



Denver Center
Theatre Company

Inside

Out

A STUDY GUIDE

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Sylvia

What's Happening, Where It's Happening and Who It's Happening To

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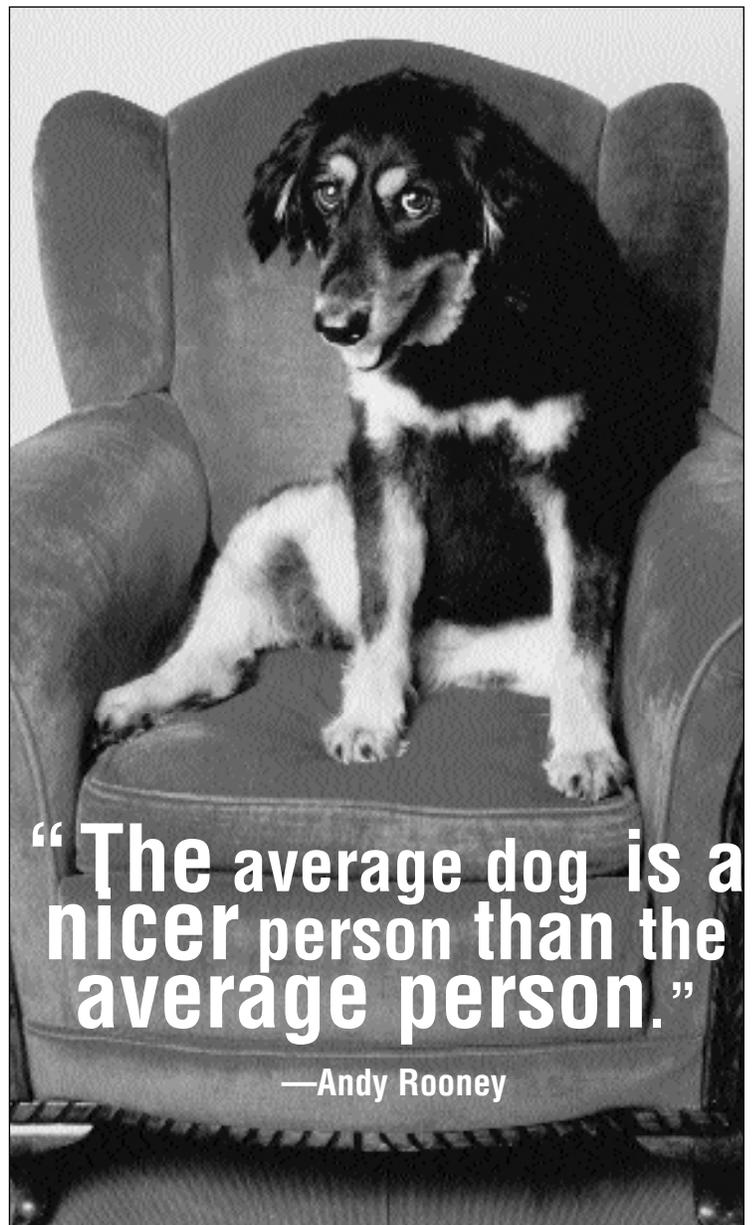
**A man and his DOG.
It's a BIG thing.**

—*Sylvia*

Kate and Greg have just moved back to the city (New York, of course) from the suburbs, their children out of the house and safely on their own. Kate is blossoming in a new career teaching Shakespeare to Harlem junior high school students, but Greg is unhappy at his brokerage house where he's been transferred to an area he finds "abstract." Greg has lost a connection to anything real in his life, until he finds Sylvia in the park and it's love at first sight.

Greg takes Sylvia home because she is—well—a dog. But this dog is endowed with human speech and she spouts human wit, wisdom and waywardness as she communicates with her master and mistress. Despite his wife's many desperate protests, Greg keeps Sylvia and lavishes her with love, which grows increasingly demented and dopey. His wife feels neglected; his job is ignored and then lost; their friends are sent screaming from the house and his psychotherapist is driven to see a shrink. Their marriage is clearly on the rocks, as Greg and Sylvia conduct a man-and-dog love affair.

Will Sylvia stay or go? Will Kate stay or go? Is the play a fantasy, a romantic comedy, or an insight into the essence of canine-human relationships? As Greg says: "Sylvia, you're full of surprises!" ❁



**“The average dog is a
nicer person than the
average person.”**

—Andy Rooney

About the Playwright

Albert Ramsdell Gurney was born in Buffalo

on November 1, 1930, to a well-to-do family. His father, A. R. Gurney, Sr., was president of a real estate and insurance business and his mother was from a prominent family. Gurney graduated from Williams College and was commissioned as an officer in the US Navy where he had a love affair with a Japanese woman. Essences of this romance appear in two of his plays, *The Middle Ages* and *Love Letters*, but he was not rebellious enough to bring her home. He returned home alone and enrolled in the Yale School of Drama's playwriting program. After graduating from Yale, Gurney taught English for two years at a private school in Belmont, Massachusetts; in 1980, he was offered a position at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology teaching literature. He stayed at MIT until 1987 when he took leave to write his plays full-time. Along the way he married Molly Goodyear, another white, anglo-saxon, protestant Buffalo girl; they have four grown children. (A side note on WASP inbreeding: two years after Gurney's father died in 1977, his mother married Molly's father.)

Gurney is known for his witty, mildly satirical portraits of life among the upper-middle class inhabitants of America's Northeast seaboard. In plays such as *Scenes from American Life*, *The Middle Ages*, *The Golden Age*, *The Dining Room* and *The Cocktail Hour*, Gurney presents the manners and foibles of WASP society while portraying a culture gradually losing its once formidable power and privilege. As Gurney says: "[I write about] the protected, genteel, in many ways warm, civilized and fundamentally innocent world in which I was nurtured which didn't seem in any way to prepare me for the late 20th century. I tend to write about people who are operating under old assumptions, but are confronting an entirely different system of values."¹

In 1986 Gurney and his family left Boston and moved to

New York City. He says: "I became more interested in probing and pushing the walls of dramatic form, and obviously the characters in my plays began to do the same."² He wrote *The Snow Ball*, a novel (later turned into a play) which said good-bye to the WASP world of Buffalo. The characters of his next play, *The Perfect Party*, poke fun at ethnic stereotyping, while *Another Antigone* explores the serious damage such stereotyping can do. In *Sweet Sue*, two actors play each role so that additional color, texture and complexity are added to the play. *Later Life* explores the lost opportunities of two 50+ people who meet again after a 30-year lapse; he is a divorced Boston-bred banker while she is married to a Las Vegas loser. And in *Sylvia* an actor takes on the role of a dog.

Gurney has received, among others, the Vernon Rice Award (1971), a Rockefeller playwright-in-residence award (1977), a National Endowment for the Arts award (1981) and a Lucille Lortel Outstanding Production Award (1989).

With the exception of *Sweet Sue*, most of Gurney's plays have been produced off-Broadway and/or in regional theatres. Though he has never received unanimous critical acclaim, he attracts a large and faithful audience, both in and out of New York.

Gurney seems impervious to the critics' ambivalence. His confidence comes from having won his success in gradual doses through his Protestant work ethic. "Slow and steady wins the race is perhaps the most WASP-y thing of all. Most WASPs identify with tortoises, not hares," says André Bishop, artistic director of Playwrights Horizons.³ ❀

"I don't write about rebels or dissenters or gangsters; I write about my own people, the Americans who call themselves anglos now because WASP has become such a pejorative term."

—A. R. Gurney

Men in Mid-Life Crisis

*"Half of my life is gone and I have let
The years slip from me and have not fulfilled
The aspirations of my youth... ."*

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Mezzo Cammin*.

“Defining the period of middle-age

is much like defining a period in history; no one quite agrees when it begins or ends.”⁴ There is some consensus among psychologists and sociologists that a gradual accumulation of life problems, role transitions, physiological changes and events ultimately lead a man to experience the realization that he has become middle-aged, and this period usually occurs between the ages of 40 and 45. Such is the case with Greg in *Sylvia*.

At this time in his work, a man sees the number of possible positions above him getting fewer while the competition is getting more intense. If he has depended on physical strength, he knows it is beginning to decline. The future now becomes more limited in time and possibilities. At home, a man may find that his wife is emerging from the responsibilities of child-rearing into a changing, developing person who wants another source of self-definition besides husband, home and children. These changes in his wife’s behavior may unsettle the husband, creating pressure to redefine his own self-concept. In the father role, the man may see his adolescent children try on identities that are in conflict with his dreams for them or take on values and behaviors that are foreign to him. At the least, they begin to move in wider and wider circles, outside any possibility of fatherly control. As a son, the middle-aged man finds his own parents becoming more dependent on him and he must come to grips with the fact that they will become more insistent, unpredictable and burdensome. Finally, a middle-aged man is liable to experience physical problems that undermine his image of himself and his way of relating to the world. Heart attacks, ulcers, back problems and other illnesses become real possibilities for him and his friends, not to mention the minor maladies of heartburn, sore muscles and hair loss.

There are some men who are able to assess their past and present and process the inner feelings of aging through a positive sense of satisfaction. Other middle-aged men may respond to these stresses with different symptoms or “masks.” One symptom is a strong sense of alien-

ation and less involvement socially and with family. In Greg’s case, his alienation is solved by socializing with his dog. Still other men deal with the stresses of middle age through denial and avoidance and present a façade of cheery self-confidence. Conversely, some men deal with denial by projecting their anger and self-hatred toward others and adopt an authoritarian attitude in the family. Finally, some men become so discontented that they turn to alcohol, religiosity, extra-marital affairs, psychosomatic ailments, depression and anxiety.

Well, what’s a fella to do? In *The Male Mid-Life Crisis* author Nancy Mayer presents some practical guidelines to ease the passage into middle-age.

- ❁ “Take the mid-life crisis seriously. Take the time to mourn your lost youth and lost opportunities; this mourning is a healing process that will free you to make new choices.
- ❁ Become responsible for who you are and what you do... evaluate your strengths and weaknesses.
- ❁ Re-examine your values and goals and think about what is really important to you.
- ❁ Learn to substitute new sources of gratification for old.
- ❁ Be more flexible and adjust to changing circumstances.
- ❁ Get in touch with your feelings and learn how to express them. Talking about them increases your self-awareness and contributes to your well-being.
- ❁ Respect your body and take care of yourself by watching your diet, exercising and avoiding excessive alcohol or pills.
- ❁ Learn how to slow down and not be in such a hurry.
- ❁ Be realistic. Evaluate what you can and cannot change about yourself and what opportunities are available for change.
- ❁ Take an inventory of your life. Try to define the actual problems and define what it is you want.
- ❁ Test your ideas on others. Talking honestly with a number of people will enable you to externalize and put limits on your problem.
- ❁ Avoid making too many changes too suddenly. It takes preparation to change old habits and restructure your life.
- ❁ Try small changes first. If you have been feeling trapped or stressed, making one minor change can be a major breakthrough.
- ❁ In essence the mid-life metamorphosis...means becoming more authentic, independent and authoritative....
- ❁ Becoming a man in the fullest sense means becoming whole.”⁵ ❁

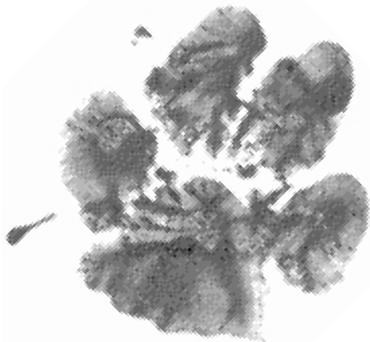
“Life is far too important
a thing ever to talk
seriously about.”
—Oscar Wilde

Man and his mutt.

"The greatest pleasure of a dog is that you may make a fool of yourself with him and, not only will he not scold you, but he will make a fool of himself, too."

—Samuel Butler

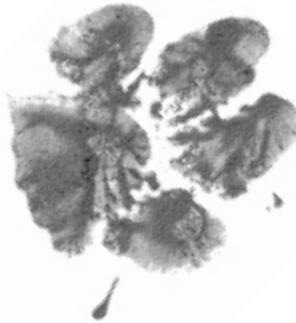
Greg finds Sylvia in Central Park in New York City,



a dumping ground for dogs that people no longer want. Millions of dogs live with their masters/mistresses in caves (apartments) in big cities and perhaps the cramped quarters account for the attention people lavish on their pets.

America seems to provide particularly fertile ground for the growth of extreme animal-human relationships. At a price, the boutiques of large cities can supply over indulgent owners with custom-made water beds, gold choke chains and personalized leather-covered dining suites. For outdoor dogs, there are leather backpacks; for indoor dogs taffeta bow ties or mink

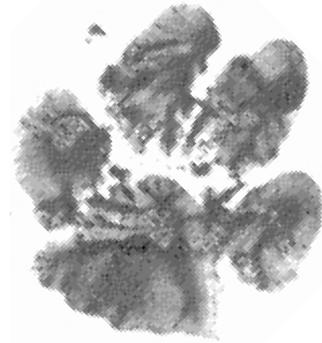
stoles. Then there are a host of mundane items: doggy raincoats, sweaters, frilly frocks, underwear, and canine cosmetics such as nail polish, available in a wide choice of colors. Some boutiques even make special arrangements for a dog's birthday party...embossed invitations and spe-



cial catering, which "includes enormous meat-loaf birthday cakes in the shape of fire hydrants."⁶

Greg's attachment to Sylvia does not seem so unnatural if you consider the behavior of some of the rich and

famous. For example, Henry III of France carried his small dog everywhere in a basket hung around his neck. Sir Walter Scott's greyhound, Maida, sat at the dinner table with him. The Empress Josephine insisted on allowing her small dog to sleep in her bed with Napoleon...despite the emperor's objections. Elizabeth Barrett



Browning wrote two poems to her dog, Flush, and paid ransom for him when he was kidnapped. Giuseppe Verdi's spaniel, Lulu, accompanied the composer everywhere concealed under his coat. He played all of his operas for her and, after she died, Verdi complained he could no longer write opera without her. The novelist Ellen Glasgow sent postcards to her dogs when she was away and had custom clothing made for them in London. Winston Churchill's poodle, Rufus, sat on his master's lap one evening while *Oliver Twist* was being

shown. Just as Bill Sikes was about to drown his dog, Churchill covered Rufus' eyes and said, "Don't look now, dear. I'll tell you about it afterwards."⁷ Finally, US

I loathe people who keep dogs. They are cowards who haven't got the guts to bite people themselves.

—August Strindberg

Senator Robert Byrd read a two-page greeting to his Maltese terrier into the *Congressional Record* ... at a cost to the taxpayers of \$1,000. Even Greg couldn't top that! ❀

First DOGS

"Histories are more full of examples of the fidelity of dogs than of friends."

—Alexander Pope

Many United States presidents were dog-owners and lovers. George Washington kept a large number of hounds, among them were Chaunter, Mopsy, Truelove and Vulcan. Abraham Lincoln had a mutt named Fido, while Theodore Roosevelt had a bull terrier called Pete and Woodrow Wilson an airedale named Davie. Warren G. Harding's Laddie Boy sat in on cabinet meetings and gave newspaper interviews.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's Scottie, Fala, slept in the President's bedroom, but he became the object of a vicious smear during the 1944 presidential campaign. The Republicans accused Roosevelt of sending a US Navy destroyer to retrieve Fala who had allegedly been left behind on a remote island near Alaska. Roosevelt responded to their charges with this response:

"Republican leaders have not been content with attacks on me or my wife or my sons. No, not content with that, they now include my little dog, Fala. Well, of course, I don't resent attacks and my family doesn't resent attacks, but Fala does resent them. You know, Fala is a Scottie. As soon as he learned that the Republicans had concocted a story that I had left him behind on the Aleutians and had sent a destroyer back to find him...at a cost to the taxpayers of two or three or eight or 20 million dollars...his Scot soul was furious. He has not been the same dog since!"⁸

Lyndon Johnson had several "first

dogs," including the beagles Him (famous for being lifted by his ears) and Her. A lesser-known Johnson dog was Blanco, a collie who was put on tranquilizers after growling inhospitably at the visiting guest, Lassie.

Richard Nixon's dogs included a Yorkshire terrier (Pasha), a miniature poodle (Vicky) and an Irish setter (King Timahoe). But the Nixons' most famous dog, Checkers, never made it to the White House, though he helped Dick get there. In the 1952 presidential campaign, Nixon was accused of accepting money from California supporters and pressure was put on Dwight Eisenhower to drop him as a running mate. Nixon went on national TV to defend himself. In the three minute speech, he listed all his assets and liabilities and said he never kept any gifts from political supporters...except one. "It [is] a little cocker spaniel dog that [was sent] all the way from Texas. Black and white spotted. And our little girl Tricia, the six-

If dogs could talk, perhaps we would find it as hard to get along with them as we do wit people."

—Karel Capek

year-old, named it Checkers. And you know, the kids love that dog, and I just want to say this right now, that regardless of what they say about it, we're gonna keep it!"⁸ The speech was a huge success: Eisenhower and Nixon were president and vice-president for two terms.

The Reagans had two dogs, the hapless Lucky (who was eventually shipped off to their Santa Barbara ranch) and the massive Rex, who was often seen dragging Mrs. Reagan across the White House lawn.

But the all-time champ of First Dogs, up to this time, is Millie, Barbara Bush's spaniel. A real publicity hound, Millie wrote a book called *Millie's Book* that brought her literary attention. She was also called the ugliest dog around by *The Washingtonian*. When Sam Donaldson interviewed her on ABC's "Primetime Live" and asked her about this allegation, Millie's response was unprintable and wet. ❀

V.I.D.s (Very Important Dogs)

Rover

The fame of George Washington's favorite dog became so great that his name became synonymous with "dog." Rover was "first to sleep, first to bark and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

Lump

Convinced that his mutt, Lump, being a city dog, had never seen a rabbit, Picasso painted one on a cardboard cutout. Lump immediately attacked and ate the pseudo-bunny, becoming the first dog ever to eat an original Picasso.

Captain Kirk

William Shatner named his Doberman after his most famous role, that of Captain Kirk. When the dog became ill, Shatner took him to see Beatrice Lydecker, who, after a Vulcan mind-meld with the pooch, discovered that his back had been hurt when his crate was dropped in shipment. After some acupuncture, he was totally cured.

Stricte

The hounds of Actaeon are an integral part of Greek mythology. One of the

dogs is Stricte, whose name translates from Greek to English as "Spot!"

Pushinka

When Pushinka arrived at the White House, a gift to Caroline Kennedy from Nikita Khrushchev, the secret service immediately took him to Walter Reed army hospital. There he was checked for microphones, hidden explosives and possible germ warfare.

Tom Anderson

Catherine the Great, Empress of all Russia, was so devoted to her dog, Tom Anderson, that when he died she had an Egyptian pyramid erected to house his remains.

Peter

Agatha Christie was known to dedicate her books to the "O.F.D.," her code for "The Order of Faithful Dogs," which included her faithful terrier Peter.

Miss Brinda

Tennessee Williams' favorite pet was his dog Miss Brinda, who had every possible defect including walleyes and practically no legs. All of her medical problems notwithstanding, she actually used to pose with the fashion

models in Rome at the foot of the Spanish Steps, but never for longer than one hour at a time.

Misty

When author Dorothy Parker was being interviewed by the FBI in 1951 for being a subversive, her dog, Misty kept jumping up on the agents. Finally, Dorothy said,

"Listen, I can't even get my dog to stay down. Do I look to you like someone who could overthrow the government?"

Inside Out is intended for students and teachers but may be enjoyed by audiences of all ages.



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Theatre Company

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