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Lolita Holden Caulfield Augustus McCrae and W  
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# Characters in 20th- CENTURY LITERATURE

Laurie Lanzen Harris

**Characters in**  
**20<sup>th</sup>-**  
**CENTURY**  
**LITERATURE**

# ***Characters in*** **20<sup>th</sup>-** **CENTURY** **LITERATURE**

**Laurie Lanzen Harris**



*Gale Research Inc.*

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**To Dan**

## Preface

Characters are the medium through which the author speaks to the world. The character may represent a philosophy, reflect the author's artistic intent, or illuminate his or her vision of humanity. The literature of the twentieth century is brimming with beloved literary characters who seem to transcend the books in which they appear, acquiring lives of their own. Huckleberry Finn, Leopold Bloom, Clarissa Dalloway, Holden Caulfield, Nick Adams, Jay Gatsby, Sherlock Holmes—such characters as these have become archetypal figures of the modern era, yet they also embody a timeless statement on the human condition. The rich heritage of modern world fiction, as seen through the characters who bring a work of art to life, is the focus of this book.

### The Scope of the Work

*Characters in 20th-Century Literature* presents essays that elucidate the function and significance of the most important literary characters from more than 600 works of twentieth-century literature. Descriptions of over 2,000 characters, drawn from 250 of the twentieth century's major novelists, dramatists, and short story writers, are included. Students and general readers will find that an author's most representative and widely discussed works are featured in *Characters in 20th-Century Literature*. The term "twentieth century" used in the title refers to all authors now living or who have died since 1899. To augment existing reference sources that concentrate on the interpretation of characters, over half the volume is devoted to authors of the post-1960 era, with special emphasis given to minority writers and authors from emerging nations. Thus, discussions of *The Color Purple*, by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alice Walker, and *Miramar*, by 1988 Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz, are included.

### The Organization of the Work

The book is arranged alphabetically by author. Each author entry begins with the following elements: the author's name, birth and death dates, nationality, and principal genres. The author's works are chronologically arranged beneath the author heading, and the title heading offers the full title, genre, and date of publication; in the case of dramas, the date of first performance is given. The essay on each work contains a brief plot synopsis as well as commentary on thematic and stylistic aspects of the work and the way in which the characters illustrate the central themes and aesthetics of the author. A student will thus be

better prepared to understand the ethical or philosophical points of view expounded by an author and to discover trends and patterns in a writer's major works. The names of all characters mentioned in the essay are boldfaced for easy reference. If the character is known by more than one name—for example, "Molly Bloom" and "Marion Tweedy Bloom"—both are included and boldfaced. The length of the essays varies, reflecting the magnitude and complexity of individual works.

A list of critical essays and articles for further reading on titles discussed concludes each author entry. This section also includes references to several literary series published by Gale Research, including *Contemporary Authors*, *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series*, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, *Short Story Criticism*, and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*.

The book concludes with an index to characters and titles. If a character appears in more than one work by an author, the character name is followed by the title in which he or she appears. If a character name is used by more than one author, the author's name appears in parentheses after the character name.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dedria Bryfonski and Chris Nasso of the New Publication Development group at Gale for the opportunity to edit *Characters in 20th-Century Literature*, Dennis Poupard and Daniel Marowski of the Literary Criticism Series for their assistance, and Jay P. Pederson, Norma Jean Merry, Madeline Gleason, Kathleen Aro, Christine Norris, Jane Thacker, Claire Rewold, and Kevin P. Decker, who helped in the composition of this volume. I would especially like to thank my husband, Dan Harris, for his tireless support and encouragement.

# Contents

## Preface xi

|                           |                  |                             |                    |
|---------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Chinua Achebe.....        | 1                | Erskine Caldwell.....       | 54                 |
| Henry Adams.....          | 2                | Italo Calvino.....          | 55 <sup>港</sup>    |
| James Agee.....           | 3                | Albert Camus.....           | 56                 |
| Alain-Fournier.....       | 4                | Truman Capote.....          | 58                 |
| Edward Albee.....         | 5                | Joyce Cary.....             | 60                 |
| Sholom Aleichem.....      | 7                | Willa Cather.....           | 62                 |
| ✓ Kingsley Amis.....      | 8                | Louis-Ferdinand Céline..... | 63                 |
| Sherwood Anderson.....    | 10               | John Cheever.....           | 65                 |
| Jean Anouilh.....         | 11               | Anton Chekhov.....          | 68                 |
| Sholem Asch.....          | 13               | G. K. Chesterton.....       | 72                 |
| Margaret Atwood.....      | 14 <sup>73</sup> | Kate Chopin.....            | 74                 |
| Isaac Babel.....          | 16               | Jean Cocteau.....           | 74                 |
| James Baldwin.....        | 18               | Colette.....                | 76                 |
| Djuna Barnes.....         | 20               | ✓ Joseph Conrad.....        | 78                 |
| John Barth.....           | 21               | Julio Cortázar.....         | 81                 |
| Simone de Beauvoir.....   | 23               | Stephen Crane.....          | 83                 |
| Samuel Beckett.....       | 24               | Robertson Davies.....       | 84 <sup>78</sup>   |
| Saul Bellow.....          | 27               | James Dickey.....           | 86                 |
| Arnold Bennett.....       | 31               | Joan Didion.....            | 87                 |
| Thomas Berger.....        | 32               | Isak Dinesen.....           | 89 <sup>91</sup>   |
| Ambrose Bierce.....       | 33               | E. L. Doctorow.....         | 91                 |
| R. D. Blackmore.....      | 34               | John Dos Passos.....        | 92                 |
| Heinrich Böll.....        | 34 <sup>港</sup>  | Arthur Conan Doyle.....     | 94                 |
| Jorge Luis Borges.....    | 38               | Margaret Drabble.....       | 96                 |
| Elizabeth Bowen.....      | 40               | Theodore Dreiser.....       | 97                 |
| Ray Bradbury.....         | 43               | Lawrence Durrell.....       | 99                 |
| Bertolt Brecht.....       | 44 <sup>港</sup>  | Friedrich Dürrenmatt.....   | 100 <sup>101</sup> |
| Pearl S. Buck.....        | 47               | Umberto Eco.....            | 102 <sup>港</sup>   |
| Mikhail Bulgakov.....     | 48               | Ralph Ellison.....          | 103                |
| Ivan Bunin.....           | 49               | James T. Farrell.....       | 104                |
| Anthony Burgess.....      | 50               | William Faulkner.....       | 105                |
| William S. Burroughs..... | 53               | F. Scott Fitzgerald.....    | 111                |



|                              |                  |                                    |                   |
|------------------------------|------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Ford Madox Ford .....        | 114              | Rudyard Kipling .....              | 218               |
| ✓ E. M. Forster .....        | 115              | John Knowles .....                 | 221               |
| John Fowles .....            | 118              | Arthur Koestler .....              | 223               |
| Max Frisch .....             | 120 <sup>德</sup> | Jerzy Kosinski .....               | 224               |
| Christopher Fry .....        | 122              | Milan Kundera .....                | 225 <sup>斯</sup>  |
| Carlos Fuentes .....         | 123              | Pär Lagerkvist .....               | 226 <sup>瑞典</sup> |
| Athol Fugard .....           | 124              | Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa ..... | 228 <sup>意</sup>  |
| William Gaddis .....         | 124              | ✓ D. H. Lawrence .....             | 229               |
| ✓ John Galsworthy .....      | 126              | Ursula K. Le Guin .....            | 232               |
| Gabriel García Márquez ..... | 128              | ✓ Doris Lessing .....              | 234               |
| John Gardner .....           | 131              | C. S. Lewis .....                  | 237               |
| Hamlin Garland .....         | 133              | Sinclair Lewis .....               | 239               |
| William Gass .....           | 133              | Wyndham Lewis .....                | 241               |
| Jean Genet .....             | 135              | Jack London .....                  | 243               |
| André Gide .....             | 138              | H. P. Lovecraft .....              | 245               |
| Jean Giraudoux .....         | 140              | Malcolm Lowry .....                | 246               |
| ✓ William Golding .....      | 142              | Naguib Mahfouz .....               | 247 <sup>埃</sup>  |
| Nadine Gordimer .....        | 145              | Norman Mailer .....                | 248               |
| Maxim Gorky .....            | 146              | Bernard Malamud .....              | 250               |
| Günter Grass .....           | 147 <sup>德</sup> | André Malraux .....                | 252               |
| Robert Graves .....          | 150              | David Mamet .....                  | 253               |
| ✓ Graham Greene .....        | 151              | Thomas Mann .....                  | 255 <sup>德</sup>  |
| Knut Hamsun .....            | 153 <sup>挪</sup> | Peter Matthiessen .....            | 259               |
| Peter Handke .....           | 155 <sup>奥</sup> | ✓ W. Somerset Maugham .....        | 260               |
| Thomas Hardy .....           | 156              | Mary McCarthy .....                | 261               |
| Bret Harte .....             | 160              | Carson McCullers .....             | 262               |
| Gerhart Hauptmann .....      | 161 <sup>德</sup> | Thomas McGuane .....               | 264               |
| John Hawkes .....            | 163              | Larry McMurtry .....               | 265               |
| Joseph Heller .....          | 164              | George Meredith .....              | 267               |
| Lillian Hellman .....        | 167              | Arthur Miller .....                | 268               |
| ✓ Ernest Hemingway .....     | 167              | Henry Miller .....                 | 271               |
| O. Henry .....               | 173              | Yukio Mishima .....                | 272 <sup>日</sup>  |
| Hermann Hesse .....          | 174 <sup>德</sup> | Brian Moore .....                  | 274 <sup>加</sup>  |
| William Dean Howells .....   | 177              | Alberto Moravia .....              | 275 <sup>意</sup>  |
| Zora Neale Hurston .....     | 179              | Toni Morrison .....                | 276               |
| Aldous Huxley .....          | 180              | Iris Murdoch .....                 | 278               |
| Joris-Karl Huysmans .....    | 182              | Vladimir Nabokov .....             | 281               |
| Henrik Ibsen .....           | 183 <sup>挪</sup> | V. S. Naipaul .....                | 284               |
| Eugène Ionesco .....         | 187              | Sōseki Natsume .....               | 285 <sup>日</sup>  |
| John Irving .....            | 189              | Ngugi wa Thiong'o .....            | 287               |
| Christopher Isherwood .....  | 191              | Frank Norris .....                 | 288               |
| Shirley Jackson .....        | 193              | Joyce Carol Oates .....            | 289               |
| ✓ Henry James .....          | 194              | Edna O'Brien .....                 | 291 <sup>爱</sup>  |
| Alfred Jarry .....           | 200              | Sean O'Casey .....                 | 292 <sup>爱</sup>  |
| Sarah Orne Jewett .....      | 201              | Flannery O'Connor .....            | 294               |
| James Jones .....            | 203              | Sean O'Faolain .....               | 299 <sup>爱</sup>  |
| Erica Jong .....             | 204              | John O'Hara .....                  | 300               |
| ✓ James Joyce .....          | 204              | Eugene O'Neill .....               | 301               |
| Franz Kafka .....            | 208 <sup>奥</sup> | Joe Orton .....                    | 304               |
| Yasunari Kawabata .....      | 212 <sup>日</sup> | ✓ George Orwell .....              | 306               |
| Nikos Kazantzakis .....      | 214 <sup>希</sup> | John Osborne .....                 | 308               |
| Thomas Keneally .....        | 215 <sup>英</sup> | Amos Oz .....                      | 310               |
| Jack Kerouac .....           | 216              | Alan Paton .....                   | 311               |
| Ken Kesey .....              | 217              | Cesare Pavese .....                | 311 <sup>意</sup>  |

|                               |       |                            |        |
|-------------------------------|-------|----------------------------|--------|
| Walker Percy .....            | 312   | Wole Soyinka.....          | 374    |
| Marge Piercy.....             | 314   | ✓ Muriel Spark.....        | 376    |
| Harold Pinter.....            | 316   | Christina Stead .....      | 377 海  |
| Luigi Pirandello .....        | 318 海 | Gertrude Stein.....        | 378    |
| Sylvia Plath.....             | 320   | John Steinbeck.....        | 380    |
| Katherine Anne Porter.....    | 321   | Bram Stoker.....           | 384 海  |
| Chaim Potok.....              | 323   | Tom Stoppard.....          | 385 捷斯 |
| Anthony Powell.....           | 324   | David Storey.....          | 388 海  |
| Marcel Proust .....           | 326   | August Strindberg.....     | 388 海  |
| Manuel Puig .....             | 328   | William Styron.....        | 392    |
| Barbara Pym.....              | 329   | John Millington Synge..... | 394 海  |
| Thomas Pynchon .....          | 331   | Paul Theroux.....          | 396    |
| Raymond Queneau .....         | 333   | James Thurber .....        | 397    |
| Ayn Rand .....                | 333   | J. R. R. Tolkien .....     | 398    |
| Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings..... | 335   | Leo Tolstoy.....           | 400    |
| Ishmael Reed .....            | 336   | Jean Toomer.....           | 404    |
| Erich Maria Remarque .....    | 338 海 | Mark Twain.....            | 405    |
| Jean Rhys .....               | 338   | Anne Tyler.....            | 408    |
| Mordecai Richler .....        | 339 海 | John Updike .....          | 411    |
| Alain Robbe-Grillet .....     | 341   | Mario Vargas Llosa .....   | 414    |
| Edmond Rostand .....          | 342   | Jules Verne.....           | 416    |
| Philip Roth .....             | 343   | Gore Vidal .....           | 417    |
| Salman Rushdie.....           | 345   | Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. ....    | 418    |
| J. D. Salinger.....           | 346   | Alice Walker.....          | 421    |
| William Saroyan.....          | 351   | Robert Penn Warren.....    | 422    |
| Nathalie Sarraute.....        | 353   | ✓ Evelyn Waugh.....        | 424    |
| Jean-Paul Sartre .....        | 354   | H. G. Wells .....          | 426    |
| Delmore Schwartz.....         | 356   | Eudora Welty.....          | 429    |
| Peter Shaffer.....            | 357   | Franz Werfel.....          | 433 海  |
| Ntozake Shange.....           | 358   | Nathanael West.....        | 434    |
| Bernard Shaw .....            | 359 海 | Edith Wharton.....         | 436    |
| Sam Shepard.....              | 362   | Oscar Wilde .....          | 440    |
| Mikhail Sholokhov .....       | 364   | Thornton Wilder.....       | 441    |
| ✓ Alan Sillitoe.....          | 366   | Tennessee Williams .....   | 443    |
| Claude Simon .....            | 367   | P. G. Wodehouse .....      | 446    |
| Upton Sinclair.....           | 368 海 | Thomas Wolfe.....          | 447    |
| Isaac Bashevis Singer .....   | 369 海 | ✓ Virginia Woolf .....     | 449    |
| Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.....   | 371   | Richard Wright.....        | 454    |
|                               |       | Émile Zola .....           | 455    |

Character Index 459

Title Index 475

# Chinua Achebe

1930-

Nigerian novelist, poet, short story writer, and essayist.

## *Things Fall Apart* (novel, 1958)

Achebe's first novel is set in the Nigerian Ibo village of Umuofia during the late 1800s. The central character, **Okonkwo**, is a respected village leader whose inability to change brings about tragedy. The first half of *Things Fall Apart* portrays traditional village life and customs before British colonization. The Ibo's ancient rites, including human sacrifices, are presented as part of a viable, well-ordered culture which is destroyed by the coming of the white man. Okonkwo's troubles begin when he accidentally kills a young member of his tribe. The punishment for his crime is exile from the clan for seven years. When Okonkwo returns to his village, he discovers that the European missionaries have already begun to change the people. Okonkwo and a few other older members of the tribe resist the changes the white men try to enforce and are sent to jail. After their release, Okonkwo strikes out in anger and kills a messenger from the British authorities. Okonkwo then commits suicide, a crime worse than any other in the Ibo culture.

*Thing Fall Apart* is considered the beginning of contemporary African literature because of Achebe's fusion of the Ibo language and its rhythms with conventional Western novelistic techniques. Achebe was praised for depicting both the good and bad aspects of a previously unknown culture and its destruction by Europeans who forced their values and beliefs upon the native Africans.

## *Arrow of God* (novel, 1964)

This novel is set in the Ibo village of Umuaro during the 1920s, after British rule of Nigeria had been established. At this point in Nigerian history, the native struggle was not against the encroaching white man's civilization, but was instead an effort to maintain aspects of the tribal past. The main character is **Ezeulu**, the chief priest for the god Ulu and a powerful man in his Ibo community who understands the importance of adapting to the changes instigated by the British. He even sends one of his sons to be taught by the missionaries. On the other hand, Ezeulu still strongly believes in the village gods and his own powers and responsibilities as the representative of Ulu. He subsequently refuses, when asked by the white District Officer, to become a warrant chief, a representative of a decentralized Ibo government. Through a series of misunderstandings, Ezeulu is imprisoned. Upon his return to the village, he realizes that the people no longer look to him as their sole spiritual and tribal leader. In an effort to punish them, Ezeulu refuses to name the day of the all-important yam feast and the villagers are unable to begin the yam harvest. In desperation, the villagers take it upon themselves to gather the yams with the blessing of the Christian missionaries. These events, coupled with the death of one his sons, leads Ezeulu to question his own faith

in the tribal gods, which in turn creates a breakdown of Ezeulu's mental processes, leaving him out of touch with reality for the remainder of his life.

*Arrow of God* is marked by Achebe's attention to the detail of tribal life and values. His story is about the changes wrought by European colonization and the erosion of traditional, tribal religion. Achebe's insistence on educating his readers about the Ibo past has been noted by critics, who generally find this work difficult but enlightening.

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## Henry Adams

1838-1918

American autobiographer, historian, essayist, and novelist.

### *Democracy* (novel, 1880)

The greater of Adams's two novels, *Democracy* is set in post-Civil War Washington, D.C., during a time of political turmoil and reconstruction. Recently widowed, **Madeleine Lee** has come to Washington seeking the companionship of some distinguished elder statesman with whom she can help chart her nation's future. In her arsenal are money, social position, beauty, charm, and a wellspring of fresh ideas. **John Carrington**, a lawyer and Confederate veteran, immediately falls for her. His cynical attitude of defeat and inferior standing, however, preclude any romantic attachment. For a time, Madeleine pursues **Senator Ratcliffe**. A villainous figure from Illinois with colossal political sway, Ratcliffe gains control of the new administration before the president has taken office. Gradually, with the aid of Carrington, Madeleine discovers that the senator's career has been founded on a bribe. She has, furthermore, learned the distressing truth about the symbiotic relationship between political dealing and human imperfectability. For her, the climate of Washington, devoid of idealism and conscience, rife with graft and corruption, becomes intolerable. Rather than succumbing to the allure of POWER (so capitalized in the novel) and ally herself with Ratcliffe, Madeleine leaves Washington for Europe.

Popular in its day as a political roman à clef, *Democracy* is important primarily for its pioneering exposure of governmental evils in Washington. Adams's work in general is less pertinent to the history of literature than it is to the history of ideas. In the latter context Adams embodies for many a particularly modern viewpoint, one which sees the world becoming less stable and coherent and which predicts this trend will continue, never to be arrested. Adams developed this doctrine most thoroughly in his best-known work, *The Education of Henry Adams*.

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# James Agee

1909-1955

American novelist, journalist, critic, and essayist.

## *A Death in the Family* (novel, 1957)

The autobiographical novel is set in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1915. Much of the lyrical narrative's four-day action is seen through the eyes of **Rufus Follet**, a lonely, sensitive, intelligent six-year-old boy. After viewing a wonderfully touching Charlie Chaplin film with his father, **Jay Follet**, Rufus is put to bed. During the night Jay and his wife, **Mary**, are awakened by a phone call summoning Jay to his father's deathbed. On his return drive, a loose cotter pin in the automobile causes Jay's instantaneous death. Mary's overwhelming grief is shared by other family members, each holding differing religious views and interpretations of the death, as they make preparations for Jay's funeral. Reality and fantasy converge with Jay's brief, mysterious visitation and Rufus's later verbal encounter with his ghost. The final day of the novel concerns Jay's burial. At the conclusion of the ceremony, **Uncle Andrew Lynch**, Mary's bitter, agnostic brother, takes Rufus aside and explains that he has witnessed something miraculous, perhaps enough to make him believe in God. He describes a butterfly that alighted on the casket as it was being lowered into the ground; when the casket reached bottom the sun burst dazzlingly from behind the clouds and the butterfly flew high into the sky. Rufus feels privileged that Uncle Andrew has chosen to tell him the story; he wonders at the end about the difference between love and hate and the unspoken feelings that surround him.

Agee wrote that he intended *A Death in the Family* to be "chiefly a remembrance of my childhood, and a memorial to my father." Left unfinished at his death, the novel was pieced together by editors who inserted several passages from outside the time frame of the story. While some critics maintain that the interpolations detract from the narrative by creating internal contradictions and by further complicating Agee's attempt to present the event from a variety of viewpoints, others contend that the inserted passages surpass the main narrative in the quality of their prose and contribute to the cohesiveness of the novel by focusing the narrative more exclusively on Rufus. For its unmatched poetic style and sympathetic portrayal of the human struggle against fear, loneliness, and death, Agee's novel was awarded a posthumous Pulitzer Prize in 1958.

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## Alain-Fournier

1886-1914

French novelist.

### *The Wanderer* (novel, 1913)

The novel takes place in rural France during the nineteenth century. It is narrated by one of the main characters, **François Seurel**, a young schoolboy, crippled and withdrawn, who idolizes his strong and adventurous friend, **Augustin Meaulnes**. With his friends Meaulnes and **Frantz de Galais**, Seurel forms a trio whose idealistic quests are imbued with allusions to the journeys depicted in medieval romance.

As the story opens, Meaulnes is sent to the train station to meet Seurel's grandparents, but instead decides to embark on an adventure. He loses his way and happens upon a great and seemingly enchanted manor where a party is in progress. Here he meets **Yvonne de Galais**, a figure of beauty and purity, and he falls deeply in love with her. He also learns that the party was to be in honor of Yvonne's brother, Frantz, and his bride-to-be, **Valentine Blondeau**. But Valentine has run away, and the grief-stricken Frantz becomes a wanderer with a band of gypsies.

Meaulnes returns home and relates his adventures to Seurel. Soon afterward, Frantz arrives in the town and both Seurel and Meaulnes swear to help Frantz in his search for Valentine. Meaulnes, also in search of the elusive ideal embodied in Yvonne, is unlucky in his quest.

Later, living in Paris, Meaulnes begins an affair with Valentine, unaware of her identity as Frantz's lost love. But Seurel has found Yvonne and brings her and Meaulnes together; they marry, but their union is plagued with unhappiness. Meaulnes becomes disillusioned and deserts her, devoting himself to the quest to reunite Frantz and Valentine. In his absence, Yvonne gives birth to a daughter and dies, leaving Seurel to grieve for her and care for the infant. Having brought Frantz and Valentine together, Meaulnes returns to learn of his wife's death. Overcome with grief, he dedicates himself to his child.

Alain-Fournier's novel is infused with a dream-like atmosphere, reminiscent of a fairy-tale and evoking the fantastic ambience of childhood. Critics often note the dualities represented in the novel, such as the idealism of childhood and the disillusionment of adulthood, and the sacred and profane nature of love, as embodied in the characters of Yvonne and Valentine.

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## Edward Albee

1928-

American dramatist.

### *The Zoo Story* (drama, 1959)

Set in New York's Central Park, the play depicts the encounter of **Jerry** and **Peter** on a Sunday afternoon. Peter, a man in his forties and a publishing executive, is a self-contained and reticent man, seemingly conservative and middle-class. Jerry, an articulate man in his thirties, is described by Albee in the stage directions as having a great "weariness." He appears as Peter sits reading on a park bench, announcing to this perfect stranger, "I've been to the Zoo!" He dominates the conversation, pouring out his deepest thoughts and feelings, wanting to connect with another human being, to know everything about Peter. Peter doesn't know what to make of Jerry's effusiveness and spends most of the play responding to Jerry's queries or listening to his stories with a mixture of wonder and uneasiness, as Jerry chides him for wanting to bring order out of the chaos of Jerry's rambling.

Jerry wants to know the direction he is heading and says to Peter, in a phrase that will be repeated throughout the play, "sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly." He tells Peter about the rooming-house he lives in and about its strange and lonely inhabitants, focussing particularly on his grotesque landlady and her equally repulsive dog. In a long monologue, he describes how the landlady harbors a pathetic passion for him, and how he tried to poison her dog, a tale that proves to be an allegory for Jerry's own inability to relate to others. Although the dog does not die, he and Jerry harbor "sadness, suspicion, and indifference" for one another, paralleling the relationship that Jerry appears to have with other human beings. Although Peter claims not to understand the import of Jerry's tale, he is clearly agitated. Jerry provokes him into a fight over his park bench, throws him a knife and slaps him, goading him on until Peter holds the knife out towards him. Jerry impales himself on the knife and dies, thanking Peter.

Jerry, searching for meaning in life, for the chance to relate to others and to understand, has ended his quest in death. Although the meaning of the conclusion is debated by critics, most agree that Albee seeks to reveal the isolation and lack of communication that characterizes contemporary life. The work is noted for its simple but vivid language and dramatic intensity.

### *The American Dream* (drama, 1961)

The play is set in an apartment living room and begins with a conversation between **Mommy** and **Daddy** that reveals the emptiness of the characters and their lives. They speak in banalities, yet the audience can see the dominance of Mommy and the subservience of Daddy and learns quickly that there is no love in their marriage, and that Mommy married Daddy for his money. **Grandma** offers a refreshing candor, speaking her mind in language

that is clear and simple and accurately accessing the situation. Mommy and Daddy are waiting for someone to discuss their lack of “satisfaction” with something they bought. As Grandma relates the story, the two had been unable to have children and so had bought a baby. But they began to destroy it, plucking out its eyes and genitals and cutting off its hands; the baby eventually died.

Now the **Young Man** arrives on the scene, who, in Grandma’s words, looks like “the American Dream” because of his good looks. He appears to be an empty, shallow young man, fixated on his looks and willing to do anything for money. His true character is shown in a conversation with Grandma in which he reveals that he is a twin who had lost his brother when they were infants. As the brother of the child destroyed by Mommy and Daddy, he claims that he is “incomplete” and he has suffered symbolically the physical mutilation endured by his brother. Thus, because his brother lost his eyes, he no longer sees with pity; because his brother lost his hands, he is now unable to touch with love and feeling. The conclusion indicates that the Young Man has been accepted by Mommy and Daddy as recompense for their earlier, “defective” product.

As he was to do in such later works as *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee explores the emptiness of family relationships in this play, focussing on the physical and emotional barrenness of modern life. Daddy, Mommy, and Grandma reappear in his brief play *The Sandbox*.

### ***Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (drama, 1962)**

The play is set in the fictional college town of New Carthage and centers on an evening spent at the home of **George**, a professor of history, and his wife, **Martha**. Their guests of the evening are **Nick**, a new biology professor, and his wife, **Honey**. The relationship between George and Martha is characterized by mutually destructive cruelty and rage, tempered with a childish delight in fantasy and humor. Their bitter, acrimonious association—their names ironically suggest George and Martha Washington—is marked by occasional moments of humor and tenderness; their marriage is anything but shallow, built on the knowledge of how to nurture and how to wound. They have not been able to have children, and, to compensate, have created a fantasy child, now twenty-one. Nick, a young man in his middle twenties, seems to function as an embodiment of their created son, but in negative ways. Martha lures him upstairs to her bedroom, where he plays out an Oedipal role, albeit unsuccessfully.

To George, Nick as a biology professor represents the new order, the son rebelling against the father, promoting the values of science and technology over the study of the history of thought. Nick himself is a ruthless man, willing to do almost anything to enhance his career, which is what is behind his sexual interlude with Martha. He does not particularly love his wife, and during the course of the evening George divulges that they married thinking Honey was pregnant, only to find out that it was a false, or hysterical, pregnancy. Thus, they too had a fantasy child. At the end of the second act, George decides to end the game: he announces that their son is dead. Martha, chastened by this change, retreats into docility and fear. The ambiguous conclusion appears to indicate a mood of reconciliation; with the fantasy child dead, the struggle for dominance that characterized their relationship is momentarily dormant.

Critics have noted Albee’s social and political themes in this work, particularly in the contrast between George and Nick, one attracted to the variety and multiplicity of human behavior, the other a man who would control humanity through science, as George indicates through his vision of a dystopic future in which Nick and men like him would control the genetic makeup of society. As he has in several of his plays, Albee examines the nature of truth and fantasy as well as the sterility of the American family in his two childless



couples. He depicts the generations at war, where the children (Nick and Honey) reject the world of the parents, and the parents (George and Martha) destroy their own children.

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## Sholom Aleichem

1859-1916

Yiddish novelist, dramatist, and short story writer.

### "Modern Children" (short story, 1946)

"Modern Children," one of several stories written by Aleichem in which **Reb Tevye** is the main character, is a humorous short story dealing with a father's befuddled attempts to marry off his eldest daughter to everyone's satisfaction. The tale is told by Tevye, the dairy man, a poor Eastern European Jew living with his strong-willed wife and several daughters. As the story opens, Tevye's wife, **Golda**, urges Tevye to pay a visit to a prosperous neighbor and widower, **Lazer-Wolf**, who recently had been asking after Tevye. Assuming that Lazer-Wolf was interested in purchasing the family cow, Tevye proceeds to bargain with his neighbor only to find that, after some discussion, Lazer-Wolf is interested in Tevye's eldest daughter, **Tzeitl**, not the cow. Upon enlightenment, Tevye agrees to discuss the matter with his wife, who is delighted, and his daughter, who is not. Tevye, anxious over his daughter's happiness, learns of her love for a poor local tailor, **Motel Kamzoi**, and sympathetic but confused over the breach of tradition, specifically, his own lack of control in the situation, contrives to win his wife's support of Tzeitl's marriage to the tailor.