



The Cocktail Hour

by A.R. Gurney

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A Study Guide by Martin Andrucki

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By A.R. Gurney

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A STUDY GUIDE

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THE AUTHOR. Born in 1930, Albert Ramsdell Gurney, Jr. grew up in Buffalo, New York. He attended St. Paul's School, Williams College, and Yale University, institutional hatcheries for the people Gurney has said he "likes to write about—the American East Coast Bourgeoisie, the much-maligned so-called WASPs." In an interview with Arvid Sponberg, he said that, "I'm writing about change . . . all the time. Social change and cultural change." Often the social and cultural change charted in his plays is the decline of those "much-maligned . . . WASPS"—the dwindling authority of their customs and values, the slippage of their political influence.

The term WASP entered the language in the mid 1960's as an acronym for "Wealthy Anglo-Saxon Protestants," or, redundantly, "White Anglo-Saxon Protestants." (Aren't virtually all Anglo-Saxons white?) In any case, the acronym has endured, accruing in its history a slew of negative connotations. As Wikipedia informs us, the term refers to a "closed group of high-status [White Americans](#) of [English Protestant](#) ancestry . . . believed to control disproportionate social and financial power." Moreover, the acronym often serves as a mild insult, "usually indicating . . . disapproval of the group's excessive power in society." On the other hand, the same source tells us that, "Scholars agree that the group's influence has waned since the end of World War II, with the growing influence of Jews, Catholics, African Americans, Asians, and other former outsiders."

We noted above that the schools Gurney attended were well-tended preserves of WASP culture. This was so of St. Paul's and Williams, and certainly true of most of the schools within Yale University—law, arts and sciences, medicine, divinity. But Gurney didn't attend one of these mainstream programs. Instead he enrolled in the School of Drama, a detour off the path usually trod by the "East Coast bourgeoisie" to which he belonged. So even in graduate school, he finds an ambiguous identity, one that is both fully WASP—Yalie—while incipiently deviant—man of the theater. An identity that anticipates the ambiguous feelings he expresses in his plays about the social world that shaped him.

After completing his degree in playwriting, he began a long career as a member of the humanities faculty of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). For some twenty-five years, he spent the academic year teaching dramatic literature, and summers writing plays. In 1982, as he says in the biographical section of his website he, “moved to New York . . . to devote more time to writing for the theatre.” The move paid off, 1982 being the year in which he achieved his first major New York success as a playwright, *The Dining Room*. He has gone on to a highly prolific career, listing some 54 works on his website, including plays, novels, and librettos for operas and musicals.

About *The Cocktail Hour*, which premiered in San Diego in 1988, he has written:

This is a play about a play, and so could be called self-reflexive. Yet despite its post-modern tone, it is probably the most personal thing I had written up to this time. The play tries to work within the traditions of a comedy of manners, and simultaneously challenge those traditions as outmoded if not destructive. Because the details are so close to home, I promised my family not to let it be produced in Buffalo, my home town, until after both my parents were dead. I personally don't feel that it's terribly tough on either one of them, but the world I grew up in treasures its personal privacy and doesn't enjoy being displayed on stage. And, of course, that's the big issue in the play.

Born, raised, and educated in a period of unchallenged WASP ascendancy, Gurney came of age as a dramatist when that party was ending. He dramatizes this social transition in a number of his plays as a tension between generations, with old WASPS and their middle-aged offspring squaring off against each other. The former look back fondly and longingly at a mode of life that has largely vanished; the latter, while sharing some of this nostalgia, have mostly come to accept the critical view of the WASP world held by those “former outsiders” who are taking over. This leads to conflict between the generations, and conflict leads to drama.

Among Gurney's other plays are *Sweet Sue* (1986), *Love Letters* (1988), *Another Antigone* (1988), and *Sylvia* (1995).

THE SETTING. All the action of *The Cocktail Hour* takes place in the mid-1970s in the living room of a comfortably well-off, upper-middle-class family in “a city in upstate New York,” reminding us that the author, who grew up in a well-off family in Buffalo, has called the play “the most personal thing I had written.”

Gurney tells us in his “Author's Note” that, “The set is basically realistic, but should also be vaguely theatrical, reminding us . . . of those photographs of sets of American drawing room comedies in the thirties or forties. . . .” Again, Gurney's comment on *The Cocktail Hour* comes to mind: he calls it “a play about a play.” And in his “Note” he stipulates that the setting should assert the play's theatricality: its purpose is not to create a facsimile of the real world, but to suggest a realm of dramatic artifice and self-conscious performance. This room is the theater in which members of the WASP elite stage their social rituals and enact their identities. And Gurney wants the set to remind us that “all the world's a play,” especially the world of the people he “like[s] to write about.”

This is a “lovely step-down living room” with an “antique writing desk, a working fireplace with a mantelpiece . . . and a pretty good Impressionist painting hanging over it.” The walls are lined with “good books, all hard-back, some leather bound sets . . . all neatly organized.” A baby grand piano, family photographs in silver frames, a china cabinet full of “excellent china,” and a “thick, warm Persian rug” all add to the atmosphere of well-orchestrated tastefulness. In fact, the playwright comments on the artful arrangement of the scene, telling us that, “The overall effect” should be “tasteful, comfortable, and

civilized, an oasis of traditional warmth and solid good taste.” And he adds, with a nod to Karl Marx, that this room represents “a haven in a heartless world”—a place to be viewed with ironic reverence.

One particular formulation in the “Author’s Note” deserves attention. “Of course,” he says, “a large comfortable couch . . . along with several comfortable chairs” occupy the focal space “downstage”—the position on stage closest to the audience. That “of course” alerts us to the fundamentally theatrical arrangement of this space. *Of course* a theater designer would place the furniture on which the actors will be sitting as they perform the script of the family cocktail hour *downstage*. Real living rooms aren’t organized like that, with couch and chairs turning their backs on the room they occupy in order to face an invisible fourth wall. But “of course” this is how theatrical sets are arranged, and this is “a play about a play.”

But what is the play that this play is about? There are two answers to that question. The first, as we have seen, is that *The Cocktail Hour* is a play about staging the WASP social script called “the cocktail hour.” But another scenic element calls our attention to a second answer: “On the coffee table, noticeably set apart from the china ashtrays and other objects, is a thick manuscript in a black cover.” That black manuscript irritates the eye of the beholder like a speck of dust. It stands out from its visually comforting surroundings, calling attention to itself as an alien presence. Lurking between those black covers is a play written by John, the middle-aged son of this WASP household. “This one’s about us, Pop. . . . The family. . . . This one cuts pretty close to home. . . . This one’s about you, Pop.” This information appalls Pop—Bradley—who immediately assumes that John has written a play that makes “fools out of your family.” Another WASP son is about to betray his father’s most cherished social and cultural values. That generational clash is captured by the contrast between the subdued tastefulness of the living room and the intrusive presence of that black manuscript.

The temporal setting—the mid-1970s—also figures in the action. This was a time of accelerating social change, a period when the counter-cultural ardor that marked some pockets of American life in the 1960s—the universities, for example—was finding its way into the broader world of the working and middle classes. Families—including WASP families—were discovering that some of their members were challenging previously unquestioned cultural and religious values, were experimenting with drugs, engaging in sexual adventurism, flaunting leftist political ideas and postures, and devising “alternative life-styles.” That city in upstate New York was not immune to these influences.

THE PLOT. As the play begins, Bradley “*enters, carrying a silver ice bucket,*” signaling the beginning of cocktail hour—about six p.m. This being “*early evening, early fall,*” darkness is just beginning to descend. Bradley’s son, John—a publisher and moderately successful playwright—has arrived from New York to inform his family that he has written a new play, that it’s about them, and that it’s about to be produced down in the big city. Bradley immediately assumes that he and his wife and other children will be held up to ridicule and contempt in this play, and berates John for never having cared “about our way of life. . . . You’ve gone out of your way not to care.” We learn, in fact, that Bradley has told John on numerous occasions in the past to stay away from family events because, “I didn’t want you snickering in the corner, making snide remarks. . . . That’s why you came up here this weekend. . . . Simply to announce that you plan to humiliate us all in front of a lot of strangers in New York City.”

John, however, informs Bradley that he has actually come home to secure his parents’ permission to put the play on stage. If they object, he will withhold it from production. Bradley most forcefully objects, and John at once agrees to respect his father’s wishes. “After I’m dead, after your mother’s dead,” Bradley declares, “after everyone you can possibly hurt has long since gone, then you can write your plays. And you can put them on wherever you want.”

At this point Ann, John’s mother, “*richly and fashionably dressed,*” enters, bearing a tray of crackers and cheese. There follows a ritual moment between husband and wife:

BRADLEY. What would you like to drink, darling?

ANN. After almost fifty years of marriage, you know very well what I'd like.

BRADLEY. After almost fifty years of marriage, I know very well always to ask.

"Ah, the old questions, the old answers, there's nothing like them" says a character in one of Samuel Beckett's plays, relishing the comfort of knowing what comes next. There are servants in the kitchen, snacks on the coffee table, and drinks being expertly mixed: domestic grace abounds as the cocktail hour gets under way. As Ann says, "The cocktail hour is sacred." "We're never too busy for the cocktail hour," Bradley affirms, citing a bishop of their acquaintance who "used to say when he came here for dinner that the cocktail hour took the place of evening prayers."

So the secular liturgy begins, with Bradley and Ann looking forward to an evening of familiar and ceremonious comfort. Prompted by an allusion to John's new play, the conversation turns toward the theater, with Ann and Bradley reminiscing about the plays and players they "used to love," celebrating the "wonderful plots" and "the attractive couples" once found on stage, and recalling fabled performers like "Gertrude Lawrence, Ina Claire, Katharine Hepburn," and, above all, the Lunts.

Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne were a celebrated husband-and-wife acting duo who appeared together in more than twenty plays during their careers in the '30s, '40s, and '50s. They were featured on the cover of *Life* magazine in 1949, accepted the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Lyndon Johnson in 1964, and appeared on the 33-cent U.S. postage stamp after their deaths. "Oh, the Lunts, the Lunts," Ann exclaims, remembering that she and Bradley actually met them once for drinks after a performance in New York. They were "terribly amusing," and could both "talk at exactly the same time. . . . without interrupting each other." A feat which, the stage directions tell us, Ann and Bradley "*of course*" enact even as they describe it, becoming the Lunts themselves, if only for a moment. "They made you feel proud to be married," says Bradley. "I wish you'd write plays like that, John," says Ann, turning the conversation back to the faulty state of the contemporary theater.

And, indeed, the failings of contemporary life in general: "It's all over," Bradley laments, "The life we led is completely gone." Which brings matters back to John's play and its presumptively scornful attitude toward that lost life. Bradley laments the absence of his other son, Jigger, who, unlike John, would have made the evening a happy occasion, playing the piano while the family gathered around to sing all the old favorites. John brings no such invigorating spirit. He refuses to celebrate his family and their way of life in his plays—the art prizes, the no-hitters, the sailing cups. Instead, Bradley declares, "you attack your parents in their old age."

As an agitated Bradley mixes more drinks, talk turns to the state of his health. He is convinced he is seriously ill, and that Ann is minimizing his problems. "When I was in the hospital with double pneumonia, it was just a cold. . . . When they're lowering me into my grave, she'll tell all my friends that it's hay fever." And because he is convinced he has "very little time left on this earth," he wants to be sure no moment is ruined by pain inflicted on him by his son's malevolent play. In fact, he offers John twenty thousand dollars on the spot in exchange for a promise to keep the play off the stage.

Having already promised to shelve the production, John refuses the money, at which point his sister, Nina, arrives. Bradley promptly includes her in the conversation about John's play, informing her that it is about the family. Nina wants to know if she is in the play. As she flips through the script, she discovers that her role seems fairly small, which leads her to complain that, "I always play a minor role in this family"—a fact she resents because she is the one who does all the heavy lifting in caring for Bradley and Ann.

John claims that he has tried to build up her role, but found that difficult because Nina has always seemed so content with her life. This causes another explosion from Nina: "Ask Dr. Randall how

comfortable I am. . . . Ask him to show you the X-rays of my insides.” Her “insides” are in a twist, we assume, precisely because she is excruciatingly un-comfortable with her life, and wants to change it. Indeed, she wants to go to school in Cleveland to learn to work with seeing-eye dogs, and realizing that her family circumstances prevent her from doing that, she bursts into tears.

Bradley blames John for her distress, accusing him of having always been a source of family “disarray.” Still emotionally overwrought, Nina declares that John should write a play about a woman like her who has made all the socially approved choices in her life, but has “ended up feeling perfectly terrible.” At which point, she runs out of the room, followed by Bradley.

This leaves John alone with Ann. She praises him for agreeing to withhold his play from production, saying that his decision, “shows you have strong family feelings.” This provokes a vehement response from John, who deploras family feelings as “the bane of my existence,” as a force that has confined and inhibited him all his life. And now that he has come up with a play,

“which is—all right, maybe a little on the nose, maybe a little frank, maybe a little satiric at times—but still clearly infused with warmth, respect, and an abiding affection, and what happens? I being censored, banned, bribed not to produce.”

These are the most forceful words John has spoken thus far in the play, and they prompt Ann to urge him to turn the play into a book—that way his work will not be entirely wasted, but its impact will be much less “noisy.” But John protests that he “can’t seem to write anything but plays,” that he is trapped in an “old medium” that is “artificial . . . archaic . . . restrictive beyond belief. It doesn’t seem to have anything to do with contemporary American life.” “Oh, God,” he laments, “why do I do it? Why write plays? Why have I always done them.”

And by “always” he means from his earliest childhood, when he would stage performances in the basement, and coerce his parents into watching them. Now, however, he cannot remember what these childhood plays were about, even though his psychiatrist “says they could open a few doors for me.”

Despite her disapproval of psychiatrists, Ann helps John to remember one play in particular, whose meaning he grasps in a flash of intuition:

What I was doing was parading my penis in front of my parents. . . . Saying, ‘Hey you guys. Look. Look over here. I’m here, I’m alive, I’m wild. . . .’ That’s what I was doing then! That’s what I’ve always done! . . . And that’s why I have to write plays, Mother. I have to keep doing it.

After a pause, Ann deploras John’s recourse to psychiatry, and reiterates her advice to turn his writing talents away from the stage and toward books. “I could tell you lots of things if I knew you would write them down quietly and carefully and sympathetically in a good, long book . . .” she tells him, leading us to wonder what “things” she might have in mind.

Bradley returns, and informs his wife that there is trouble with dinner. The cook—inexperienced, and taken on only for the evening, not a regular servant such as the family used to employ—has botched the roast and burned the peas. But he assures Ann that he has the situation under control because he knows how to deal with servants. “You can’t live without servants,” he tells John. “Civilization depends on them. . . Without them, you and I would be out in the kitchen right now . . .and none of this would be taking place at all.”

Because dinner will be delayed, cocktail hour will be prolonged, so Bradley pours himself another drink, and invites John—who had previously refused alcohol—to join him. Reluctantly—because he feels that lately he has had trouble handling his liquor—John agrees. Father and son then settle down for more discussion of the troublesome play. Bradley asks if John brings up the bogus story about the family’s

Indian blood, a bit of slander he particularly resents. And what about grandfather's death—which John has always harped on—does that make it into the script? “Once” John admits, saying that he refers to Bradley's father as a pillar of the community who, “for no discernable reason . . . drowned himself.” Bradley informs John that his father left a suicide note saying, “He's terribly . . . sorry, but he's come to the conclusion that life isn't worth living any more.”

John reveals that his own son sometimes shows symptoms of depression like Bradley's father, and Bradley asks if that fact, too, shows up in the play. When John confirms that it does, Bradley concludes that his son has written a “very depressing play” with “no plot” that stands in need of “some twist or something. . . . some secret or surprise or something.” “Actually,” John says, “there is. . . . At the end of the first act. . . .” when the father, convinced his wife has had an affair, reveals “that he doesn't believe. . . . his son is his true son.” “Why,” Bradley asks, “would you ever want to write a thing like that?” To which John replies, bringing the first act to an end with the promised twist, “Because I don't think you ever loved me, Pop.”

The second act begins “*Immediately after*” the bomb John has just dropped. Bradley has gone off to take a phone call from his younger son, Jigger, and Nina arrives with more “munchies.” John recalls how often in the past he and Nina sat waiting for dinner with growling stomachs because Jigger was late for one of a dozen reasons. “The cook held dinner. . . . And the maid kept the plates warm. The cocktail hour kept all of life in an amazing state of suspended animation.” Talk of the cook and the maid leads John to recall how badly his parents always treated their servants. Nina disagrees, but John insists, and asks if Nina has ever considered how “every dinner party, every cocktail hour . . . every civilized endeavor in this world is based on exploiting the labor of the poor. . . . It's a sh**ty system, but I can't think of a better one.”

Nina switches away from the Marxist overview to focus on John: “I think you're a s**t.” She berates him for coming home and “stirring things up,” threatening their parents “with some ghastly kind of exposure in the last years of their lives.” She accuses him of having been a lifelong troublemaker, “causing an argument, starting a fight, leaving a trail of upset and unhappy people behind you.” And he didn't limit his mischief to the family: “Anyone in authority comes under your guns.” And now Nina is especially furious with him because, “here we are, the family at least partially together for the first time in several years, and possibly the last time in our lives, and what happens: you torment us with this play . . . you make us all feel thoroughly uncomfortable. . . . Has it ever come to mind that this is what you do?”

Surprisingly, John agrees, justifying his behavior because there's a “hell of a lot of horses**t around” that he feels called on to expose, chiefly regarding his father. “He's a hypocrite. . . . He's a fake!” All his talk about civilization, and manners, and social obligation, and hard work are the empty posturing of a man who has been essentially idle and dependent all his life, getting by on “charm, affability, and Mother's money—and . . . his friends. His friends have carried him all his life.”

Even more galling than Bradley's hypocrisy has been his failure as a father. “Did he ever show you how to throw a ball or dive into a pool? Not him. . . . All he ever taught me was how to hold a fork or answer an invitation. . . . He's never been my father and I've never been his son and I have known that for a long time.” A dissenting Nina declares that Bradley has been a “wonderful father to me,” which prompts John to theorize that his troublemaking has been the product of parental neglect: “I'm jealous of anyone who seems to have a . . . father in the background helping them out.” Like Nina and Jigger, Bradley's favored children; like his own offspring, for whom he has “bent over backwards.” He concedes that he's a mess, but he declares that he'd be in worse condition if he “didn't write about it.”

And yet, he says, he's actually glad that his play won't be produced, because he feels the script is missing a crucial element, some convincing explanation for Bradley's alienation from him. “Where, when, why did he turn his countenance from me. . . . I'd love to know what I did to have him say to himself—and to me—‘I don't know this boy. This is not my son.’”

Ann then enters, having been on the phone with Jigger. John exits to speak with his brother, and Ann discloses to Nina that Jigger has decided to move to California to build wooden boats. "Says he plans to buy one of those grubby vans, and lug everyone out, like a bunch of Oakies. Your father is frantically trying to talk him out of it." With her brother's example in mind, Nina again raises the possibility of studying seeing-eye dogs in Cleveland.

An agitated Bradley returns from his conversation with Jigger, bemoaning the fact that his younger son is now lost to them, that he will never see him again. "I've given my sons everything. . . . And now what happens? I reach my final years . . . and one son attacks me while the other deserts me. . . . It is not to be borne."

John returns from talking to Jigger, and announces that he has urged his brother to take the California job; that he, in fact, has engineered the whole situation, having arranged an interview for Jigger with a classmate who owns the boatyard where he will be working. When Bradley demands to know why John would do such a thing, he answers simply, "Because Jigger was miserable where he was." And he also announces that he thinks Nina should go to Cleveland. "I think I'll do it," she says. "I think I'll go. . . . Put that in your play and write it, John."

These developments prompt Bradley and Ann to advise John to "stop managing other people's lives, and this sets off a confrontation between father and son. John tells Bradley that the cocktail hour and all it represents is dead, and that Nina and Jigger have finally come to recognize its passing. Rather than continuing the free ride of WASP entitlement, they have decided to "put something back into the world." When Bradley challenges John to reveal what he's contributing to the world, the answer is, "I'm writing about it. At least I have the ba**s to do that." Outraged at this profanation of the cocktail hour, Bradley orders his son out of the room; John counters with an offer to clear out altogether, accusing his father of lacking the masculine fortitude just invoked and merely sitting on his backside, watching the world go by.

Bradley rears back, and delivers a Jovian rejoinder to his transgressing son:

Your mother and I, and your grandparents on both sides, and Aunt Jane and Uncle Roger and Cousin Esther, and your forbears who came to this country in the seventeenth *century* have spent their lives trying to establish something called civilization in this wilderness and as long as I am alive, I will not allow foul-minded and resentful people to tear it all down. (*He storms off and upstairs.*)

At which point Nina arrives to announce that, the cook having mistaken the microwave oven for a food warmer, the roast is ruined. However there are frozen lamb chops, and yet more peas, so she will be able to patch together an acceptable meal. Nina goes off to get that ball rolling, leaving John and Ann alone on stage.

Talk again turns to the provocative manuscript. Just as at the end of the first act John announced that there was a missing twist to the story, now he announces that the plot lacks "an obligatory scene. . . . a scene with you, Mother." He wants to know just one thing: "What went wrong when I was very young. Something went wrong. . . . What was it?" "You got lost in the shuffle," she tells him. She and Bradley were newly married, the Depression was at its worst, the household was in an uproar, and "nobody paid much attention to you. . . . You lay in your crib screaming for attention, and I'm afraid you've been doing it ever since."

This fails to satisfy John, who feels there must be more to the story: "I can see the scene going on just a tad longer, Mother." And Mother obliges—after further prodding—revealing that she often left John to wail in his crib because she was preoccupied with writing "a big long book. . . . and I'm sorry if it made me neglect you." She has since burned the manuscript, but she remembers the plot: it was about a beautiful governess who falls in love with a handsome stable hand. When she eventually terminates

their affair, her lover sets fire to the stable and the beautiful governess is badly burned. But she recovers, emerging from her bandages even more beautiful than before. The stable hand goes away, and the young governess marries the master of the house.

John is certain that the plot of his mother's novel—which he assumes is autobiographical— confirms the blockbuster explanation for Bradley's lack of paternal warmth that he proposed at the end of the first act: Ann did have a lover; John is not Bradley's son; and Bradley has never accepted John as his own.

Ann, however, fails to play her role in this scene, rejecting John's hypothesis, or at least evading the questions it raises. John demands to know the real-life identity of that stable hand—his actual begetter. And Ann responds, "Oh, John, I don't know . . . Maybe I'm getting old . . . but I'm beginning to think I based him on your father."

With that anti-climax, Bradley returns, and offers to bury the hatchet with John. "I blame you, I blame myself, and I blame alcohol. There's nothing more dangerous than a lengthy cocktail hour." Moreover, he has decided to accept fate, and embrace Jigger's decision to head west. He's even prepared to bankroll the move, despite the fact that he's no longer as flush as he was when he was drawing a salary. Then Nina stakes a claim to his support when she asks for help with travel and living expenses for her adventure in Cleveland. Having grown mellow thanks to the long cocktail hour, Bradley assures her that "we'll work out something."

As the play draws to an end, Bradley urges John to include the brighter elements of their lives in his script, like the singing around the piano and the skiing: "I'd want to prove to those critics we *are* worth writing about. I'd put our best foot forward. . . ." And what about a punchy ending? Will there be a "kicker?" he asks. John produces one on the spot: at the end of the play the son will no longer think he's illegitimate. Instead "he discovers he's the true son of his father after all." As Ann arrives to shepherd the reconciled pair in to dinner, the play comes to an end.

THE CHARACTERS. Aristotle tells us that character is defined by what a man chooses to do or not to do. **John** chooses to write plays despite the fact that the theater is an "artificial," "archaic," and "restrictive" medium. He just can't help himself. And why is that? He doesn't understand until the middle of the first act when he experiences an epiphany while discussing his childhood theatrical projects with his mother: writing and staging plays was a way of commanding attention, of getting his parents to notice him, to acknowledge his existence. He realizes that this motive has persisted throughout his life, right up to the present moment.

We might not have concluded that John was an attention-seeker from his behavior early in the play. In the opening scenes his voice is quiet, his lines short and unassertive, his actions subdued. But behind this quiet façade lurks the family troublemaker, the attention-seeker, the hidden side of John's personality that emerges as the play goes on.

He has come home ostensibly to make peace with his parents by giving them veto power over the production of his latest dramatic creation. But far from averting a storm, his actions provoke a thunderclap of resentment from his father, who instantly forbids his son to stage the play, and then goes on to berate him for writing about his family in the first place.

But Nina perceives that John has, in fact, come home "to stir things up . . . to cause trouble. That's what you've done since the day you were born, and that's what you'll do till you die."

So John is something of a dissembler, a prodigal son returned from the fleshpots only pretending to have changed his ways. Instead of sparing his parents the discomfort of seeing themselves portrayed on

stage, he actually snares them into performing—or rewriting—the play that will, as Ann says, “spill the beans” about their way of life. Thus, at the end of act one John provokes a confrontation with his father resulting in a scene between him and Bradley that parallels the end of the first act in his manuscript. In the middle of the second act, John inveigles his mother into revealing her past as a frustrated novelist, thereby providing the “obligatory scene” his play lacks. And as *The Cocktail Hour* draws to an end, it is Bradley who prompts John to invent the “kicker” that will punch up the final act of that drama between the black covers.

John is also a double-sided character in another sense. When Ann congratulates him on still having “strong family feelings,” John recoils at the idea. “Family feelings . . . The bane of my existence.” He sees himself as having been inhibited throughout his life by these feelings: “may I cross the street? May I have permission to buy a car? Would you mind very much if I screwed my girl?” Straitjacketed by “family feelings,” he retaliates by becoming a playwright who turns his family into a target for his mordant wit, who uses them as material to illustrate the shortcomings of WASP social and emotional life. At least, that’s Bradley’s view. And to some extent, John must actually agree with that judgment, since he does offer to keep his play under wraps during his parents’ lifetime. Why do so if there were no merit to the charge?

And yet John does pay homage to his parents by making a pilgrimage to their upstate home and offering to renounce the staging of his play. Surely this deference to their sensibilities is an act of “family feelings.” And he describes the play as “clearly infused with warmth, respect, and an abiding affection” for its subjects—hardly the attitudes one would expect from a family renegade. One seemingly minor event near the end of the play illustrates John’s contradictory feelings about his family. Just as dinner—at long last—is about to be served, and father and son are about to proceed into the dining room, “*John takes a necktie out of his jacket pocket, and begins to put it on.*” In this small act, we see the spell that his family and their WASP liturgy still cast over him. Defiantly tieless up to this moment, John instinctively puts on the vestment essential to a properly-conducted family dinner. That necktie is the talisman of his fidelity to the family and its ways, the visible affirmation that John is, as he says in the play’s “kicker,” “the true son of his father after all.”

Bradley wants his world to go on as it always has. Indeed, he would like to reset the historical clock back to a time when that world provided the template for all decent American society. But, he bitterly realizes, that will never happen. Instead, as he notes early in the play, “Nobody cares about our way of life.”

Nowhere is the contemporary world’s fall from grace more evident than in the theater—the arena in which his irritating son has chosen to play a part.

Of course nobody goes to the theatre any more. Ted Moffatt Just made a trip to New York. . . . I said, ‘Did you go to the theatre, Ted?’ . . . He said he did not. He said all they do these days in the theatre is stand around and shout obscenities at each other. And then take off their clothes. Ted said he wouldn’t be caught dead at the theatre. And Ted was once a big theatre-goer.

In a world that seems diseased, Bradley is himself seriously ill—at least in his view. He is convinced that he is suffering from a terminal malady, and constantly complains that the rest of the world ignores his precarious condition. In fact his fixation on the state of his health almost makes him into a character out of a farce, Moliere’s imaginary invalid. As Ann says,

He’s been saying that he’s dying for years. He announced it on his fortieth birthday. He reminds us of it whenever he gets a cold. Lately, when we go to bed, he doesn’t say ‘goodnight’ any more. He says ‘goodbye’ because he thinks he won’t last till morning.

But his fixation on the state of his health is not entirely irrational, since “he has a blood problem, a kind of leukemia, which seems to be in remission now.” So behind the self-dramatizing complaints there lies a genuine source of concern, a state of remission being also a state of anxiety.

If all the world’s a stage, Bradley wants the leading role in a play that enacts the rituals of the “East Coast bourgeoisie” as they were in 1940, with a decorous cocktail hour as the obligatory scene. In fact, we hear several times about Bradley’s skill as a performer, his record of success as toastmaster and social wit at weddings and public dinners. These moments are his apotheoses, his transformation to the elevated status of community spokesman, WASP-in-chief. In the same vein, he wants to be the master of ceremonies in a civilized household that practices civilized manners and adheres to the decent old plotline of life. But reality keeps heckling him, sending him into fits of pique and gloom. The cook bungles dinner. His elder son writes treasonous plays about his own family; his daughter bursts into tears because she’s unhappy with her perfectly respectable life. His younger son intends to abandon his solid job and his East Coast roots and, like a hippie, travel to California and build boats. Underneath Bradley’s veneer of self-confidence and charm there lives a man who is terrified at what is happening to him and his family.

This fear introduces an element of rigidity into his character. Thus, at several points in the play, Bradley sounds like one of those stock characters who have populated comedy since antiquity—figures whose obsessions and deformities are predictable, unvarying, and ludicrous. One of these is the Pappos, the irascible father, perpetually grumbling about his insubordinate children. This is Bradley in dealing with John and grouching about Jigger. Another is Moliere’s Argan, whose obsession with his imaginary ill health disrupts his family. This is the Bradley who is convinced that his death is imminent and that his indifferent wife and children are hurrying him to his grave.

But Bradley differs from these stock characters in one important way. He achieves a degree of self-knowledge which enables him to change—a dramatic pathway not followed by the classical, and immutable, archetypes. As he says,

I sat and thought. I thought about all of you. I thought about . . . my father. Do you suppose all families are doomed to disperse? . . . People seem to want to leave me. There seems to be this centrifugal force. . . . Well, whatever it is, I can’t fight it any more. . . . ‘The old oak must bend with the wind . . . or break . . .’

And, bending with the wind, Bradley finally gives his blessing to Jigger’s plan to move to California, and Nina’s decision to study seeing-eye dogs in Cleveland—even agreeing to bankroll these radical steps.

As the play moves toward its end, the irascible father gropes for a way to make peace with his most troublesome son, comparing his relish of the role of toastmaster with John’s love of theater:

You can generate an appreciative mood. I mean, isn’t that what we want, really? Both of us? In the end? Isn’t that why I make speeches and you write plays? Isn’t that why people go to the theatre? Don’t we all want to celebrate something at the end of the day? . . . In spite of all our difficulties, surely we can agree on that. So find a good kicker for the end.

And the kicker John finds, as we have seen, is his discovery that “he’s the true son of his father, after all.” Bradley likes that idea, and proposes as well a change in the play’s title: it should be called, he says in a fit of inspiration, *The Good Father*. Which is what he has become.

Ann, Bradley’s wife of more than fifty years, shares many of her husband’s ideas and values. With him, she believes that no day can be satisfactory that lacks a cocktail hour. Like her husband, she too views the contemporary theater—and contemporary culture more generally—with revulsion, illustrating her feelings with a story about old friends who traveled to New York to attend the theater. They found nothing

they wanted to see, and then decided to go to the movies, where they found nothing but “people . . . shooting each other—in the *face!* . . . and using the most repulsive language while they were doing it.”

She is no happier than Bradley about the idea of John putting his family up on stage, exposing them to the condescension and ridicule of the new philistines. But unlike Bradley, she expresses sympathy with John’s artistic ambitions, actually encouraging him to write—only not for the theater. A nice, “long” book would be far more acceptable, making less noise, attracting less notice, and occupying shelf space somewhere or other with the decorum appropriate to literature.

That sympathy—however conditional—grows out of Ann’s own former ambitions to be a writer. As we learn midway through the play, she spent the first years of her marriage—the years of John’s infancy and early childhood—grinding out a six-hundred page novel that she subsequently destroyed. But the time and effort required for this artistic project led her to neglect her maternal responsibilities. Baby John, as a result, got little or no attention from mother. And this, he concludes, prompted him throughout his life to clamor for recognition, first in his boyhood basement dramas, and later through his work as a professional playwright.

So Ann is John’s parent in two senses: at the literal level, she brought him into the world; at the metaphorical level, she begot his career as a troublemaking artist by ignoring him.

And what does her abortive novel tell us about Ann? The story of a beautiful governess who has a passionate affair with a stable groom, severs the relationship, suffers severe injuries when the groom burns down the stable, emerges from her ordeal more beautiful than before, and marries the master of the house, reveals a romantic streak that seems improbable for a well-adjusted WASP wife and mother. But does that side of his mother’s personality surprise John? Probably not. After all, we have just heard that the first act of John’s autobiographical play ends with the elder son informing his father that he believes himself to be the product of an extra-marital affair between his mother and a nameless lover. In other words, John has long suspected that his mother has been keeping amorous secrets about her past. And the plot of Ann’s novel seems to confirm his hunch about his illicit origins.

But does it? The question is surrounded by hints and ambiguities. We remember that when she was discussing Nina’s love of animals, she said she understood an attachment to horses: “The thrill of riding. The excitement of the hunt. The men. . . . There used to be a lot of attractive men around stables.” That’s a teaser.

Later, when talking with John, Ann had speculated about the causes of Bradley’s opposition to the staging of her son’s play:

ANN. I also think he’s scared you’ll spill the beans.

JOHN. The beans?

ANN. The beans.

JOHN. What beans?

ANN. O, John, face it. Everyone’s got beans to spill. And, knowing you, you’ll find a way to spill ours.

So Ann worries about spilled beans, the exact nature of which she avoids telling John. But her anxiety leads us to suspect that something troublesome lurks under the floorboards of this WASP household. When we get to the plot of Ann’s novel, we can’t help wondering if the groom and the affair were the beans she was hoping not to spill. John thinks they were, but when he presses Ann to tell who that groom was, she again refuses to give a straight answer: “Oh, John, I don’t know . . . Maybe I’m getting old . . . or maybe I’ve had too many cocktails . . . but I’m beginning to think I based him on your father.”

True? False? We don't know. We only know that John doesn't press her on the matter, seeming to accept her explanation. So if the groom was Bradley, that means that Ann fell in love with someone who seemed to her an exotic, powerfully sensual figure—someone out of the pages of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. And the fact is that at the time of their marriage, Bradley was, as John says, a "poor boy," whose father had committed suicide, leaving his family in financial straits. That poor boy became Bradley, the master of the house. In life, as in the novel, the groom was replaced by a pillar of the community, the man that Ann has been living with for more than half a century. The romantic fantasies of her youth have mellowed into the complacencies of the cocktail hour, a metamorphosis she happily accepts.

Nina enters on page 26 of the printed script of *The Cocktail Hour*, and by the bottom of page 31—about ten minutes of stage time—she is bathed in tears, mourning her unhappy life like a character out of Chekhov. She arrives with a stomach ache, probably due to nerves, which promptly gets worse when she learns that she has merely a supporting role in John's play.

I just think it's interesting I always play a minor role in this family. . . . Oh boy, John. I swear. . . . once again . . . you . . . end up getting all the attention, whereas I, I, who have remained here since I was married, who have lived here all my *life*. . . . I, who got pop to go to a younger doctor . . . I, me, who drove Mother all over town for weeks after her cataract operation . . . who found them a new cleaning woman when their old one just walked *out!* . . . once again I am told I play a goddamn minor ROLE!

Too little money and too many responsibilities as wife and mother prevent her from studying seeing-eye dogs in Cleveland. Dr. Randall's X-rays show her insides in a painful twist, and she even resents her name, Nina, which means "little Ann," i.e., a miniature version of her mother. And now once again her troublemaking brother is shoving her to the sidelines in their family drama.

You've never written about me, John. Ever. . . . Why don't you some time? Why don't you write about a woman who went to the right schools, and married the right man, and lived on the right street all the days of her life, and ended up feeling perfectly terrible! (*She runs out of the room and upstairs.*)

She only feels fully alive when she's with animals:

Put me with a dog, a cat, anything, and I feel I'm in touch with a whole different dimension . . . It's as if both of us . . . me and the animal . . . we're reaching back across hundreds of thousands of years to a place where we both knew each other much better.

But instead of communing with our brother beasts in the forest primeval—like someone in a Douanier Rousseau painting—she's fixing snacks and sipping wine at a cocktail hour in a well-appointed house in a city in upstate New York.

So Nina's well-ordered life is, ironically, the source of her physical and emotional disorder. And why has she fixed so firmly on those seeing-eye dogs as her salvation? Maybe because she desperately wants some trustworthy, simple, pure-hearted animal to lead her out of the desert of her life and toward the green pastures and the still waters where her soul will be restored.

THEMES. *The Cocktail Hour* dramatizes social change as a series of domestic crises disrupting a cocktail hour. Gurney has called the play a "comedy of manners." Meaning what? "Comedy of manners" is a term that often appears in dramatic criticism, especially in connection with the theater of the Restoration and seventeenth century, and with the plays of Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, and Noel Coward. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* defines "comedy of manners" as, "A witty, cerebral form of

dramatic comedy that depicts and often satirizes the manners and affectations of a contemporary society. A comedy of manners is concerned with social usage and the question of whether or not characters meet certain social standards.” That seems a pretty good description of Gurney’s play.

But what are “manners?” Does the word refer merely to details of social conduct, such as saying “please” and “thank you,” and keeping one’s elbows off the table? Yes, it does—in part. But such details are only a subset of the word’s larger meanings. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines “manners” in a number of expansive ways. It means, “The prevailing customs, social conduct, and norms of a specific society, period, or group. . . .” The word also refers to, “Behavior through which one reveals one’s personality;” and denotes, “A habitual way of behaving.”

“Manners,” then, equal “behavior,” which is a very big word, encompassing a huge portion of what it means to be human. It refers to everything we say and do, whether in the company of others. “Manners” means the way you address the world, and especially the way you treat other people.

To be truly mannerly is to be a gentleman or a lady. As Cardinal Newman famously tells us, a gentleman’s “great concern is to make every one at their ease and at home. He has his eyes on all his company; he is tender towards the bashful, gentle towards the distant, and merciful towards the absurd. . . .” From this perspective, manners become virtually consubstantial with morality itself, embodying the great mandate to “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

The ruthless lechers and pompous hypocrites who populate the plays of Wycherley, Wilde, Shaw, and Coward practice deformed manners, modes of behavior that lead them to treat others as mere instruments of their own satisfaction. “The prevailing customs, social conduct, and norms” of the societies represented in these plays are inversions of Cardinal Newman’s ground rules. They have become not merely ludicrous, but often vicious, thus inviting the satirist’s critical squint.

The crisis of manners in *The Cocktail Hour* arises out of the conflict between Bradley and Ann and their children. Turning again to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, we learn that a crisis is, “An unstable condition, as in political, social, or economic affairs, involving an impending abrupt or decisive change.” The word may also refer to that “point in a story or drama when a conflict reaches its highest tension and must be resolved.”

As we have seen, the play’s “conflict” and “unstable condition” arise from an intra-familial clash: Bradley, Ann, and Nina want John to withhold his play from production because it casts an unflattering light on them and their world. In important ways, this is a question of manners.

The opponents of the play object to John’s subjecting his family to the unsympathetic gaze of strangers; they don’t like being used as instruments for his purposes as a playwright. They feel ill-treated, betrayed, misrepresented—in short, the victims of bad manners.

John, on the other hand, feels called on to practice the artist’s vocation of telling the truth, which is his version of good manners. And eventually, we see that Nina and Jigger themselves opt for truth—the truth of their own feelings which tell them that to be happy, they must reject their parents’ expectations. Bradley and Ann’s manners are no longer for them.

The ritual of the cocktail hour is the synecdoche of those parental expectations, the part that represents the whole. One code of manners—that of the older generation—embraces the ritual. The alternative code of manners views it skeptically as a vestige of an obsolescent and largely discredited way of life. The laughter arises—as it always does—from the ludicrous situations produced by this conflict: the moments of misunderstanding, awkwardness, and pique. The comedy lies in the fact that the action ends with reconciliation and a hearty dinner.

The Cocktail Hour is also an example of what has come to be called “meta-theater,” a work of drama in which the theater itself plays a crucial role. The most famous example of meta-theater occurs in *Hamlet* during the play-within-the-play when Claudius reacts guiltily to a murder on stage that closely resembles the way he killed his brother. Hamlet now knows that his uncle is a fratricide, and we witness the theater’s uncanny ability to reveal the truth.

Other examples of meta-theater occur in the plays of Corneille, Pirandello, and Tom Stoppard, often exploring the truthfulness of art and the artifice of life.

The most obvious meta-theatrical element of *The Cocktail Hour* is the fact that it’s about a playwright who has written a play called *The Cocktail Hour*, one whose characters and situations are virtually identical with those we see on stage. There, between its black covers, sits John’s manuscript; here, in front of our eyes, the manuscript’s contents are being acted out. Does art imitate life, or does life imitate art?

In a famous work of psychology from the 1950s, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman argued that a person in “everyday social intercourse” presents “himself . . . to others . . . in the manner of an actor presenting a character to an audience.” Thus, acting is acting, but so is not-acting. The point about Gurney’s play is that the characters can’t detach themselves from the roles written for them by the social world into which they were born. Bradley must be Bradley, and John, John. And John cannot complete his manuscript without having his parents create its essential missing elements—its twists, obligatory scenes, and kickers—by performing themselves in real life. Or, rather, in that version of “real life” that is the cocktail hour within *The Cocktail Hour*. It’s theater all the way down.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.

1. How would you feel about seeing your family portrayed on stage or in a movie?
2. Do you think it’s true that people are performing all the time?
3. Why is Nina unhappy?
4. Why is Jigger unhappy?
5. Does playing a role have anything to do with their unhappiness?
6. Do you think the groom in Ann’s novel was actually Bradley?
7. Do you have rituals in your family like the cocktail hour? What are they? When do they occur?
8. What do these rituals mean to you and your family members?
9. What do you like about these rituals? What do you dislike?
10. Do members of your family compare the present unfavorably with the past? What specific kinds of comparisons do they make?