

## SAMPLE ESSAYS ON DRAMA

Plays are full of fascinating characters and themes that invite interaction and analysis. The sample essays that follow analyze just a few plays. You will find many more reviews on my website connected to this book. These essays elucidate some of the principles of drama that we have been discussing in this chapter. They provide engaging and concrete contexts for them.

### ***Hamlet's Enduring Appeal*** **An essay by the author of this book**

Is *Hamlet* a murder mystery, a detective story, a revenge play, or philosophy of life disguised as drama? The prevalent view is that this play combines all those elements and, thus, like Shakespeare's most other plays, has something for every taste. His ability to feel the pulse of his audience made Shakespeare the most popular dramatist of his day. It would, however, be wrong to say that popularity was his chief goal. He had a clear conception of the role of the dramatist as someone who, while providing entertainment, would not overlook the moral and philosophical aspects of drama.

### **Shakespeare's view of drama**

Fortunately, the play itself contains a clear and concentrated statement of Shakespeare's view of drama presented to us in Hamlet's words in Act III, Scene ii, lines 1-47.<sup>1</sup> Here Hamlet is advising the actors about acting and about his concept of drama. His words on acting can be applied with equal validity to the writing of plays. Hamlet emphasizes the following points:

1. Use restraint (understatement) in expressing passion so that you don't tear it to tatters: ". . . in the very torrent, tempest, and . . . whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness" (III,ii,5-8).
2. Make the style and substance complement each other: "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (lines 18-19).
3. Represent the universal in human nature as well as the particular in the dramatist's time and place:  
". . . the purpose of playing . . . both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time . . . [its] form and pressure" (lines 21-25).

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1 *Shakespeare: Complete Plays and Poems*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin & Company, 1942)

4. Maintain a clear sense of audience. Entertaining the unskillful is less important than pleasing the judicious viewer/reader. What makes the “unskillful laugh” may make “the judicious grieve, the censure of the which one must in your allowance o’erweigh a whole theater of others” (lines 27-30).
5. Represent human nature realistically; some writers and actors portray humanity “so abominably” that it seems “some of Nature’s journeymen had made men, and not made them well” (lines 35-36).
6. Limit the role of clowns so that they serve, not disrupt the play’s important questions:
 

”And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them, for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the meantime some necessary question of the play be then to be considered. That’s villainous and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it” (lines 40-47).

This scene shows that Shakespeare (using Hamlet as his spokesman) felt writers should address important questions.

Earlier Hamlet had commented on a play that was not well received by the masses, yet he thought it to be a good play because it was free of trendy ostentation and affectation:

“I heard thee speak me a speech once, but it was never acted, or if it was, not above once, for the play, I remember, pleased not the million; ‘twas caviary to the general, but it was (as I received it, and others, whose judgments in such matters cried in the top of mine) an excellent play, well digested in the scenes, set down with as much modesty as cunning [;] . . . there were no sallets in the lines to make the matter savory; nor no matter in the phrase that might indict the author of affectation” (II,ii,44-454).

With Shakespeare’s aforementioned criteria of great plays in mind, let us look at *Hamlet* as a play that combines the elements of murder mystery, detective story, revenge play, and philosophy.

### ***Hamlet* as a murder mystery**

In the play’s opening, jittery lines we learn from the sentinels that an apparition, resembling the late King of Denmark, has been haunting the platform of the royal castle at Elsinor. Later in Act 1 (scene v), the Ghost reveals to Prince Hamlet that the prince’s uncle and the present King Claudius is the one who had murdered his own brother – King Hamlet. The “official” reason for King Hamlet’s death had been given out to be a snake bite. Now the Ghost tells Hamlet that the snake that bit him wears his crown. This is all quite confusing to Hamlet, who intuitively feels the Ghost’s words to be true, but being a just, honorable, and conscientious man, he wants to be sure of Claudius’ crime before taking revenge.

Hamlet’s confusion is evident in these lines:

The spirit that I have seen/May be a devil; and the devil hath power/T'assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps/Out of my weakness and my melancholy/ . . . Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds/More relative than this (II,ii,606-616).

### ***Hamlet as a detective story***

To test the Ghost's veracity, Hamlet must become a detective, and here the murder mystery becomes a detective play. There are, of course, other detectives in the play. They are Hamlet's former friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whose services the King engages to spy on Hamlet. And then there is Polonius, the chief spy in the court of Elsinor. However, our concern is primarily with Hamlet as a detective. When some actors come to Elsinor, Hamlet devises a plan. He will ask the visiting actors to act out on stage the circumstances and manner of King Hamlet's murder by Claudius as reported to Hamlet by the Ghost. If Claudius reveals his guilt when watching this mirror image of his crime, Hamlet would be sure of Claudius's crime and then would know his course. Hamlet is here expressing an artist's faith in the power of drama:

I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play have by the very cunning of the scene been struck so to the soul that presently they have proclaimed their malefactions. For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak with most miraculous organ. I'll have these players play something like the murder of my father before mine uncle. . . . The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King (II,ii,601-617).

Since the life of King Claudius is at stake, Hamlet does not want to be the sole judge lest he should make an error of Judgment. To make certain that his own eyes do not deceive him, Hamlet asks his wise friend Horatio to observe Claudius's response to the murder scene in the play-within-the-play.

### ***Hamlet as a revenge play***

When Claudius reveals his guilt, the detective component in the story of Hamlet comes to an end and the revenge component begins. Now Hamlet knows his course, but the first decisive step that he takes is the accidental murder of Polonius, who had been hiding "behind the arras" to listen in on the conversation between Hamlet and his mother. Hamlet mistook Polonius for Claudius; what business, after all, did Polonius have in the Queen's bedroom? This unintended murder of Polonius complicates the plot and Hamlet's situation. Claudius uses Hamlet's act as an excuse to get rid of him under the pretext of sending him to England. Escorted by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet is to be put to death immediately on reaching England. That is Claudius's secret command to the king of England. Thus, potentially, Claudius is already guilty of at least two murders.

Looking at *Hamlet* as a revenge play, we find that revenge is an important topic in the play. In fact, the Ghost's call for revenge on Claudius is the plot-setting device that controls the play's movement. Even though *Hamlet* includes many elements of the popular tradition of the revenge play, Shakespeare adds a philosophical dimension to the typical, action-oriented drama.

## ***Hamlet as philosophy of life***

A poignant reminder of the ultimate futility of the vicious cycle of revenge is that when vengeance is finally carried out, it is not in the form hoped for, nor does it bring the expected satisfaction. Along with Claudius die the Queen, Laertes, and Hamlet. Revenge brings no personal satisfaction to Hamlet and Laertes, who seek and wreak revenge in the play. On the other hand, Fortinbras, who overcomes his desire for revenge on Denmark, eventually becomes the king of Denmark.

This philosophical reflection on the futility of revenge is but one of the numerous great ideas Shakespeare has enshrined in stunning and memorable language. Some will undoubtedly and persuasively maintain that the play's philosophical component is its most enduring quality. In fact if there ever were to be composed one single book of profound observations about human existence, *Hamlet* would, undoubtedly, be a prominent source.

## **Some other philosophical reflections in *Hamlet***

The following random thoughts in response to just a few of the memorable passages from *Hamlet* by no means cover the wealth of great ideas in this play.

**Scruples of conscience and how they bind a thinking man, sometimes to the point of paralysis of will:** "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all, and thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" (III,I,83-88). Conscience, Hamlet comes to know, is the ultimate controller of a thoughtful man's actions.

On the question of **how to live one's life**, unsurpassed are Shakespeare's following words – ironically uttered by Polonius, who can give great advice but fails to practice it: ". . . Give each man thine ear, but few they voice; take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment. . . . Neither a borrower nor a lender be, for loan oft loses both itself and friend, . . . This above all, to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man (I,iii,61-80).

**Validity of our statements in the heat of passion:** What credibility do our words carry in a state of heightened emotions? Once again, Polonius' words furnish the answer: "When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul lends the tongue vows" (I,iii,116-117)

**The paradoxical elements in human nature -- our zenith as well as our nadir:** "I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, . . . this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; . . . it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors. What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, . . . in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals; and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? . . . (II,ii,303-318)

**Ideal temperament and desirable attitude in adversity:** For guidance we have Hamlet's words about Horatio, who embodies these enviable qualities:

“A man that Fortune’s buffets and rewards hast ta’en with equal thanks; and blest are those whose blood and judgment are so well comeddled that they are not a pipe for Fortune’s finger to sound what stop she please. Give me that man that is not passion’s slave, . . .” (III,ii,68-76).

Whereas Hamlet sees himself as passion’s slave and as such an easy instrument to be exploited by fate, Horatio’s stoical nature enables him to rise above life’s fever and fret.

**Desirable conduct – the importance of kindness in human dealings:** In response to Polonius’s plan to treat the players “according to their desert” (that is, according to what they deserve), Hamlet urges him to treat them “much better”: “Use every man after his desert, and who should scape whipping? Use them after your own honor and dignity. The less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty” (II,ii,540-543).

**Random distribution of sorrows:** When Claudius’s crafty schemes backfire, he learns the bitter truth expressed in a way that lifts the cliché-like “When it rains it pours” to new heights of artistic expression: “When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions” (IV,v,78-79).

**Backfiring designs:** It has been long known that those who lay traps for others may themselves fall into them, and at the end of the play, Horatio talks about “purposes mistook/Fall’n on th’ inventors’ heads” (V,ii,385-386). However, this wisdom has never been expressed so eloquently as in these words of Hamlet: “For ‘tis the sport to have the enginer/Hoist with his own petar” (III,iv.207-208).

**The inconstancy of human beings:** Of other universal truths, the Player-King has chronicled for all time the truth about the inconstancy of human passions: “. . . What to ourselves in passion we propose, the passion ending, doth the purpose lose” (III, ii, 192-209)

The theme of inconstancy of human beings comes up many times in the play. Gertrude marries Claudius soon after her husband’s death. What is surprising is the fact that the love between King Hamlet and Gertrude was so special that it seemed to grow continuously. It is precisely because theirs seemed to be a perfect match that Gertrude’s marriage to Claudius soon after her husband’s death puzzles Hamlet: “. . . That it should come to this: But two months dead . . . frailty, thy name is woman – a little month, or ere those shoes were old with which she followed my poor father’s body like Niobe, all tears, why she, even she – O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason would have mourned longer – married with my uncle” (I,ii,137-151). In fact, Hamlet’s mind is so tainted by his mother’s conduct that he starts seeing her in every woman. When Ophelia comments on the brevity of the prologue to the play being performed, Hamlet retorts that the prologue is brief like “woman’s love” (III,ii,159).

Hamlet notices inconstancy of human beings in yet another respect – the nature of public memory. People who made faces at Claudius when King Hamlet was alive now purchase Claudius’s miniature portraits (II,ii,371-376). The Player-King, too alludes to this phenomenon:

“the great man down, you mark his favorite flies; the poor advanced makes friends of enemies (III,ii,210-219).

Hamlet would like to understand the reasons for these defects in human nature, and he counts on philosophy to furnish an answer, but he finds philosophy very limited in explaining the mystery of human nature and existence. Hence Hamlet’s famous words to Horatio: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (I,v,166-67).

**The inevitability of death and the importance of readiness:** As to the ultimate philosophical question that brings us face to face with oblivion of the inevitable, ever-approaching death, what can surpass Hamlet’s words that culminate in the famous “readiness is all” attitude: “There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ‘tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is’t to leave betimes? Let it be” (V,ii,220-225). Some things are simply beyond our control and the best we can do is submit to the inevitable.

**Life is riddled with Ironies:** Hamlet has been dying to tell the truth about Claudius’s crime of fratricide and his other evil acts. Finally, when the right moment offers itself, Hamlet’s voice is silenced by death. Instead of a harmonious speech tying all loose ends, as Hamlet plunges into Claudius the same envenomed weapon that has mortally hurt him and Laertes and as he forces the remainder of the poisoned drink down Claudius’s throat, with the last ounce of his energy and the last seconds of his time, all that he can tell the dumbfounded courtiers is this: “You that look pale and tremble at this chance, had I but time (as this fell sergeant, Death, is strict in his arrest) O, I could tell you – but let it be. Horatio, I am dead; . . . report me and my cause aright to the unsatisfied” (V,ii,335-341). Hamlet’s speech captures the pathos of helplessness in being so close to a longed-for goal (in this case, Hamlet’s desire to reveal Claudius’ crimes) but not achieving it because the “fell sergeant, Death” so decrees.

Horatio is left to reveal the long withheld truth about Claudius -- something that Hamlet and the whole play have not been able to tell. Thus, in one of the most perfect finishes in drama, the story is both ending and beginning – ending of Hamlet’s incomplete story as the play attempted to tell it and the beginning of Hamlet’s complete story, with his friend Horatio as the would-be narrator. On this artistically perfect finish of Hamlet’s story, Bertrand Joseph’s words from his book *Conscience and the King* are not to be missed:

“[It is] not enough to kill Claudius; the king must also be unmistakably exposed for what he is. In the whole play there is only one moment when this [the exposure of the king’s criminal acts] can happen; and when it happens it is a culmination of a long serpentine course of events.”

The list of great ideas from the play could continue indefinitely because *Hamlet* remains Shakespeare’s longest, most discussed, and most complex play. It bristles with probing questions and profound observations on the human condition. The deeply meditative and riddlesome nature of the play was captured by A.W. Schlegel nearly 150 years ago:

*Hamlet* is singular in its kind: a tragedy of thought inspired by continual and never-satisfied meditation on human destiny and the dark perplexity of the events of this world, and calculated to call forth the very same meditation in the minds of the spectators. This enigmatical work resembles those irrational equations in which a fraction of unknown magnitude always remains, that will in no way admit of solution" (Schlegel 404)

### **Play discussed: Shakespeare's *Hamlet***

*Using Chapter Two's advice on writing a character analysis, Stella Carey's interpretation of Horatio's role in Shakespeare's "Hamlet" is lucid and persuasive. Especially welcome is her finding in Horatio a source of hope. Re-read the plot analysis of this play in Chapter Three. If you have not yet read the play, at least watch any of its film adaptations. There are dozens of versions. Sir Lawrence Olivier's is one of the good ones.*

### **Horatio: A Source of Hope in *Hamlet*** **Student author: Stella Carey**

Critics frequently dismiss Horatio as a minor character in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. He is often viewed as little more than a foil for Hamlet or a reflection of the prince's conscience. However, deeper consideration of Horatio's function in the play reveals a much more significant role. Horatio is the only character Hamlet trusts, and as such he is a true friend and the sole confidant of the prince. He also brings a sense of balance and stability to the play by virtue of his calm and rational nature. Finally, Horatio provides an outside perspective which serves to validate the audience's point of view. Horatio is essential to understanding Hamlet's personality and the tragic events that come to pass in the play.

Perhaps the most important of Horatio's functions in the play is his role as Hamlet's ally and confidant. There is a strong bond of friendship between Hamlet and Horatio, and this connection offers unique insight into Hamlet's personality and character. Only in his interactions with Horatio can the prince completely be himself, free from pretense, feigned madness, or bitterness and disdain that dominate his exchanges with most other characters in the play. Hamlet seems to truly enjoy Horatio's company, and at times the two friends exchange jokes and lighthearted banter, such as in the graveyard scene (Act 5, Scene 1) or the dialogue with Osric (Act 5, Scene 2). These are some of the few moments during the play when Hamlet seems happy. Interactions between Hamlet and Horatio provide the only glimpse into Hamlet's true self, as he was before the tragic events surrounding his father's death began to unfold.

Horatio is the only character, aside from Hamlet's own late father, that the prince respects and reveres. In Act 3, Scene 2, before confiding his plans to entrap Claudius, Hamlet lavishes his friend with praise:

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice  
And could of men distinguish her election,  
S'hath seal'd thee for herself, for thou hast been  
As one, in suff'ring all, that suffers nothing,  
A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards  
Has ta'en with equal thanks; and blest are those  
Whose blood and judgment are so well comeddled  
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger  
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man  
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him  
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,  
As do I thee. (III, ii, 65-76)

Hamlet sees in Horatio qualities that he finds enviable. The prince admires his friend's equanimity, integrity, and even temperament. Horatio is sensitive, but not ruled by emotion; he is not "passion's slave." As Hamlet struggles with his own emotional distress, he recognizes the value of Horatio's strong character.

It is this strength of character that enables Horatio to provide a sense of stability and equilibrium to other characters in the play. In the first scene the sentinels turn to him for guidance in dealing with the ghost. "Thou art a scholar," (1.1.42) Marcellus remarks, and urges him to confront the apparition. True to his rational nature, Horatio questions the ghost without fear, and then determines that Hamlet should be informed about the ghost. It is the same lucidity and resolve that later prompts Hamlet, as he is dying at the end of the play, to entrust Horatio to tell his story.

Another vital role Horatio fulfills in the play is to provide the audience with an outside perspective that validates their point of view. Because Horatio is a sound and sensible person, he lends credibility to aspects of the play that may otherwise be questionable. Horatio sees and believes the ghost, so the audience can be confident that it is not a figment of Hamlet's troubled mind. Horatio also helps to confirm Hamlet's sanity by providing an outlet for the prince to let down his guise of madness when he is talking to Horatio. Without the counterpoint that Horatio provides, the audience would be in doubt as to Hamlet's true mental state.

The character of Horatio is vital to *Hamlet* in a number of ways. And Shakespeare was no doubt cognizant of the character's importance, for the playwright emphasizes Horatio by featuring him prominently in both the opening and closing scenes of the play. Horatio's constancy of presence and of character throughout the play provides crucial insight into the mind of the prince and the events that transpire. Thus Horatio helps the audience better understand and appreciate the story and meaning of Hamlet's life.



## **Play discussed: *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)**

*This review is based on the Irish playwright's written text, not on a performance.*

*Either read the play or watch any of its film adaptations, preferably before reading this review.*

*You can read the play online at: <http://www.bartleby.com/138/> or*

*<http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/gbshaw/pygmalion.pdf>*

*The 1938 film version with Leslie Howard and Wendy Hiller is excellent and faithful to the text and you can watch it on YouTube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmdPj\\_XbF30](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmdPj_XbF30).*

*The film musical of 1962, based on this play, was called "My Fair Lady," and starred Rex Harrison and Audrey Hepburn. It won eight Oscars, including best picture. You can view it on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=da5Md6OzUPo>*

### **Education and Class in Shaw's *Pygmalion*: A Review by the author of this book**

#### **The Plot-setting Bet**

The plot of Shaw's popular romantic comedy revolves around a bet between two scholars of phonetics—Henry Higgins and Colonel Pickering. The play's main male character claims that he can transform the unschooled flower girl Eliza Dolittle (the play's heroine) into a speaker of perfect, upper class English in just three months. The unbelieving Colonel Pickering offers to bear all costs of this experiment. The success or failure of the project is to be tested at an ambassador's garden party, where Eliza is to pass off as a duchess. The experiment is a huge success owing to a number of reasons: Eliza has a great desire to learn to speak "proper" English; she is intelligent; she has the benefit of good instruction, and she works hard at picking up the rhythm, intonation, and diction of educated speech.

#### **Eliza's Incredible Success**

In a few months, wearing a fancy dress and the right accent, she is able to pass off as a duchess at an ambassador's party. Everyone at the party is captivated by her charms and wants to know more about her background which she has to struggle to conceal, rightly afraid that if the truth about her background is found out, she would not only be thrown out but punished for her impudence. She wins Higgins' bet. However, Eliza herself is not happy with her transformation because she has to be constantly on guard to hide her "low" origin in order to mix with the people whose language she has learned after hard work. What she tells Higgins and Pickering during the party expresses her feelings: "I don't think I can bear much more . . . nothing can make me the same as these people" (Shaw 95). She is also disappointed that Higgins regards her no more than a subject in a successful experiment.

#### **The Turning Point**

At the end of the party at which Eliza passes off as a duchess, Higgins fails to acknowledge Eliza's achievements in his conversation with Pickering, overheard by Eliza: "Thank God it's over! . . . It

was interesting enough at first, while we were at the phonetics; but after that I got deadly sick of it . . . It was a silly notion: the whole thing has been a bore . . . The dinner was worse . . . with nobody but a damned fool of a fashionable woman to talk to! I tell you, Pickering, never again for me. No more artificial duchesses. The whole thing has been simple purgatory” (98-99). No wonder she throws Higgins’ slippers at him when he asks for them.

### **Eliza’s Dilemma**

Eliza is left to ponder her predicament all alone. She describes her current *versus* former situations eloquently, “I sold flowers. I didn’t sell myself. Now you’ve made a lady of me I’m not fit to sell anything else. I wish you’d left me where you found me” (103). As a flower girl she made her living by selling flowers, but now she has to sell her integrity to be a part of the elite. At the party where she is surrounded by all the admiring aristocracy, deep inside she feels miserable because she does not like being with those people. What is to become of her now? In the class-ridden society, mastering the language of the upper class has given her the opportunity to enter the privileged group without the means to stay there and be a part of it. Her dilemma is that she cannot go back to her former occupation of selling flowers. The education she has received makes it impossible for her to relapse into a “guttersnipe”. In Shaw’s own words from the postscript to the play, Eliza has become “disclassed.”

### **The Play’s Themes**

Shaw’s object of attack is the rigid social stratification that makes movement across the established lines impossible. Higgins tells us how this class system makes people desperate to learn the elite lingo when they run into money and want to be a part of the upper class: When Pickering, who is returning from India, asks Higgins if there is a living in phonetics, Higgins answers: “Oh, yes. Quite a fat one. This is an age of upstarts. Men begin in Kentish Town with £80 a year, and end up in Park Lane with a hundred thousand. Now I can teach them” (27).

He is also suggesting that decent education is the right of everyone, that given an opportunity, everyone can benefit from it, and that depriving people of this birthright fosters the social evil of creating “the haves” and “have nots.” However, the problem gets even more complicated when we realize that to enjoy respect in a class-ridden society, only education is not enough. Money is also a necessity. Those like the family of Clara and Freddy, who have the status without the money, are also miserable in that system. In his postscript to the play, imagining the lives of his characters after the play is over, Shaw explains that to maintain the “air of gentility,” Freddy’s mother discourages him from accepting a clerical job or opening a flower shop with Eliza because it will “damage her [Clara’s] matrimonial chances.” The Eysford-Hill family has been “clinging for so many years to that step of the social ladder on which retail trade is impossible (141).

For the same snobbish reason, Clara does not work, even though the family needs the money desperately. Eventually, in Shaw’s postscript, she is forced by the circumstances to sell for a lady of a furniture shop, resulting in two huge gains: First, since Clara has accepted a sales position, there can be no opposition to Eliza and Freddy’s opening a flower shop. Secondly, Clara enjoys the thrill of freedom in her ability to earn her living:

“It exasperated her to think that the dungeon in which she had languished for so many unhappy years had been unlocked all the time, and the impulses she had so carefully struggled with and stifled for the sake of keeping well with society, were precisely those by which alone she could have come into any sort of sincere human contact” (143-144).

### **Character-Theme Connections**

Shaw used Higgins to satirize the upper class. To expose the sham of the so-called middle class respectability, he uses Alfred Dolittle, who is pushed into the middle class from his carefree disclassed poverty as a result of Higgins’ silly joke in telling an American philanthropist Ezra Wannafeller that “the most original moralist in England . . . was Alfred Dolittle, a common dustman” (115). Wannafeller’s bequest leaves Dolittle £3000 a year on the condition that he lecture for the Wannafeller Moral Reform World League up to six times a year. Dolittle points out the self-imposed fetters of the middle class that force them “to live for others” and not for themselves (116). On this transformation, Dolittle laments, “I was happy. I was free. I touched pretty nigh everybody for money when I wanted it . . . Now I am worried [sic]; tied neck and heels; and everybody touches me for money . . . I’ll have to learn to speak middle class language from you, instead of speaking proper English.” (116) When Mr. Higgins reminds Dolittle that he does not have to accept the bequest, he explains his predicament: Since he has been an “undeserving poor” unable to “put by a bit”, he has no choice but to accept the offer: “They’ve got you every way you turn: it’s a choice between the Skilly [sic] of the workhouse and the Char Bydis [sic] of the middle class. [Dolittle is referring to the myth about Scylla (a monster) and Charybdis (a dangerous whirlpool)]. The common proverb for this situation is to be caught between the devil and the deep blue sea.

Higgins is evidently the title’s Pygmalion, but in Shaw’s adaptation of this famous myth, Eliza is not inert material waiting to be shaped into form by Pygmalion. She has a mind of her own as is evident in her spirited and defiant response to Higgins’ bullying. She tells him that she can be better at teaching people phonetics because besides having a quick mind and a good ear, she is also better than Higgins at human relationships. She tells Higgins all she has to do is advertise that she was a cockney flower girl who learned to speak like a duchess in six months and could pass on the same skill to anyone interested for a thousand guineas. She goes on to declare her independence: “I can do without you: don’t think I can’t.” (127) Eliza’s assertiveness jolts Higgins out of his usual smugness and elicits this surprising response from him: “You never asked yourself, I suppose, whether I could do without you” (127). Higgins does admit—although grudgingly—that he has learned something from Eliza: “I have learnt something from your idiotic notions: I confess that humbly and gratefully” (127). Therefore, the play should not be regarded only as the education of Eliza by Higgins, but also the education of Higgins by Eliza. By the end of the play Eliza is able to have her desire for respect fulfilled. She has earned a place of equality with Higgins and Pickering as the transformed Higgins admits:

“Five minutes ago you were like a millstone round my neck. Now you’re a tower of strength: a consort battleship. You and I and Pickering will be three old bachelors instead of only two men and a silly girl” (132).

## Shaw's Effective Comic Devices

All of the aforementioned serious issues are introduced without sacrificing any chance to interject laughter, which makes this comedy especially enjoyable. Shaw effectively employs the frequently used comic devices of repartee, hyperbole, and dramatic irony along with suspenseful moments. The witty verbal exchanges of repartee are used in most of the dialogue. Eliza's screams as she is subjected to the rigors of a proper bath by Higgins' housekeeper Mrs. Pearce is just one of the examples of hyperbole. A masterpiece of dramatic irony is the introduction of Neppomuck, who is called the "hairy-faced Dick." He claims to be an expert in language and phonetics, but can't even use basic grammar correctly. Among the play's gripping moments of suspense, notable is the scene when Eliza is playing the part of a duchess and is in danger of being found out. Another scene that keeps the audience guessing is the play's ending. We don't know until the very end as to what will happen to the deep bond that gets established between Higgins and Eliza during the few months they have been together as teacher and student. We are not sure whether Eliza will stay with the emotionally indifferent Higgins or go with the passionately avid young admirer Freddy until the very end when she declares her intention to marry Freddy.

## Questions on Pygmalion

1. Why did Shaw call his play "Pygmalion"? There is no character by that name, and there is no reference to Pygmalion in the play. Comment on Shaw's use of the ancient myth of Pygmalion and Galatea. Who were they in Greek mythology? Explain how Shaw changes the original story to suit his purposes.
2. Cite an example of dramatic, verbal, and situational irony from the play. Comment on their function either by relating them to themes and topics or by pointing out their effectiveness in any other way.
3. What theme can you relate to the character of Eliza's father Alfred Doolittle in *Pygmalion*? How? Shaw was very fond of this character.
4. *Pygmalion* is ostensibly about the flower girl Eliza's education by the professor of phonetics Henry Higgins. Demonstrate how the play is also about the education of Higgins by Eliza. What does he learn from her?
5. Comment on the realism and effectiveness of the play's ending.
6. What role does Freddy Eynsford-Hill play? Can he be considered a foil to Henry Higgins?
7. Discuss the play as a criticism of the British class system.
8. The critic Stanley Weintraub has said that Shaw was the "enemy of whatever represented the Establishment." Where in *Pygmalion* do you detect this tendency in Shaw? Which characters embody it? You may include comments on any or all of the following: Shaw's characterization, themes, topics, significant events, statements, etc. that show his being anti-establishment.
9. What is the plot-structuring device that holds the play together?
10. Read the comparison between Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* in the following article. In "Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* vs. Shaw's *Pygmalion*: Male chauvinism vs. Women's Lib, Lise Pederson, for example, associates Shaw's play with

women's liberation and Shakespeare's play with male chauvinism. Which of the critics do you find persuasive? [www.archive.org/stream/.../gbshawacollectio000699mbp\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/.../gbshawacollectio000699mbp_djvu.txt) -

## **Play discussed: *Ah, Wilderness* by Eugene O'Neill**

### **O'Neill's Rare Romantic Comedy by the author of this book**

*What follows is a brief introduction to Eugene O'Neill's romantic comedy.*

This play is a delightful romantic comedy and a rare detour for O'Neill into light entertainment. The play is about the 17-year old Richard's initiation into adulthood. It was inspired by Omar Khayyam's famous quatrain No. XI:

Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,  
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse – and Thou  
Beside me singing in the Wilderness –  
And Wilderness is Paradise enow.

Muhammad Iqbal, the famous philosopher-poet of India and Pakistan, said that poets not only give words that live but also words to live by. The protagonist Richard seems to be living his life by the words of Omar Khayyam, the twelfth-century astronomer, poet, and philosopher. The books of verse that he has been reading are those by Swinburne, Oscar Wilde, and similar poets, who, in Richard's mother's view, are corrupting her son's mind. The "Thou" of Khayyam's quatrain is Richard's girlfriend Muriel, whose father is irate at the influence Richard is exerting on her daughter and tries to break up the relationship, producing a letter from Muriel to that effect. It becomes apparent that Muriel has been forced to write that letter because she sets up a tryst with Richard that night.

It would be hard to imagine an O'Neill play without a drunk. Richard's gentle uncle Sid fits well into that role. There is even a scene in which the reluctant and naïve Richard finds himself in the company of a young prostitute as a result of a double date soon after being handed Muriel's letter terminating their relationship. When Richard returns home late and drunk, it is Sid who, being well-versed in such matters, takes care of him. The parents plan to punish Richard for his conduct.

The young lovers are briefly thwarted, but love eventually wins out, and the play ends happily. The play's conclusion shows not only Richard and Muriel's bond established but also Richard's parents kissing.

The play was made into a movie bearing the same title in 1935. It was directed by Clarence Brown. You can read the play's synopsis using this link:

[www.bard.org/education/studyguides/wilderness/wilderness.html](http://www.bard.org/education/studyguides/wilderness/wilderness.html)

You can listen to a 1945 reading of this play online:

<http://www.eoneill.com/artifacts/flash/awr/awr.htm>

## **Play discussed: *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965)**

*Before reading the following analysis of playwright Lorraine Hansberry's Raisin in the Sun, read the play or watch any of its film adaptations. You can watch one version of the film on YouTube:*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xqxLmnzURc>

### **A Perfect Plot Design for American Dreams and Nightmares by the author of this book**

To see how Hansberry's play exemplifies tragicomedy, let us look at its content and form. In terms of thematic substance, it addresses many important issues, such as race relations, classism, sexism, family relations, and the American dream. The sample essays will explore some of these topics. The focus here in this discussion is on the play's form, specifically its meticulous handling of all plot components. Having created a mood of tension, struggle, and weariness through her precise opening stage directions, which the director has to transfer to either the stage or the screen, Lorraine Hansberry quickly introduces the entire Younger family – Ruth, Walter, Travis (their son), Beneatha (Walter's sister), and Lena Younger (Mama) in the *exposition* part.

#### **The plot structuring device**

The play's primary *plot-structuring device* is the insurance check for ten thousand dollars, which is expected to arrive soon. The play does not tell us, but we can assume that this amount is the life insurance on the deceased Walter Younger, Sr. We do not know how recent the family's bereavement is, nor do we know any clear cause of Younger, Sr.'s death. Later in the play Lena refers to her husband's great love for his children and suggests that he might have pushed himself toward death through the exhaustion of overwork after their baby died. In Lena's words, "I guess that's how come that man finally worked his self to death like he done. Like he was fighting his own war with this here world that took his baby from him" (Hansberry 45). We are not told how the world caused the baby's death. These ambiguities, the result of the esthetics of omission, have an enriching effect on the play's content. They are among the mystifying details, but the source of *conflict* in the family is delineated clearly.

#### **Internal family conflict**

Walter would like to invest the money in a liquor business to break out of the crushing cycle of demeaning jobs he, his wife, and mother have to perform to survive in a ghetto. Mama is opposed to Walter's idea. She and Walter's wife Ruth would like to use the money to make

down payment on a home after Mama makes sure that part of the money is set aside to help her daughter Beneatha with her medical school expenses.

Escalation of this conflict forms the play's *rising action*, which contains some wrenching scenes between Walter and Ruth, Walter and Mama, and Walter and Beneatha. There are some moments of excruciating suspense after Mama declares that she has spent the money to buy a home. Walter accuses her of butchering his dream. Fearing her son's collapse, Lena reveals a few weeks after the fact what she has actually done with the insurance money. She has put \$3500 down toward the purchase of a house. The rest of the money she hands over to the unbelieving and ecstatic Walter, who is to take charge from then on and do whatever he thinks fit with the money after putting \$3000 in a savings account for Beneatha's education. This phase of the play closes with Walter's famous words to his son Travis: "Son . . . I hand you the world" (Hansberry 109).

### **The play's climax**

However, a critical test of the family's moral strength, courage, and solidarity has yet to come in the play's *climax*. Just as Walter begins celebrating his good fortune, Karl Lindner shows up with a "generous offer" to the Youngers if they would change their mind about moving into a white neighborhood. Then soon after Lindner's racist offer is rejected and he is asked to leave, the crushing news arrives that Willie Harris has run away with the entire amount of \$6500. In the hope of making a big profit, Walter had chosen not to set aside \$3000 for Beneatha's education.

### **Falling action**

The play's *falling action* takes the Younger family to the point of utter hopelessness, so much so that Walter declares he will call Lindner and accept his demeaning offer. He does call Lindner, but by the time the representative of the exclusively white neighborhood arrives, Walter has been shamed by Mama into having second thoughts.

### **Resolution**

The *resolution* is uplifting because Walter and the family decide to move into their new home and leave the miserable ghetto life behind. Through collective hard work, they vow to finally make their dream come true and not let it dry up like a raisin in the sun.

### **Problematic conclusion**

The play's conclusion may seem to be a happy one, but it is not without some sinister possibilities. It perfectly illustrates E. M. Forster's idea of a superior conclusion: Expansion "is the idea . . . [the author] must cling to. Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out" (Forster 169). In view of the information we have in the play that homes of minorities have been firebombed, we cannot think of the play as having a purely happy ending. Lorraine Hansberry's own words help us understand the conclusion's complexity. Referring to a reviewer, she said, "If he thinks that's a happy ending, I invite him to come live in one of the communities where the Youngers are going" (Hansberry xv). We are tempted to agree with Robert Nemiroff that the play's ending "leaves the Youngers on the brink of what will surely be, in their new home, at

best a nightmare of uncertainty” (Hansberry xiv). As we can see, Lorraine Hansberry has skillfully woven the play’s themes into a perfect plot design.



## **Play discussed: *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry**

*Chris Finn explores the theme of the American dream in Hansberry's play. Through character analysis, specifically making connections between characters and themes, he focuses on the Younger family's courage in facing oppression and standing up for their rights. Watch the play's film adaptation featuring Danny Glover and Esther Rolle or any other production. You can watch a scene from the movie at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybffbq5Jag>.*

### **True to Your Dreams Student author: Chris Finn**

Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, is a powerful look at many of the issues surrounding an African American family's life in an oppressive white-dominated society. Some of the issues include gender dynamics, living with a low income, and generational differences, and the husband and wife relationship; but all of these issues are secondary to the greater, more important issue of the oppression that affects every part of their life. The greatest effect the oppression has in the play is seen in how it affects the dreams of the family. The author shows that there is a choice to advance by conforming to the oppressive culture, but the purest most pride-worthy response is to challenge the oppression and stay true to your values and dreams. The main characters in the play are Lena Younger, the mother of the family in her sixties, Walter and Beneatha, her son and daughter, and Ruth and Travis, Walter's wife and son. They all live together in a small two-bedroom apartment in a black section of Chicago's south side with the dream of someday moving out.

#### **Acceptance of oppression**

Mrs. Johnson, the Youngers' neighbor, is an example of the type of person who accepts oppression. She has accepted a position in life that does not conflict with the oppressive society and actively discourages other African Americans who try to challenge oppression. She appears in the play while the Youngers are packing up for their move to a new house that happens to be in a white neighborhood. She claims to have come to help, but has brought along a copy of the latest paper with an article about the latest black family to be bombed out of their house in a white neighborhood. She pretends to be positive, but slips in a comment that next month's paper will probably have the Youngers' name all over it with the headline, "NEGROES INVADE CLYBOURNE PARK – BOMBED!" (102).

Her negative attitude applies to any attempt on the part of the Youngers to improve things for themselves. She also has a problem with African Americans getting an education, claiming that they get too pruned if they're educated and even refers to a quote that she attributes to Booker T. Washington – "Education has spoiled many a good plow hand" (103). She feels that servant work is fine for blacks and that even though Walter is not satisfied as a chauffeur, there is

nothing wrong with being a chauffeur. Mrs. Johnson takes offense that the Youngers have too much pride to be content as servants and that they want to improve things for themselves.

### **Denying one's roots**

George Murchison, a rich black man whom Beneatha is dating, is an example of the type of person who chooses to advance by conforming to the oppressive culture. At one point, she refers to him as an assimilationist Negro which she defines as "someone who is willing to give up his own culture and submerge himself completely in the dominant, and in this case *oppressive* culture!"(81). He doesn't support Walter or Beneatha's celebration of their identity as blacks or as African Americans and puts them down in their attempts to do so. One time as Walter greeted him as "Black Brother!", George's response was, "Black Brother, hell!"(79). His response to Beneatha when he found out that she was going to wear her hair natural and nappy had the same tone; to be natural meant to be eccentric to him and that was nothing to be proud of (80). He also distanced himself from his heritage "as nothing but a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals and some grass huts!" (81).

### **Oppression by the unknowing oppressed**

George has adopted not only the customs of the white culture but also the value systems of the oppressive culture. He applies this same oppressive behavior to Beneatha by telling her that he's not interested in what she wants, and that what she wants is actually interfering with her being successful with men. He wants her to present herself as men want her to be and wants to accept her on his terms without having to hear her thoughts and feelings. He states that her thoughts as an individual don't matter "because the world will go on thinking what it thinks regardless"(97). This statement shows his belief that the world is unchangeable and that the world's thoughts matter more than any thoughts an individual may have.

His oppression of Beneatha parallels the oppression that they are all subjected to by the white culture. His statement that the purpose of an education is to advance in the system and get a degree and not to learn new thoughts (97) shows that he sacrifices his own thoughts to get by easier in life. Now he wants Beneatha to do the same for him. He doesn't want her to be natural or eccentric, or to express herself; he wants her to conform to his way just as he has conformed to the powerful, rich, white culture. Beneatha refuses to compromise her values because her drive to be in touch with her identity and to fully express herself is too strong.

### **Betrayal for financial gain**

Willy Harris is similar to George in that he has shown that he is willing to turn his back on members of his race if it means personal gain for him. Willy is someone who Walter thought was a friend and with whom he invested the family savings to make Walter's dream come true. Willy abandoned Walter and ran off with the money, taking all of the Younger family's money along with Walter's dream of owning his own business and Beneatha's dream of becoming a doctor. Even before this happens, Walter describes himself as a volcano; he's that full of bitterness at seeing other people rich while his family barely has enough and of seeing stars that he can't reach out and grab (85).

### **Walter's momentary, frightful surrender**

After Willy has taken the money, Walter starts to think that maybe his values aren't the right ones and maybe Willy has it right. He tells his family that he's figured it out and that right and wrong aren't what matter because life is divided up "between the takers and the 'taken'"(141). He claims that they have been wasting time always worrying about what's right and wrong while the takers are out there taking (142). He decides that that is the value system that he will live by and tries to convince himself that his pride doesn't matter. In the last scene of the play, he is prepared to sell out his family's dreams by going against everything his family stands for and has worked for. He calls Lindner, a man from the white neighborhood where the Youngers are supposed to move, with the intention of agreeing to accept Lindner's offer of money not to move into their neighborhood.

### **Walter's awakening**

This last scene is actually a definitive one for showing the differences between those who would compromise their values and those who are too proud of their identity and their heritage to compromise either their values or their dreams. Throughout the play, the Younger family's pride is evident and their dreams and values as individuals and as a family are described. Beneatha's dream is to be a doctor; Walter's dream is to move up in the world by owning his own business; and Mama and Ruth dream of moving out of their apartment to a better place. Some of their values can be seen by the way that they support each other in the face of outside pressure. In private, Walter tells Beneatha that she should just be a nurse, but when he is talking to Lindner, he stresses the pride that the family has and makes note of the fact that someday Beneatha will be a doctor.

In another example, when Beneatha is ready to stop supporting her brother, Mama reminds her that the time to love someone most is not when they made things easy for everybody, but "when he's at his lowest and can't believe in his self 'cause the world done whipped him so!"(145). Other values can be seen in how the family interacts with Mrs. Johnson, George Murchison, and Asagai an African friend of Beneatha's, or even Lindner the first time he comes to the house. The Youngers are polite but firm in who they are and what they represent. They respect life and they value their dreams and they compromise neither their dreams nor their values. These are the reasons that the last scene is so intense. Lindner is there to make the deal and the whole Younger family is there to watch Walter's expected handing over their dignity and all that they stand for. The climax comes when Walter realizes that he can't accept the idea that his family is not just as deserving as any other family and further that his family will not abandon their dreams or their dignity no matter what the consequences may be. He stays true to his family's values and dreams and exhibits all the pride of the family as he tells Lindner his father earned that house brick by brick and that the family will not be accepting the offer; they are moving in.

### **Suspenseful Conclusion**

The last scene is interesting because in a way it is positive, but it is far from being a happy ending. The reason it is climactic is because Walter is on the verge of throwing away five generations of struggle, and he fights through everything that brought him to that point to say

that he won't give up. This means that the family keeps their dignity, but that they will continue to have to struggle and that now the struggle will be even more difficult; it will literally be life-threatening. The play in itself shows the ugliness of oppression and the fact that it can be apparent in every aspect of people's lives, especially in the lives of women and people of color. The play also shows the extreme strength and courage demonstrated by those who face oppression every day of their lives.

### **Questions on *A Raisin in the Sun***

1. In writing *A Raisin in the Sun*, what were two of the major challenges and difficulties encountered by Lorraine Hansberry? Demonstrate how she overcame them.
2. In his 1989 review article, "*A Raisin in the Sun: The Uncut Version*," the critic Dean Peerman pointed out the viewers' misunderstanding of Hansberry's play:  
"[A]udiences and reviewers alike seemed to pass over what to Hansberry were some of the play's more pertinent themes; indeed, America seemed to be embracing the play without fully understanding it – or perhaps without wanting to understand it. And although Hansberry was gratified by the acclaim and the attention that were coming her way, she was increasingly disturbed by what some of the critics were saying – including some of those who were giving the play high praise."  
In developing a short essay response (about 150 words), identify which of the play's more pertinent themes have the potential of being passed over by the critics and the audience?
3. Which of the African-American characters in the play can be called an assimilationist? Give a reason for your answer.
4. Do you think the play has a happy ending? Before answering this question, keep in mind the following points without necessarily agreeing with them: Hansberry's husband and author Robert Nemiroff felt that the ending was "at best a nightmare of uncertainty."<sup>2</sup> Lorraine Hansberry herself said, "If he [the viewer] thinks that's a happy ending, I invite him to come to live in one of the communities where the Youngers are going."<sup>3</sup>
1. Discuss the themes of inequities of race, class, and gender in the play.
2. What is the main plot-structuring device – an event or a fact that drives the plot action and holds the play together?

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6. Lorraine Hansberry. *A Raisin in the Sun*, introduction by Robert Nemiroff. New York: New American Library, 1986

7. "Make New Sounds: Studs Terkel Interviews Lorraine Hansberry," *American Theater*, November 1984.

## Play discussed: *Gibraltar* by Octavio Solis (b. 1962)

[http://www.desdemona.org/blog/?portfolio\\_item=gibraltar](http://www.desdemona.org/blog/?portfolio_item=gibraltar)

You can use this review of Mexican-American playwright Octavio Solis's play "*Gibraltar*" by Robert Hurwitt, "*San Francisco Chronicle*" Theater Critic, as a sample to write your own review of a contemporary play of your choice. For more guidance, please re-read item 11 (Reviewing a contemporary play) under "Topics Relevant to Drama in General" from an earlier part of this chapter.

### **Solis' *Gibraltar* Drills the Depths of Love and Loss**

**A review by Robert Hurwitt**

"Love is love is," a character says with simple, weary finality. The line reverberates with intimations of Gertrude Stein-like profundity. But playwright Octavio Solis earns its every conceivable nuance, and overcomes any allusion-driven doubts, with the emotional depth, sensual poetry, flesh-and-blood characters and gracefully intricate structure of *Gibraltar* . . . at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's New Theatre.

Stories nestle within stories, like lovers in each other's arms, echoing or altering each other in the embrace. Love is passion, comfort, grief, jealous rage, sudden lust, suicidal despair, the unexpected immediacy of a memory of who one's lover once was. Written with soul-searching honesty and breathtaking mastery, exceptionally well performed and staged (by Liz Diamond) with painterly precision, the world premiere of *Gibraltar* was the luminous highlight of six generally strong productions seen by this critic at the festival in Ashland last week. . . .

The 70-year-old Tony Award-winning festival is one of the largest regional repertory companies in the country, employing some 450 theater artists on a budget of almost \$21 million. The sizable Bay Area portion of its audience will feel right at home at *Gibraltar*. And not just because the play is set in San Francisco (where Solis lives), with the large, multi-paned window at the center of Richard Hay's set affording a view of the lights of Berkeley beyond the "deep, perfect, unanswerable black" of the bay. *Gibraltar*, though developed in Ashland – in part, from improvisations with festival actors – reflects the vibrant immediacy of life, love and loss in a poetically enhanced and concentrated multicultural Bay Area.

The themes are so universal, though, and the characters so truthfully drawn, that its appeal should be widespread. Solis gives us four stories of love and loss wrapped within a battle between two storytellers, a kind of mortal combat between equally wounded and fundamentally opposed emotional worldviews.

Amy, in a searingly and exhilaratingly honest portrait by Vilma Silva, is a painter whose husband has fallen – or jumped – from his sailboat (named after her) outside the Golden Gate. With his body still not found, Amy is a stunning image of depression, consumed with her loss and her fear of losing the intensity of her grief. She can't paint. She can't go into her bedroom. She can scarcely move from the mattress on the floor in the middle of a sinuously snaking black floor that takes up most of the set, alternately lit by Chris Parry as a river, an ocean shoreline or a road (its liquidness enhanced by Jeremy J. Lee's sound design). From her one trip to the supermarket – the Marina Safeway, no less – Amy has brought home a Mexican drifter. Unless he's a figment of her overheated imagination. Palo (a sensual and ominously feral Rene Millan), so-called because he's thin as a stick, is jealous violence wrapped in self-flagellating remorse. He insists on calling

Amy “Lila,” the name of the wife he brutally beat after seeing her kiss another man. She left and he’s been following her footprints in the sands of beaches ever since, north from their Baja home.

From there, *Gibraltar* (the subject of Amy’s painting no longer in progress) spirals ever deeper in a struggle to separate love from death and passion from violence. Palo, who sees Amy as a Latina divorced from her cultural heritage, tells stories to illustrate those violent connections. Amy intervenes in the telling to interpose more hopeful outcomes. A gently strong, deeply torn Kevin Kenerly is riveting as a young, black dockworker still mourning the father who killed himself for love of a white woman in Alabama, and Dee Maaske is quietly, affectingly focused as the older white artist who confronts the chaos of his passion.

U. Jonathan Toppo is a remarkably collected human time bomb as a by-the-book cop consumed with murderous and/or suicidal rage when his wife (a bright, tense Julie Oda) leaves him for a woman. The superb Bill Geisslinger and Judith-Marie Bergan are heartbreaking as an older man who gazes at his brain-damaged wife and still sees his young bride.

Amy’s own story is among those told, in the full complexity of her feelings of guilt, betrayal, anger and complicity. Diamond skillfully orchestrates the heartfelt performances to bring out the muscularity of Solis’ poetic language and the rich dramatic tension between the undertow of violence and surging tides of sensuality in his script. Amy and Palo’s stories converge and separate, as the solidity of the eponymous Gibraltar gives way to the liquid interface between dreams, fantasy and reality.

The deeper Solis plunges into the multiple facets of love, the more his *Gibraltar* echoes not only the allusive poetics of Stein and flowing imagery of Garcia Lorca, but something of the wisdom of Solomon’s “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.” As Amy struggles valiantly back toward the surface from the depths of her depression, *Gibraltar* grapples boldly, beautifully and honestly with the question of whether love really “is strong as death” (*San Francisco Chronicle*, July 11, 2005, p. C-1).