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A Man For All Seasons

by

Robert Bolt



MonkeyNotes by Jane Johnson

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

A Man for All Seasons is set in the Reformation Period of Britain. The time was also considered to be part of the Renaissance. The time was from 1529 through 1535. It was during the reign of King Henry VIII, the second Tudor King of England (reigned 1509-1547).

The Sixteenth Century (the 1500's) was an exciting time. Much was happening. The world, including Britain, was changing quickly. People were thinking and sharing new ideas. Examples of this sharing were the visits Erasmus, a Dutch humanist and writer, made to Sir Thomas More. Johannes Gutenberg.....

List of Characters

Major Characters

Sir Thomas More - Sir Thomas More is the protagonist, or main character. His refusal to affirm the Act of Supremacy making King Henry VIII the supreme head of the Church of England is the main subject of the play. The play focuses on Sir Thomas' inability to sacrifice his moral conscience to save his life. His conscience is more important to him than life itself. But, More, in the play, is more existential than he.....

The Common Man - The Common Man is a useful invention for this playwright. His characters can be looked upon as either universal or base. His characters do whatever is expedient. They "go along to get along." They let others be concerned with right and wrong. They are concerned with what works, with.....

Characters played by the Common Man

Matthew, the Steward - Matthew is the Common Man character that makes the most appearances. He understands his position well. He knows what he should do, what he can do, what he should not

Minor Characters

Duke of Norfolk - The Duke of Norfolk is Sir Thomas More's friend. He seems almost innocent when compared to Cromwell. Since he took part in bringing More down, he surely

Alice - Alice More is Sir Thomas More's wife. She does not know how to read and does not want to learn. She is unable to understand why More won't just do as the king demands. It would be so much.....

Margaret - Margaret is Sir Thomas More's daughter. She has received a good education from her father and others. It was unusual in the Sixteenth Century for a woman to be educated. She comes.....

Cardinal Wolsey - Cardinal Wolsey was a powerful player in the reign of King Henry VIII until he fell out of favor with the King. During earlier years, he could almost be described as equal to the King in power. He was frequently at odds with the old nobility, such as the Duke of Norfolk, who resented the fact

Thomas Cromwell - Thomas Cromwell seemed to make Machiavelli his guide to living. He was in Wolsey's service until Wolsey's fall. After that he worked for the King. He seemed to have no sense of guilt or.....

CONFLICT

Protagonist: Sir Thomas More is the leading role.

Antagonists: Sir Thomas's main antagonist is Thomas Cromwell, who is determined to bringMore down. He has character traits that are the opposites of More's.

Richard Rich and The Duke of Norfolk are minor antagonists who help Cromwell achieve.....

Climax: The climax begins when Alice, Margaret and Will Roper visit More in jail and Alice begins.....

Outcome: The outcome is the death by beheading of Sir Thomas More.

PLOT (SYNOPSIS)

Sir Thomas More tries to show Richard Rich that becoming a teacher would be better than striving to become rich. He does not succeed. Sir Thomas gives Rich a cup that he received from a woman whose case he had reviewed. It was a bribe, but More did not realize that until after she gave it to him. So, after that he did not want to keep it.

Sir Thomas visits Cardinal Wolsey who is Lord Chancellor of England, as well as Archbishop of Canterbury. The Cardinal has a letter to show him. The letter is to be sent to Rome, to the Pope. It is requesting the Pope's approval for dissolution of the marriage of King Henry VIII and Queen Catherine. More says that the Pope may be reluctant to grant another exemption. The Pope had allowed Henry to marry Catherine even though she was his brother's widow. Wolsey wants More to be realistic. The King wants the marriage ended.

More meets Thomas Cromwell, the cardinal's secretary, a man who seems to be an admirer of Machiavelli, who flatters him. Then he sees Chapuys, the Spanish ambassador to England, who is a friend of Queen Catherine. Catherine wants to stay married to the King. Catherine is the aunt of the Spanish king which is another reason for Chapuys to take the Queen's side in the matter of dissolving the marriage. Chapuys gets the impression that More is also against the idea of a royal divorce. He tells More that an insult to Catherine would be an insult to the King of Spain. He asks More what his response to Wolsey was. More's response to.....

THEMES

"...to thine own self be true, and it shall follow, as the night the day, thou cans't not then be false to any man."
~Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act I, Scene III

Integrity is the major theme of A Man for All Seasons. Sir Thomas More stays true to his

MOOD

The mood is ominous, suspenseful and foreboding with occasional lighthearted moments. Sir Thomas More knows the seriousness of his situation. However, he continues to

Background Information

Robert Bolt, the son of a small shopkeeper, was born and raised in Manchester and attended university in Manchester, where he received a degree in history. Manchester is a city in northwest England. He was in the military for three years during World War II. After his military service and after attending Manchester University and a year of post-graduate studies at Exeter University, Bolt taught school, first at a.....

Literary/Historical Information

This play is laid out in a very interesting, exciting time, the reign of the second Tudor king, King Henry VIII. Henry's brother, Arthur, was expected to be king, but he died before taking the throne. Henry, besides taking his brother's place as king, was also expected to take his place as husband to Catherine of Aragon, the daughter of the Spanish king. Marriage was, in this case as in others, an important way to

SCENE SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

Preface

Summary

The setting of this play is the reign of Henry VIII. He is well known to our age. He was a spoiled brat who demanded what he wanted and received it. He is a great example of the baser side of human nature. By reading about him we can indulge that side of us today.

Opposing Henry was the long history of medieval religious piety, which unfortunately had been scarred by the avarice of some church leaders.

When he was growing up, Henry was not expected to become king. His older brother, Arthur, was to become king. However, Arthur died before he became king but after he married Catherine of Aragon. At that point, Henry's parents and Catherine's parents wanted to continue their close connection. They decided to marry Henry to Catherine. They had to have the pope approve of the marriage because it was usually not considered correct for a man to marry his brother's widow. The approval was obtained. Catherine became Henry's wife and his queen.

At first the couple was happy, but over time that changed. Some of the reasons are hard to fathom, but it seems likely that they included the following. Catherine had grown unattractive. Henry was in love with Anne Boleyn. The Spanish alliance was unpopular in England. The prime reason was that Henry and much of England felt that he needed a male heir. And, Catherine, who had reached menopause, seemed unable to give him one. Anne Boleyn appeared to be able to give Henry his required male son. But, if they were not married, the son could not succeed his father as king. Once again the pope was called upon to approve of what England wanted. But Spain argued against England's request. Spain wielded great power at that time because they had occupied Rome. After much wrangling the pope refused to grant the divorce. This angered Henry immensely.

Henry was sure that his marriage to Catherine should not have taken place. And, because of that, it should be undone. His punishment for marrying his brother's wife was not having sons. He had sinned because his father and the pope told him to marry Catherine and told him that it was all right to do so. It seemed clear to him that a man who would try to keep him in sin could not be called the Vicar of God, as the pope was called.

As Henry researched the subject farther, he found that there were others who questioned the special position of the Pope as head of the Church. He found that others thought of him as simply the Bishop of Rome. If he was a bishop, then he could not be changing rulings made by God. He did not have the authority. He also did not have the authority to appoint other bishops. And, it seemed reasonable that the person with the authority to appoint bishops was the King who held that position by the Grace of God. The Bishops of Rome had been usurping the power of the English Kings for centuries. Henry appointed Thomas Cranmer Archbishop of Canterbury. He felt certain that Cranmer would do as he wanted in the matter of the divorce and remarriage. He was right. And the Church of England was born.

So far we have covered the political and religious environment of the play. We now turn to include the economic environment. The economic setting was progressive while the religious environment was reactionary, setting the scene for a collision of the two. This collision was a collision between men and within men.

The author wrote Sir Thomas More as having an extremely strong sense of self. He could be moved and bent by family, friends and even enemies only up to the point where it intruded on his sense of self. To protect his sense of self, he was unbendable. What first attracted the author to Sir Thomas More was his capacity for living and enjoying life. Sir Thomas was indeed bendable in many areas. When he could not be bent was when he was required to state under oath something that he did not believe. Sir Thomas was very sociable, had many friends including many of the great thinkers of his age.

The sea and dry land are used as symbols for the superhuman context and for society with its shared shelter.

The style of playwriting that the author used was that of Bertolt Brecht. The author used Brecht's alienation technique to deepen involvement in the play. He had an actor address the audience in character instead of directly. The intention was to grab the audience and pull them into the play, not to alienate the audience.

The author found that some people took exception with the Common Man character, the one who speaks to the audience. They felt that it was insulting. Others felt that the Common Man was vulgar. The author claims that he wanted the Common Man to come across as attractive and having a philosophy with which it is hard to disagree.

The Common Man was in the theatre at times. The author heard him laughing in the gallery.

Notes

The preface was written after the play had been performed. It gives the reader or audience member who reads it only after reading or seeing the play a different slant on the play than he or she probably got from the play.

Much has been written about the reign of Henry VIII. The author tells us what we need to know to understand the play.

Following are a few tidbits of information to add to what the preface tells us.

Anne did not give Henry the son that he desired, but she did produce for him the next ruler of England. Anne's daughter, Elizabeth, was a very successful ruler even though she was a woman.

Henry felt that he was wrong to marry Catherine because she had been his brother's wife. However, he saw nothing wrong with marrying Anne Boleyn even though he had had an intimate relationship with her sister, Mary.

Berthold Brecht, the playwright from whom the author mentioned borrowing, started the use of the alienation effect, which was supposed to make events on stage seem unfamiliar to the audience. Brecht did not want what happened onstage to be confused with reality. The audience was to remain alienated from the staged events. The author gave Brecht's ideas a twist. As he said, he wanted to pull the audience into the play.

After reading the play, and being exposed to the character of Sir Thomas More, it is difficult to understand the author's use of the Common Man as someone with impregnable philosophy.

ACT ONE

Act One, Scene One

Summary

The Common Man, an unusual character in that he plays many roles within the play, puts on clothes appropriate

for Matthew, the household steward of Sir Thomas More. Sir Thomas More is the title character and we are in his home. Matthew prepares the table and takes a drink of the wine he has set out. After doing so, he says that the Sixteenth Century is the century of the common man. Then, he adds "Like all the other centuries."

Sir Thomas More enters and asks for the wine. He questions whether it is good. Matthew denies knowing.

Richard Rich enters as Matthew regards him contemptuously. Rich continues the argument he is having with More. Rich believes that every man can be bought, even if the reward offered is only that the man will not be made to suffer. Rich admits that Thomas Cromwell has interested him in the writings of Machiavelli. He adds that Cromwell will do something for him.

More, obviously thinking that aid from Cromwell, such as a job, might bring temptations to Rich, offers to get him a job with The Dean of St. Paul's as a teacher.

When Rich is not impressed, Sir Thomas counsels him against temptation. More shows Rich a silver cup that was given to More in the past. More tells him that, after accepting the gift, he had realized that it was a bribe. Because of that, More is eager to be rid of the cup. Then, More agrees to give the cup to Rich.

Rich plans to buy clothes with the proceeds from the sale of cup. More suggests that Rich might consider it to be contaminated. Rich denies that it is.

More thinks that being a teacher would keep Rich away from temptation. Rich is not interested in the position even after More tells him that he would have the admiration of his pupils and friends.

The Duke of Norfolk enters and Matthew announces his arrival. With him is Alice, Sir Thomas More's wife. Norfolk and Alice continue a conversation that they are having about a falcon stooping down out of a cloud to attack a heron. Margaret, Thomas More's daughter, also enters. Matthew announces her arrival in glowing terms, causing Alice to shoo him away. Norfolk, after calling Alice ignorant, tells Margaret, also called Meg, about what they are discussing. Rich interjects Aristotle's explanation of the difference between clouds and mist. Norfolk says that he will take Alice and show her what he means if she can ride. More forbids her to go. Sir Thomas takes the story to a different level, using it to say that his problem concerning King Henry VIII will resolve itself.

More returns to Rich's reference to Aristotle. He tells Norfolk that Rich is now interested in Machiavelli. When Norfolk mentions Machiavelli's book, he is surprised to learn that Margaret has read it.

Rich starts to discuss Lord Cromwell's thoughts on Machiavelli. Norfolk interrupts; voicing surprise that Rich knows Cromwell. When Norfolk refers to Cromwell as the Cardinal's secretary, More, Alice and Margaret are surprised.

More tells Rich that he no longer needs his help now that he knows the Cardinal's secretary. Rich tells him that he prefers his help to Cromwell's.

Just then Matthew presents a letter from Cardinal Wolsey to More. More says it is regarding the King's business. Alice comments that it is more likely the Queen's business and Norfolk agrees. More has to go immediately to meet the Cardinal. He tells Alice and Margaret to go to bed and asks Rich and Norfolk to excuse him. More, Alice and Margaret say a quick evening prayer together.

More tells Norfolk that Rich is seeking employment and also needs a ride. Norfolk agrees to give him a ride but first tells Alice that they will hawk together soon. More counsels against it.

Rich picks up the silver cup and Matthew questions his right to do so. Rich explains that it is a gift from More.

Matthew voices his displeasure at More's generosity. He says "...someday someone's going to ask him for something that he wants to keep, and he will be out of practice. There must be something that he wants to keep."

Notes

The Common Man in Robert Bolt's play, *A Man for All Seasons*, represents all of us. His attitudes are those of everyone. He acts like everyone would act, no better, no worse. He is not a copy of Sir Thomas More to be sure. But, neither is he the opposite. He is interested in survival, self-preservation and a minimum of pain.

At the beginning of the scene, Matthew, the first of the Common Man characters, tastes the wine that he puts on the table at Sir Thomas More's home. But, he hides that fact when Sir Thomas asks him if it is good, claiming ignorance. This avoids the chance of any unpleasantness.

Sir Thomas uses the conversation that Norfolk has with his wife and daughter regarding a falcon stooping on a heron as a chance to assure Alice and Margaret that danger subsides. He is well aware of dangers on the horizon but does not want to cause them to worry by addressing the dangers directly.

Norfolk was the Third Duke of Norfolk. He was also the Earl of Surrey. He married Lady Anne of York, daughter of Edward IV 1495. This made him a brother-in-law of King Henry VII, King Henry VIII's father. Norfolk's father, who held the same titles, played an important role in the battle of Bosworth Field in 1485, the battle that ended the War of the Roses and brought the Tudor dynasty to power. His father also had an important part in the battle of Flodden Field in 1513. While King Henry VIII was in France, Norfolk was in charge of defending the realm. The queen of France persuaded King James IV of Scotland to invade northern England, thereby helping the French cause. This led to the battle of Flodden Field, which the English won. While his father had a more important role, Norfolk also fought at Flodden Field. Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII's second wife, was Norfolk's niece. Norfolk encouraged her.....

OVERALL ANALYSES CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Sir Thomas More - This story centers on Sir Thomas More's conscience, his attempts to save his life by remaining silent, and his eventual surrender to death rather than act against his conscience. He was a complicated personality, not eager to become a martyr, but unwilling to surrender that

The Common Man - The Common Man is a compilation of useful characters, all people who would not be considered important. The Common Man played the parts of steward, boatman, publican,.....

Richard Rich - Richard Rich is opposite Sir Thomas More in many respects. He is concerned with.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The plot of *A Man For All Seasons* follows historical events in the Sixteenth Century. Robert Bolt, the author, describes this part of history to his twentieth century, now twenty-first century, audience. His aim is to illustrate some characteristics of one of the characters, Sir Thomas More. Bolt has strong opinions about how traits of Sir Thomas would improve people in this era. He wrote with the hope that we would learn by example.

The play is divided into two acts. The first act acquaints us with the situation in which Sir Thomas More finds himself. We learn of the political climate as well as how he prefers to handle himself in it. In the

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

Integrity is the major theme of *A Man for All Seasons*. Sir Thomas More is tested to the extreme as he remains true to his conscience. In the end, he is beheaded because he remains true to his conscience.

A man cannot serve two masters. At some point, he will likely need to decide between the two. After that time, he will only serve one master. Sir Thomas tried to serve two masters, his King and.....

POINT OF VIEW

The integrity of oneself should be one's major goal. Without it, life is really not worth.....

QUOTES - IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS AND ANALYSIS

1) "You, your pupils, your friends, God. Not a bad public, that." - More, pg. 9

Sir Thomas was listing for Richard Rich those who would admire him if he chose to be a good teacher. More was trying to show Rich that there are other valuable things to strive to obtain besides riches and high position.

2) "My master Thomas More would give anything to anyone. Some say that's good and some say that's bad, but I say he can't help it-and that's bad...because some day someone's going to ask him for something that he wants to keep; and he'll be out of practice." Steward, pg. 17

This foreshadows Sir Thomas losing his head. The steward does not understand that More would rather lose his head than his sense of self, his conscience.....

SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS

Water and Dry Land - In this play, water symbolizes instability and natural forces and dry land symbolizes stability and society.

The Gilded Cup - The gilded cup is a symbol of (hate, evil)

IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

Title: A Man for All Seasons

Author: Robert Bolt

Date Published: 1960

Meaning of the Title: Sir Thomas More was a multi-faceted man. Also, he would be a good addition to any age.

Setting: England during the reign of King Henry VIII

Genre: Historical drama

Protagonist: Sir Thomas More.....

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Does Alice want to learn to read?
2. Did Sir Thomas ever meet the Holy Maid of Kent?
3. What was the occupation of Thomas Cromwell's father?.....

ESSAY TOPICS / BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. Is *A Man for All Seasons* a good description of Sir Thomas More? Give the reasoning behind your answer.
2. Which character in the play is most capable of hurting society? Why?.....

END OF SAMPLE MONKEYNOTES EXCERPTS

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