

Dream of a Common Language

Study Guide

CHARACTERS

Characters: (According to the script.)

Victor: A painter. Thick-haired and full-bearded. A large, burly man with a powerful male energy. Vigor. A bouncing gregariousness as though he is anxious for people to think well of him.

Clovis: Victor's wife. A painter who hasn't painted in some time. Beautiful and sad. She has lost something about herself. Someone who was vibrant, passionate, curious. A strong woman who has been knocked over. Not someone easily given to depression. She is actively trying to understand something.

Pola: Their friend who makes pilgrimages. A painter. A not conventionally beautiful woman. Odd looking at times with a taste for colorful, exotic clothes.

Marc: A painter a few years younger than the others. He wears fine clothes well. There is a bit of the dandy about him but not silly. A walrus moustache waxed and twisted up at the ends. Fingernails buffed to a fine polish. A fastidious man, he has a horror of being out of control.

Mylo: Clovis and Victor's son. A thin, nine-year-old boy with yellow hair and pale gray eyes. Something sad and lost about him.

Dolores: A nurse/companion to Clovis and teacher/governess to Mylo. Of another place and culture suggesting magic, mystery, secrets. Dresses simply, plainly. Catholic. A comforting presence but not grandmotherly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

According to George Mason University, where Heather McDonald teaches: Heather (MFA, New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, 1984) a professional director and playwright, Ms. McDonald has taught Playwriting for the Theater Department for seven years. In the spring of 1999, she directed the GMU Players production of her 1986 play, *Rivers and Ravines*, which was commissioned by the Arena Stage. Her play, *An Almost Holy Picture* was named Best New Play of the Year by the Los Angeles Times and opened on Broadway at The Roundabout Theatre in February 2002 starring Kevin Bacon and directed Michael Mayer. Additionally, Heather was a guest at the 2001 Sundance Festival. Heather's play *When Grace Comes In* premiered at The La Jolla Playhouse in the summer of 2002 and was produced by at the Seattle Repertory Theatre in September 2002.

According to Echo Theatre: Playwright McDonald was partly inspired to write the play after attending an Impressionist exhibit at the National Gallery of Art. She stumbled across an intriguing painting, and beneath it was a blurb describing a dinner held to plan the first Impressionist exhibit in 1874. What hit home with McDonald about the painting was the fact that none of the women artists who participated in that exhibition were at the dinner. Says McDonald, "I was struck that you could be a painter, but you couldn't be part of the dialogue."

In a recent interview, McDonald said, "that image of the men sitting down at the dinner table jogged me. I thought about what it was like, not to be at the table." She continued, "I wanted to write about that invisibility and how it can cause crippling, self-doubt...fury. McDonald explained that she also wanted to write a love story, but one within a marriage. She further stated, "I wanted to write about the longing, for women as well as men, to have a fusion of passion and work in their lives."

FEMINISM

There are several different types of feminism. One way to distinguish between the different aspects is to divide feminism into three chronological parts. *FIRST WAVE* feminism dealt with institutional discrimination of women. For instance, women could not legally own property or even vote! It is generally agreed that in the United States first wave feminism ended with the passage of the 19th amendment giving women the right to vote (1919). *SECOND WAVE* feminism did not stop with legal discrimination, but also fought against cultural discrimination. Although women had the right to vote, they were still being discriminated against and oppressed in all areas of their lives. *THIRD WAVE* feminism continued the fight against discrimination and oppression of women, but also consciously embraced all races, cultures -- even making a firm distinction between gender and sex.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. This play is set on a graveyard. What is the director's intention behind this decision?
2. The women in the play were not allowed in certain classes at their art school unless they were the nude models which were being painted. In the end of the play, Clovis is finally able to paint a nude model (her husband), but it is because she threatens him with a gun. Is this a positive ending or a negative ending? Does this help or hurt her relationship with her husband, Victor? In what way?
3. In the second act, Clovis, Dolores and Pola all play childish games – King Dido Died, and the Sun, Moon, Earth. What do you think the author's intention is? Are these just childish games, or are there strong symbols that support and expand the author's view?
4. What is the function of Dolores in this play? She is not a painter like the other women, Clovis and Pola. Do you think that she is a positive or negative role for women? How does this contrast with the roles of Clovis and Pola?
5. This play deals with *First Wave* feminism (the institutionalized and legally mandated discrimination of women). Are there aspects of *Second Wave* (the cultural discrimination of women) and *Third Wave* (a multi-cultural, racial, economical and gender/sexual approach to) feminism in this play? How is this play relevant to feminism today?
6. What do you think of Marc and Victor in this play? Do they hate women? Are they merely ignorant of the plight and feelings of women? Are they also victims of their society, playing a role that they did not choose? Are they a combination of these ideas or none?
7. The play begins with Clovis' nightmare about being pulled apart. Why is she being torn apart and by what? How does this guide us in valuing these things through the rest of the play? How does this guide our over-all interpretation of the play?
8. Have you ever been discriminated against? Or have you ever discriminated against someone else based on their race, sex, gender, culture, socio-economic status, etc? How does this play guide your thoughts about this experience now?