas regarding the competitive marketplace. This irony is a tool by which Foote begins the deconstruction of Will's unquestioning idealization of the economic system. In the quote above, Ted specifically cites the company's dwindling competitive edge□that very same competitive power that had brought Will his financial success□as the reason that Will must be fired from the company. Despite his belief that hard work and a competitive drive will continue to lead to financial success, Will gets handed a particularly brutal firing: he is 64 years of age and just months from retirement. He has just tied up all of his capital in the house he has just built, and he has just undergone another even more painful loss in the mysterious drowning of his son, Bill. Will now finds himself suddenly thrust from wealth and financial security to the brink of financial ruin. For the first time, the system has worked against him. And for the reader/viewer of the play, if not yet for Will, the virtue of this competitive work ethic that he extolled are directly brought into question by Ted's act.

Will's initial response to being fired is to stay optimistic and, rather than give up on the system he believes in, enter into competition against Ted's company by immediately opening his own produce business. He is, however, sadly set up for failure despite his experience in the business and, most importantly of all, despite his vision and competitiveness. Throughout the second and third scenes of the play, obstacles continually barrage him. It becomes obvious that he will fail to open his business. He has made the mistake of tying up his cash in his extravagant new home, and he is put in the humiliating position of having to ask his wife for her savings□only to find that she

has been swindled out of most of her money by a con artist. Will is denied time and time again by the banks who he initially believed would "stand by me until I'm on my feet once again." Because of the stress of his sudden dire situation, Will has a serious heart attack and finds himself housebound, unable to work, for six months. By the end of the third scene, Will is transformed from the "burly man with lots of vitality" of the opening scene, to a housebound invalid facing sudden financial crisis.

He says to his family: "Thirty-eight years. Where did they go? . . . I saw the city growing all around me. There was no stopping it, I thought, and there is no stopping anyone with vision and competitiveness." The system has failed to reward him with riches for his years of hard work and, most of all, for his vision and competitiveness. Instead, the system has brought him to ruin, and the experience has shattered his idealism.

By the end of the third scene of the play, Foote's complete reversal of the rags-to-riches plot is complete. Rather than be rewarded with wealth by the system for his competitiveness and hard work, Will has been fired from his job and has lost his wealth in the name of that system of competition. The story could have ended here, at the end of the third scene, as a tragedy closing with the embitterment of a man whose illusions have been crushed. But even though those fairy-tales inevitably end on a happily-ever-after note, Foote resists fulfilling a complete reversal by taking the play to such a dismally opposite end. Instead, throughout the remaining three scenes of the play, Will is transformed from the idealist he was before to a realist.

This transformation is indicated by Will's slowly and quietly realizing that he will need to accept the menial job at the produce company that Ted Cleveland Jr. has offered him. The most powerful moment of Will's transformation from idealist to realist occurs at the closing of the last scene. In a moment of completely open and honest conversation between Lily Dale and Will, Lily Dale reveals that, despite being provided with extravagant material comforts and a life of leisure, she has been lonely and unhappy, even to the point of considering unfaithfulness to her husband: "I get lonely, Will, you've always had your work, gone away so much of the time." Will confesses that, although their son Bill has recently died, Will had lost him long before his death, his long work hours not allowing him to ever get to really know his son: "I never tried to find out what he would want to do, what he would want to talk about. . . . I was never close to him, Lily Dale."

Although this closing scene is an eye-opening admission of unhappiness, dissatisfaction, and failure for both Lily Dale and Will, the play itself does not ultimately end on a note of fatality. Rather, Foote closes the play with a simple statement from Will to his wife: "Everything is going to be all right. If I go back to work and you start teaching, everything will be all right." His words reveal, despite the tragedies of loss he has experienced, a heartening resilience of spirit, and Foote thus closes the play with a redemptive glimmer of optimism.

Source: Tamara Fernando, Critical Essay on *The Young Man from Atlanta*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Adaptations

The Young Man from Atlanta is available on audiocassette. The unabridged reading, which stars Shirley Knight and David Selby, was published in 1999 by L.A. Theater Works. This reading can be downloaded from http://www.audible.com or purchased through online or local booksellers.

Topics for Further Study

Research Eleanor Roosevelt's stand on civil rights. Given your findings, do you agree or disagree with Lily Dale that Eleanor Roosevelt "took out all her personal unhappiness on the South?"

In 1948, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) ended its support of the separate but equal doctrine in favor of a policy of integration. One year later, South Africa instituted apartheid. These events reflect an international community with differing views on the treatment of black people. If the Kidders' had to vote for integration or apartheid, how do you think they would vote? Explain your decision.

Some critics believe that Bill Kidder is a homosexual character. What can you gather from the text that either supports or contradicts this opinion?

Honesty, and the lack of it, is an important thematic element in this play. In the end, it is difficult to know who to believe. Is there any evidence in the text that you can point to that would make you believe Randy Carter or Carson? Is it possible that they are both being dishonest or is it possible that there is some truth in the claims that they each make? Whom do you believe most and why?

Research the economy of the United States from 1940 through 1950. In your opinion, could the state of the economy have hurt the Sunshine Southern Wholesale Grocery company's profitability, or was the company's downslide more likely a result of Will's failing, old-style business practices?

Read *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller. How are Willy Loman and Will Kidder similar? How are they different?

What Do I Read Next?

In 1988, Grove Press published the first four plays of Foote's Orphans' Home Cycle. The volume is titled *Roots in a Parched Ground; Convicts; Lily Dale; The Widow Claire: The First Four Plays of the Orphans' Home Cycle Volume 1*. In *Roots in a Parched Ground*, Lily Dale appears at age ten and, as the title indicates, in *Lily Dale*, she returns, as does Will Kidder as a man in his twenties.

Cousins and *The Death of Papa* are two of the last plays in Foote's Orphans' Home Cycle. Grove Press published the two plays together in 1989. In *Cousins*, Foote presents Will Kidder to audiences again, this time as a middle-aged man.

Death of a Salesman, by Arthur Miller, was originally published in 1949. The play tells the tragic story of Willy Loman, a failed salesman, and, like *The Young Man from Atlanta*, treats the themes of the American dream, suicide, self-deception, and dishonesty.

Angels in America earned Tony Kushner the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1993, as well as two Tony Awards. Through two full-length plays that make up the work, Kushner explores issues surrounding politics, homosexuality, and AIDS from a contemporary vantage point.

Further Study

Evans, Harold, *The American Century*, Knopf, 1998.

In this *New York Times* bestseller, Evans chronicles United States history from 1898 to 1989. Chapters ten and eleven span the years 1941 to 1956.

Foote, Horton, *Beginnings: A Memoir*, Scribner, 2001.

In this continuation of his first memoir, Foote catalogs his transition from actor to writer.

□□□, *Farewell: A Memoir of a Texas Childhood*, Scribner, 2000.

In his first memoir, Foote focuses primarily on his youth in Wharton, Texas, and on the people whose lives intersected with his, and hence, greatly influenced him and his career.

□□□, *Genesis of an American Playwright*, edited and with an introduction by Marion Castleberry, Baylor University Press, 2004.

In this autobiography, Foote tells the story of his life and career, including stories about his childhood in Wharton, Texas, and a dedicated concentration on the people and events that shaped the man and his craft. This book is essential for anyone looking to know more about Foote as a person and artist.

Klarmon, Michael J., *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

Klarmon explores the issue of racial equality in the United States from the late 1800s through the 1960s through the lens of the Supreme Court's rulings.

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Simon, John, "With Blunt Tools," in *New York Magazine*, Vol. 28, No. 9, February 27, 1995, pp. 115—17.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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:

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