

*Collected Stories*  
*By Donald Margulies*  
*Produced at the Public Theater*  
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**A STUDY GUIDE**  
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**THE AUTHOR.** Donald Margulies was born in 1954, and grew up in the Coney Island section of Brooklyn. His father was a wallpaper salesman with a love for musical comedy. As a family treat, he would take his children to Broadway shows across the river in Manhattan, an expensive outing for a man with a fairly modest income. But his love of theater trumped his economic limitations—an affection he communicated to his son.

Margulies's early creative interests were in drawing and draftsmanship, and he began his college education at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute, a school whose curriculum emphasizes the visual arts. But, as he declared in an interview in *Bomb* magazine, "I started to itch to write and read; and [Pratt] wasn't the place to be if I had those inclinations." As a result, he transferred to the State University of New York at Purchase, a campus that offers courses in all the arts, thus allowing Margulies to satisfy his literary "itch." There he majored in playwriting.

In 1984 *Found a Peanut* was staged at the Public Theater, his first play to be produced Off-Broadway. Since then he has written more than two dozen plays, including *Sight Unseen*, which won an Obie (short for "Off-Broadway") Award for best new American play of 1992, and *Dinner with Friends*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in drama in 2000.

*Collected Stories* was first produced in New York at the Manhattan Theater club in 1997, having received an earlier production in California in 1996.

Like the character Ruth in *Collected Stories*, Margulies is also a teacher—in his case a teacher of playwriting, in the English Department of Yale University.

About *Collected Stories* he says that, “its themes cross cultures. Mentors and protégés exist everywhere. Most people . . . have known what it’s like to be a student or a teacher, a child or a parent. . . . Most people have felt betrayed or committed betrayal, deliberately or unknowingly.”

Although both characters in this two-character play are writers, Margulies insists that this is not a play only about writers. “[I]t is primarily a play about how human beings try to engage one another, pass along traditions, fulfill the powerful need for family. I have always been interested in the ways that we create families out of our friends or acquaintances. . . .”

**THE SETTING.** Five of the play’s six scenes take place in the Greenwich Village apartment of Ruth Steiner. One scene moves farther uptown, to the auditorium at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y.

Since early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Greenwich Village has been known as the center of New York’s bohemia, the home of the American avant-garde—those writers, visual artists, performers, and political activists who see themselves and their work as lying defiantly outside the mainstream of bourgeois taste and morality. Among those associated with this neighborhood have been the playwright, Eugene O’Neill, the left-wing propagandist, John Reed, the “beatnik” writers, Alan Ginsburg and Jack Kerouac, and musicians such as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Jimi Hendrix. It was Greenwich Village that was the scene of the first flowering of the off-off-Broadway movement in theater, which flourished in tiny performance spaces and produced new work by playwrights such as Sam Shepard. It was also in Greenwich Village in 1970 that three members of the radical political group, The Weather Underground, accidentally blew themselves up in a townhouse while preparing an anti-personnel terror bomb for use in killing American servicemen at a New Jersey army base.

Not only does Greenwich Village challenge cultural conventions, it subverts geographic preconceptions as well. The neighborhood is situated outside the easily-navigable grid of numbered streets and avenues found in midtown Manhattan. In the Village streets are generally *named* rather than numbered, and their unpredictable meanderings reflect their ancient origins in a Dutch colonial village. As a result, it can be confusing to find one’s way around, as if the geography of the place were itself an expression of the disorienting spirit of bohemia.

In fact, Lisa Morrison’s first foray into Ruth’s neighborhood leaves her feeling befuddled:

It’s nice to *be* here. I mean, I was beginning to think I was never gonna find this place. . . . [Y]ou know how you’re walking along and all of a sudden West 12<sup>th</sup> and like West *Something* Streets intersect? . . . And it’s like, “Wait a minute?, what is going *on* here?” Like *Alice Through the Looking Glass* or something.

(The intersection of numbered streets seems dumbfounding to Lisa because farther uptown these streets run strictly parallel to one another; for them to cross is a fundamental violation of New York geography.)

Like Alice, Lisa is entering a strange and fabulous environment; in her case, a world charged with the myth and wonder of a glamorous cultural past. As an aspiring young writer, Lisa longs to be admitted to this world, to become, like Ruth, an inhabitant of the wonderland of art.

The author supplies only one or two physical details about Ruth's apartment—but these have important thematic implications.

For example, as the action begins, Ruth is tossing her keys out her window to Lisa, three stories below, because the buzzer that opens the front door to the building doesn't work. Immediately, the setting provides a metaphor for the action of the play, as the older woman admits the younger to her private world, giving her the key to the locked room where she makes her art. However, the window through which Ruth tosses the key gets stuck, and won't shut against the chill of the autumn afternoon, suggesting that Lisa, once admitted, won't be easily excluded.

Again at the end of the play, the door to the apartment becomes an important element in the action. Lisa arrives after a public reading from her novel, which is obviously based on material from Ruth's personal life—a fact Ruth bitterly resents. Lisa discovers that she can't enter because the door is chained shut—something she had never encountered in previous visits. “Your door is usually open; since when do you use the chain?” Lisa asks. When Ruth answers, “Only when I'm expecting burglars,” we see how the change of a single physical detail in the setting reveals a vast change in their relationship.

The play's other location is the auditorium of The 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y—short for the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association. This Jewish version of the YM/YWCA is famous in New York for its emphasis on cultural and artistic programming, especially for its annual literary series featuring readings by prominent authors. To be invited to read at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y is to receive the stamp of cultural validation from New York's educated upper-middle class. Lisa's reading in this venue marks a high point for her as a rising young writer—a public triumph that stands in sharp contrast to the modest beginnings of her career in Ruth's small and secluded Greenwich Village apartment.

**THE PLOT.** The action of *Collected Stories* unfolds in six scenes, each assigned an explicit date by the playwright. The first scene takes place in September, 1990; the last in October, 1996, a little more than six years later. This is a substantial stretch of time, with each scene dramatizing a new stage of development in the complicated and evolving

relations between Ruth Steiner, who is 55 when the action begins, and Lisa Morrison, who is 26 at the outset.

Scene 1 begins with Lisa's first visit to Ruth's Greenwich Village apartment. Lisa, a student in Ruth's graduate course in writing, has come to hear her teacher's critique of her work. Ruth is a successful and widely admired author whose short fiction has been published in several volumes of collected stories. Lisa is a passionate admirer of Ruth's work, awestruck by being in her mentor's home, the sacred space in which she has created her art:

Being here?, studying with you. . .? It's like a religious experience for me. (*Ruth laughs.*) No, really, it *is*. I mean, your voice has been inside my head for so *long*, living in this secret place?, having this secret dialogue with me for like years? I mean ever since high school. . . . I was hooked, you had me. I knew what I wanted to do, I knew what I wanted to be.

At the play's beginning, then, there is in Lisa's mind a gulf between student and teacher like that between worshipper and god. And like a god, Ruth has inhabited Lisa's inner life, her soul, drawing her toward the ultimate goal, not salvation but a career as a writer..

Immediately and instinctively Ruth sets about correcting Lisa's inflated view of her. "Oh, my, that *is* devotion," she observes wryly after hearing Lisa's gushing praise. And then, as Lisa continues to eat up the clock with her enthusiasm, Ruth notes dryly that they'd better get on with their discussion of the story, "Otherwise I could so easily see myself pissing away my entire afternoon. . ." Ruth also bluntly informs Lisa that she has no magic power to turn her into a good writer. "I'm not a doctor, you know, I don't dispense prescriptions. . . . It doesn't work that way. . . . Writing can't be taught."

Nonetheless, teacher and student plunge ahead, reading and dissecting Lisa's work, "Eating Between Meals," an autobiographical story about a girl with an eating disorder in a supermarket full of food. As the critique proceeds, it becomes clear to Ruth that Lisa has what cannot be taught: talent. She praises various details about the story, censures others, and offers advice for improvement. And then, she leaps from the professional to the personal, signaling an increase of interest in this new student. "Why do you talk like that?," she demands to know, meaning why does Lisa end even her declarative sentences with what sounds like a question mark?

You're not alone. Most of my students speak this way. I'm not absolutely certain but I think more young *women* speak this way than young men. And there's something almost *poignant* about it, all these capable young women somehow begging to be heard, begging to be understood.

Commonly known as “up-talking,” this mannerism is widespread among American English speakers, and it has obviously long irritated Ruth. But we can assume that she has never bothered to voice her objections to any other student until this moment, when she corrects Lisa. Why does she do this? Because, it seems, she is beginning to see Lisa as exceptional, and she would like her to show that quality even in her habits of speech. “Who’s going to take you seriously if you talk like that?” she asks, obviously indicating that Lisa is somebody who promises to become a person of considerable seriousness.

At this point, Lisa works up the courage to ask Ruth a point-blank question—the question every protégé longs to ask every mentor—“So do you think I’m any good?” To which Ruth responds, after the requisite hesitations and caveats, that she thinks that “the stuff . . . is there” in Lisa’s work.

Lisa has also found the courage to ask another question: “I heard you need a new assistant. . . . Can I apply?”

Scene 2 answers her inquiry. It is now eight months later— May, 1991. As the action begins, we find Lisa “puttering” in Ruth’s apartment, “*sorting through piles of books and papers, making them more orderly.*” Clearly she has landed the position as Ruth’s assistant. And when the door opens and Ruth enters, returning from a trip to Washington, we see that there has been a reversal of the situation we encountered at the beginning of Scene 1, when it was Lisa walking through the door.

Ruth is clearly somewhat taken aback at finding Lisa in her home, and the atmosphere between them grows tense and eventually openly hostile as Ruth becomes angry at the extent to which Lisa has reordered her papers and intervened in her life.

RUTH. I didn’t *want* neater piles, I liked my piles the way I had them.

LISA. (*Fighting back tears.*) I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to . . .

RUTH. (*Continuous.*) There *was* a method to my madness, young lady, which served me well most of my life, thank you very much.

Stung by this rebuke, Lisa confesses a sense of abject failure in her attempts to win Ruth’s good opinion. “I always seem to get your *disapproval* when it’s the opposite I want so badly. All these months . . . it’s been both wonderful and excruciating working for you.” Removing Ruth’s apartment key from her key chain, she seems about to exit from the writer’s life when Ruth suddenly changes her tone toward her protégé, seemingly touched by her honest neediness. Learning that Lisa has made a salad to welcome her home, Ruth asks the young woman to join her in a light dinner. Lisa, so recently stung by Ruth’s scolding, hesitates, but when Ruth picks up the apartment key and gives it back to her student, it is clear that the breach has been healed. As the stage directions tell us, “*Lights fade as they begin to enjoy their first meal together.*”

The third scene leaps ahead fifteen months, to August 1992, and finds the two women enjoying Sunday brunch, another in what has now become a long succession of meals together. While they sip their tea and nibble their bagels, they discuss the news of the moment as dispensed by the Sunday *New York Times*. Lisa is particularly appalled by the ongoing story of Woody Allen's romantic involvement with the adopted child of his former lover, Mia Farrow. She thinks the comedian's behavior smacks of incest, since he was virtually the girl's father, and she is especially crushed by the reprehensible behavior of a man whose films had been a moral beacon for her. This leads to a dispute between Lisa and Ruth about the relation between art and morality.

"You can't censor your creative impulses because of the danger of hurting someone's feelings. . . . If you have a story to tell, tell it. Zero in on it and don't flinch. . . . You know the photographer Robert Capa? . . . He said about his work, "If it isn't good enough, I didn't get close enough." Objectivity, ruthlessness, indifference to the consequences: these, Ruth asserts, are the values of the truthful artist.

When Ruth seeks to clinch her point by reminding Lisa that she showed her father a painful story about him that he need never have seen, Lisa corrects her mentor. In fact, Lisa informs Ruth, her father might well have seen the story, since it's about to be published.

This comes as a complete surprise to Ruth, who has been supervising Lisa's attempts to break into print. She has recommended journals and magazines that might be appropriate venues for her work; she has written letters on her behalf; she has provided emotional encouragement and practical assistance. But now—in a journal she had vetoed, and without benefit of her personal recommendation—Lisa is about to have a story published for the first time, a fact her student has known about for some time without informing Ruth. The apprentice, it seems, is detaching herself from the master.

Ruth at first offers somewhat formulaic congratulations, but we see that she is actually resentful of Lisa's independent success: "Why wasn't I the first person you called?" she demands to know, adding that she finds it "very curious . . ." The person most invested in your progress and you wait till *now* to tell me. . . . What's the matter?, you didn't think I could take it? . . . You were cushioning the blow?" The stage directions then tell us that Ruth is "*enraged*"

After "*an extended silent sequence*" Lisa breaks the ice that has suddenly formed between them with a request: "Ruth. . . . I want to hear about you and Delmore Schwartz." Earlier in the play, Lisa had found a volume of Schwartz's stories on Ruth's bookshelf with a letter from the author to Ruth tucked into the pages, and just a few moments before the flare-up between them, while discussing Woody Allen's amorous adventures, Ruth had noted, tantalizingly, that, "The allure of a famous older man is an incredibly powerful thing." Putting two and two together—the letter from Schwartz and

the mysterious remark—Lisa has concluded that Delmore Schwartz must have been Ruth’s famous older lover during her fledgling days in New York.

Born in 1913, Delmore Schwartz was an American poet, short-story writer, literary journalist, and academic highly esteemed in the world of letters during the height of his career from the mid 1930s to the late 1950s. Among his most famous works is a short story called “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities,” in which the narrator dreams that he is watching a silent film depicting his parents’ courtship. At one point the dreaming viewer shouts at the screen, begging the couple to end their relationship while there is still time to prevent the birth of their two children “whose characters are monstrous.” Schwartz himself came from a deeply unhappy family background, his father deserting his mother when the author was ten, and critics have always viewed this story as essentially autobiographical.

By the time Ruth would have met Schwartz—in the late 1950s—he was on an irreversible downward spiral propelled by alcohol and drugs, a ruined genius famous for his tragic decline. Ruth tells of meeting Schwartz in a tavern in Greenwich Village: “There was the great poet . . . mad prophet, squandered genius, son of ‘Europe, America and Israel.’” He was a figure both oracular and doomed, an irresistible temptation for a young woman in love with literature, and eager to serve one of its high priests. Just as Lisa has a key to Ruth’s apartment, so Ruth could let herself into Schwartz’s rented rooms, which she did, “to wash the dishes . . . clean up his mess and mend his clothes.” The relationship lasted about a year, with Schwartz growing ever more unstable, “descending rapidly,” as Ruth puts it, adding that, “he was quite mad. . . . cruel, inconstant.”

The affair ended when Ruth walked in on Schwartz and another “bright-eyed girl,” who had suddenly replaced her. She “turned around and left and never came back.” Schwartz died a few years later, in 1966.

Lisa is deeply impressed by this romantic tale of devotion, madness, and heartbreak, and wonders why Ruth has never written about it. “Some things you don’t touch,” Ruth responds, and immediately apologizes for her show of temper earlier in the scene. “You know I’m happy for you, don’t you? . . . I’m very very proud.” And with these words of nearly-maternal affection and joy, the play’s first act ends.

The first scene of Act Two carries us forward sixteen months to December, 1994. Again, we are in Ruth’s apartment, this time on a weekday, with the author reading a book review in the daily *New York Times*. As it turns out, this is a notice of Lisa’s first collection of stories—her first book—and it is glowing: “In the dozen compact, well-observed stories . . . she proves herself a keen and clever chronicler of the new lost generation.” A little over three years since she first set foot in Ruth’s apartment, Lisa has crossed another threshold, stepping with this review into literary celebrity and the wider

life it promises. As Ruth tells her, “You’re on the map. Yesterday you were undiscovered country, today you’re on the map. . . . Good for you, sweetie.”

Ruth has also been busy, and has given Lisa her most recent work to read, a story about a mother and daughter whose affectionate relationship is punctuated by constant squabbling—much like that between Ruth and Lisa. But a week has passed, and Lisa has said nothing. When Ruth asks her point blank for her response to the story, Lisa admits that she had “problems with it” because Ruth gives the mother a terminal illness, so that the relationship between the two characters is simply ended rather than resolved. But as they discuss this analysis, we begin to see that Ruth’s story comes out of a “very complicated” set of feelings she has for Lisa—“not professional jealousy, it’s . . . You know what it is? I’m jealous that you have all of life ahead of you. . . . *That’s* what it’s about. Don’t you see? Time.” And with this revelation, Lisa realizes that Ruth’s story is an indirect way of telling her that her mentor, like the mother in the fictional narrative, is seriously ill. Their paths are crossing, with Lisa now looking forward to a future full of literary promise, and Ruth facing a fast-approaching death while looking backward on a career that is over.

The next scene takes place nearly two years later, in October, 1996 in the auditorium of New York’s 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y. For the first time, we are somewhere other than Ruth’s apartment, and Ruth herself is absent. Lisa is alone on the stage of the auditorium, reading from her latest work, a novel to be published in a month. She prefaces the reading with a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay which will appear as the epigraph of her novel. Millay uses the onset of winter to remind us of the transitory nature of human experience—the permanent immanence of death.

That chill is in the air  
Which the wise know well  
.....  
The heart begins here  
To feed on what has been.

Night falls fast.  
Today is in the past.

She then begins to read from the novel itself, and we soon recognize elements from Ruth’s story about her affair with Delmore Schwartz—everything from the general situation involving a young girl and an older literary celebrity to details about Ruth’s domestic life in the late 50s. The prefatory poem, then, is meant to set an elegiac tone for the story of defeated love and betrayal that will follow. But the poem also points to the consequences of Lisa’s use of her mentor’s secret story. Their relationship will no longer be the same; a winter chill will destroy it.

The final scene is only a few hours later on that same evening. Once again we are back in Ruth's apartment, and once again—as in Scene 1—Lisa is trying to get in. This time, however, there is a chain on the door, put in place, Ruth says, “when I'm expecting burglars.” This remark makes it clear that Ruth knows about Lisa's novel, and looks at it as an act of robbery—the theft of Ruth's autobiographical private property by someone who has been a guest in her house.

During the remainder of the scene, Lisa disputes this interpretation of her work, reminding Ruth of their earlier discussion of the morality of the artist: “You taught me to be ruthless,” she declares, “If something captures your eye, you told me, grab it. Remember?” And in fact, this is a fair interpretation of the position Ruth expressed in Act One.

Ruth, on the other hand, insists that the Delmore Schwartz story is her exclusive property, an intimate element of her personal life. “You destroy me and claim my lover for yourself, take him to bed with you? I think you *wanted* to destroy me.” Moreover, Ruth derides Lisa's ability to handle material that is foreign to her experience: “You've taken my entire milieu and passed it off as your own! . . . Jewish intellectual life? New York in the fifties? . . . [T]o take on territory that is so identifiably mine.” And she reminds Lisa that Delmore Schwartz has been “done” as a subject of fiction by writers of far greater distinction—namely the American Nobel laureate, Saul Bellow, whose work will make Lisa's seem contemptible. But most of all, Ruth objects to the personal betrayal she sees in Lisa's novel: “Our trust is broken. I feel like I've been bugged. My dear young friend turned out to be a spy. . . . who sold my secrets.”

In Ruth's eyes this marks the end of their relationship. As Lisa prepares to leave the apartment, presumably for the last time, Ruth asks her to do a final errand: “Look, do me a favor, take out the trash with you, I've got a leaky bag.” And with this demeaning sendoff—a reminder that Lisa has descended to pawing through the refuse of other people's secret lives—the play ends.

**THE CHARACTERS.** *RUTH* is a successful author who has traveled through the often hazardous landscape of New York literary life with her reputation and her sanity intact. She seems to have done so in large measure by maintaining a state of detachment, even aloofness from the world outside her apartment. During the course of the play we hear of no friends or intimate associates except Delmore Schwartz, a man with whom she had an affair more than thirty years earlier. There is a brief mention of the American novelist, E.L. Doctorow, but it's not clear if his relationship with Ruth is a matter of business or friendship.

Tellingly, the author introduces Ruth at the moment she is throwing her keys out the window to Lisa. She does this because the buzzer that unlocks the front door of her

building isn't working, thus making it difficult for her to admit anyone to her apartment. This is one of those details playwrights invent to point toward larger ideas and themes in the drama, in this case to underline Ruth's isolation in her Greenwich Village refuge.

Also reinforcing this sense of detachment is Ruth's refusal to have an answering machine on her telephone. She explains this choice to a bewildered Lisa: "If it's work-related, they'll call my agent. If it's my agent, she'll know to call back later; my friends would know the same. . . . I have no children, my parents are dead. What could possibly be . . . urgent?"

During her first tutorial session with Lisa, Ruth explains her reasons for teaching:

I rather like the distraction. For one thing, it gets me out of the house - which is not a small thing. It gets me . . . *talking*. . . . Otherwise I'd be alone far too much, and remain *silent* far too much, and I'm alone enough as it is. You develop bad habits when you spend too much time alone.

So we see that Ruth is aware of her own inclination toward solitude and that she worries about the spiritual consequences—those "bad habits" that might result from the absence of others. It is at precisely this moment that Lisa raises the possibility of becoming Ruth's new assistant, thereby entering this life of artistic seclusion with far-reaching results.

During their subsequent scenes together, we see Ruth revealing the essence of her artistic beliefs, while increasingly opening her heart to Lisa.

As an artist, Ruth plays her emotional cards very close to the vest. On the one hand, she insists that, "You can't censor your creative impulses because of the danger of hurting someone's feelings." On the other, she has never taken the risk of writing about her affair with Delmore Schwartz because, "some things you don't touch." In other words, she won't concern herself with the emotional impact of her fiction on other people, but she will absolutely avoid the pain of writing about her own emotional wounds. As Lisa points out late in the play, Ruth has established her reputation largely through writing about people and situations distant from her own experience, "welfare mothers" whose lives she could observe from a safe stance of aesthetic detachment.

However, her relationship with Lisa is anything but detached. Although it begins with ironic distance and professorial wit, it leaps suddenly to personal observation and engagement when Ruth urges Lisa to overcome her habit of "uptalking" if she wants to be taken seriously. Then, in the next scene, in a fit of pique, she comes close to driving Lisa away because the young woman has presumed to re-order the messy piles of paper on her desk and to answer her usually un-answered telephone. In other words, Ruth is angry because Lisa has intervened in the private preserve of her life. At this moment,

Lisa puts her finger on precisely the element in Ruth's character that sets her so distinctly apart from other people: "You're so . . . I mean, I *knew* you were difficult. . . . But you really seem to take *pride* in being difficult." That is to say, Ruth impresses Lisa as someone who intentionally and methodically repels intimacy.

But just as Lisa is about to walk out the door in tears, Ruth issues a surprising—and uncharacteristic—invitation. She asks her student to stay on and share dinner with her, the first of many meals that they will eat together. So Ruth has moved from the opening action of unlocking her apartment to this decision to unlock a more personal door to her protégé.

Ruth's continues to open up to Lisa as the action proceeds. In the next scene we see her express anger and disappointment when her student fails to notify her instantly about having a story accepted for publication—almost the way a parent would be hurt by a child's neglect. Then, in the same scene, she tells Lisa the story of her involvement with Delmore Schwartz, revealing intimate details which she has never been able to write about.

In the next plot development, we find a role-reversal, with Ruth asking Lisa to comment on her latest story—the pupil now acting as the teacher. But Lisa is still in need of tutoring, since she misses the most important point of the story, which Ruth must explain to her: it's not about the mother's terminal "illness, it's about her *inability* to tell her darling girl that she's very very sick. . . . It's as if saying it out loud would make it too real. It would let death into the room, and she can't *do* that."

When Lisa acknowledges having missed the point, Ruth opens her heart even wider: "What you have to say means a great deal to me, you know. . . . I can't just applaud you and pat you on your back and offer unconditional love and support. I've been your teacher, your champion, but I'm also your friend and I could use a little reassuring, too."

So Ruth moves beyond simply revealing her emotional secrets; she goes so far as to ask for emotional help from her student. Lisa is being invited not simply to look through the unlocked door, but to enter into Ruth's inner emotional life. And we see at the end of this scene that the story of a mother and daughter is both an example of Ruth's reticence and of her new personal openness: it expresses—but only indirectly—Ruth's maternal relationship with Lisa, and it reveals, but only through analogy, that Ruth herself is now dying.

When Lisa reads the prologue to her first novel in the next scene—clearly a version of Ruth's affair with Delmore Schwartz—we can't miss the point that Lisa has gone far beyond reshuffling the papers on Ruth's desk. Not only has she entered into her mentor's hidden life, but she has returned from that foray having carried away some of Ruth's most

cherished possessions. The life of this intensely private woman and artist has been made public, becoming an open book for the world to read.

In the final scene, Ruth responds to this act of exposure by closing the emotional door she had been opening throughout the earlier portions of the play. She begins the process by reflecting that she,

should have had children of my own. . . . It would have been good for me, I think, having a child. . . . I might have become a different person. . . . My life surely would have been *different*. Instead I spent . . . too many years nurturing other people's gifted children. . . . But none I loved as much as you.

Once again, as in her final story, Ruth is imagining Lisa as a daughter—the most beloved of all the pseudo-daughters she has known in her career as a teacher. But rather than being her child—someone to love and trust, someone to depend on—Lisa has become a traitor to their relationship. “Our trust is broken. I feel like I’ve been bugged. My dear young friend turned out to be a spy. A spy who sold my secrets.”

A spy is someone who works for the enemy—which, in Ruth’s eyes, seems to be the public at large, all those strangers outside the safe confines of her apartment who will come to know what she has kept to herself all these years.

Characters in a play define themselves by what they want and how far they will go to get it. What does Ruth want? The answer to that question probably begins with her affair with Delmore Schwartz, a period of intimacy that ended for her in pain and betrayal. Her public reticence about that experience suggests that she deeply wants to avoid re-living such pain, as does the life of solitude she has led in the thirty years since the affair. And yet the fact that she cherishes the romantic intimacy of her days with Schwartz suggests that she would like to find that depth of love again —provided such attachment carried no threat of betrayal. So what Ruth wants is love without heartbreak.

In Lisa it seems that Ruth has found the new relationship that will heal the wounds of her youthful affair. And so she adopts Lisa as the daughter she never had. But then, like Delmore Schwartz, Lisa betrays Ruth, an act of treachery made more ironically painful because Lisa steals Schwartz from her just as that other young woman did more than thirty years earlier. At the moment of that past betrayal, Ruth turned on her heel and walked away, excising Schwartz from her life, but not from her memory. At the moment of this latest betrayal, she orders Lisa out of her apartment, cutting her off as she did Delmore Schwartz long ago.

We might say that Ruth’s character goes through a process of circular development: she begins by being emotionally self-enclosed, moves on to a quasi-maternal love for Lisa, and in the end returns to her solitude. She changes radically through the middle of the

play, but in the end returns to her state at the beginning. She wanted love, took the great risk of adopting Lisa as her daughter in art, and once again encountered betrayal.

If Ruth's character runs in a circle, *LISA* moves in a straight line through the play. She enters at 26, an aspiring young writer awestruck by her teacher, but bold enough to put herself forward as Ruth's new assistant. With the key to Ruth's apartment in hand, she goes beyond watering the plants and actually re-orders her mentor's papers—an act of trespass that almost ends their relationship. At this moment, Lisa reveals what she wants: "I always seem to get your *disapproval* when it's the opposite I want so badly. . . ." There are various reasons to seek another's approval: to develop a closer and warmer personal relationship; or to rise professionally in the eyes of a superior. Or, as is probably the case with Lisa, some combination of both.

Lisa expresses her forward-moving energy through words. "Just listen first. . . . Why don't you try listening?" Ruth says when they first meet. Lisa talks a lot, and eventually she writes a lot. Unlike Ruth, who has limited her fictional output to short stories, Lisa wants to expand her reputation by writing a novel. This difference tells us a good deal about the characters of the two writers. The short story with its compression and economy expresses its meanings reticently, through sub-text and implication. Like Ruth, it deals in emotional restraint. The novel by contrast multiplies character, incident and detail, opening up and displaying its subject on an expansive canvas. Like Lisa, it is talkative and self-disclosing.

Lisa is completely unrestrained in discussing her family background, her relationship with her father, her ambitions for the future:

My whole world. *You* know: disaffected youth, disaffected parents. Sex and drugs in the family room. Uh . . . Mother drinks, father cheats. You name it, I've told it all. Crammed everything I know into a mere hundred-and-eighty-six pages. . . . I looted my diaries for tasty morsel. My frenzied, angst-ridden, adolescent jottings: I stole whole chunks. . . . [S]o now what do I do" I've *done* my parents. I've *done* my family. . . . You were lucky. . . . You had all that rich, wonderful, *Jewish* stuff to draw on. . . . What do *I* have? *WASP* culture. Which is no culture at all.

Unlike Ruth, who has excluded her most intimate experience from her fiction, Lisa has made unrestrained use of the most personal aspects of her past, so much so that she now feels she has run out of material. Having mined the vein of her own life—having, in effect, talked herself dry—where will she dig next?

At this point Ruth cracks open a literary Pandora's box out of which will spring the betrayal at the end of the play: "We're all rummagers," she declares. "All writers are. Picking through the neighbors' discards for material. . . . Shamelessly. Why stop at our

own journals?” This idea will stick in Lisa’s mind, and become the justification for her use of the Delmore Schwartz story in her novel: she has been given permission, she will tell herself, to rummage through Ruth’s life, as she has through her own, in pursuit of a tale to tell.

When she attempts explain why she dislikes Ruth’s mother-daughter story, we again see a fundamental difference between these two characters: “So when you don’t *take* them anywhere, and don’t *resolve* the relationship between them . . . I don’t know, I felt really cheated.” Lisa wants the story to come wrapped in a tidy package, with the characters achieving some sort of neatly engineered finality. She wants a conclusion and not just an ending. Ruth rejects such an approach as a piece of artistic dishonesty. “What relationship is ever truly resolved? People . . . inexplicably, inconveniently, behave badly, or take a wrong turn, or get sick and die. It happens.”

This moment is a prevision of the play’s end. Having used the Schwartz material in her novel, Lisa expects that she and Ruth will settle any difficulties that might arise as a result, that they will arrive at a resolution of their differences. For Ruth, on the other hand, Lisa’s action is one of those “inexplicable” breakdowns that happen between people in real life. Ruth is prepared for the unsentimental “wrong turn,” while Lisa is hoping for the happy ending.

Despite all her lamentations about running out of material and all her moments of self-recrimination, Lisa is fundamentally hopeful and forward-looking. What she wants above all—as she announces to Ruth in the first scene—is to become a successful writer. The torrent of words she pours out to Ruth is her way of expressing that longing and determination, her way of breaking through Ruth’s reserve and establishing herself as the great writer’s protégé. Her forward progress toward her goal is continuous throughout the play. With Ruth she moves from timid graduate student, to assistant, to dinner companion, to confidante, to literary daughter. Meanwhile, her writing career follows a parallel ascending path: from classroom work, to publication in a small magazine, to a glowing review in the *New York Times*, to the publication of a novel and a reading at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y.

But after a certain point in the play, Lisa’s relationship with Ruth begins to cool. What is the point when Lisa begins to be successful. For instance, she doesn’t call Ruth at once when she learns that she is about to publish her first story. Then, as her first book is coming out, she fails to respond to the urgent request for feedback on Ruth’s new story. And during the final two years of their friendship, she hardly visits Ruth at all, using as her excuse the demands of her novel. This growing distance from Ruth, may express either an honest need to spend more time on her own work, or something less appealing: a sense that she doesn’t need Ruth as desperately as she once did. Is the neglect a matter of professional necessity or of the user’s cruel indifference to someone no longer needed? Ruth sees the latter; Lisa, perhaps in all honesty, the former.

Why does Lisa raid Ruth's life for material for her book? We can find the answer in the scene that takes place on the morning when her collection of stories is reviewed by *The Times*. At this moment of recognition, she feels the need to raise the stakes: "Oh, God, I've got to write a novel, don't you think? Isn't that what they want? . . . Isn't that what they expect? The literary establishment. I mean, in order for me to be taken seriously?" And then she suggests that Ruth's reputation may have suffered because she has published only short stories and never a longer work. If she is to surpass her mentor, she needs a novel.

However, as we have seen, she feels she has completely used up the narrative potential of her own experience. If the price of being taken seriously is a novel, and if a novel requires a story, she is going to have to look to other people's lives for material. Ruth's secret story lies closest to hand, and Lisa doesn't hesitate to seize it, perhaps deciding to do so during this scene. In any case, we see that she will go as far as risking the destruction of her friendship with Ruth in order to achieve the goal of literary success.

**THE THEMES.** "One repays a teacher badly if one remains only a pupil. And why, then, should you not pluck at my laurels? . . . Now I bid you lose me and find yourselves. . . ." (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.)

*Collected Stories* is about the evolving relationship of a mentor and her protégé, a recurring theme in art and history. The word "mentor" was originally a proper noun, the name of a character in Homer's epic narrative, *The Odyssey*. Mentor was the man appointed by Odysseus to look after Telemachus, his son, while he was away at Troy. Subsequently, the proper name lost its initial capital, and became a common noun denoting an experienced person who oversees the development of a younger neophyte placed in his care.

The word "protégé" is an Anglicized version of the past participle of the French verb meaning "to protect." A "protégé" is literally one who is protected by her mentor. More broadly, a "protégé" is someone who enjoys the guidance and wisdom of a mentor in pursuing the goals of maturity, success, and ultimately independence.

Given its origins, it's obvious that the relationship between mentor and protégé parallels that between parent and child. Both are meant to be nurturing bonds, sustained by respect and affection. But history and literature are full of parent-child and mentor-protégé relationships that turn bitter and destructive.

Freud theorized that a boy's feelings toward his father exhibit what he called the "Oedipus Complex," an idea based on the Greek myth of the king who unknowingly killed his father and married his own mother. In Freud's eyes, all sons are at some level and to some degree motivated by murderous rage against their fathers, and driven by

incestuous desire for their mothers. We repress these impulses, according to Freud, but their unconscious existence arouses a crippling, neurotic guilt in the soul of every male. Females, on the other hand, develop a parallel loathing for their mothers, longing to replace them in their father's affections. Dubbed the "Electra Complex" by Carl Jung, one of Freud's associates, it is named after the princess who helped murder her mother, Clytemnestra. Based as it is on the family, human society is thus a vast multiplication of parent-child and mentor-protégé relationships. And at the heart of many of our deepest human connections, Freud suggests, lurks some variant of the inclination to murder.

In the history of philosophy, Plato was mentor to Aristotle, but the latter repudiated fundamental elements of the Platonic system, thus performing an act of intellectual assassination. In psychology, Jung rejected the teachings of his mentor, Freud, causing the latter a famous fainting spell brought on by his protégé's betrayal. In politics, Brutus turned on his mentor, Julius Caesar, literally assassinating the man who had been like a father to him.

Literary mentors and parents have also come in for their share of difficulty. King Lear's daughters, Regan and Goneril, turn on their father after he has bestowed kingdoms on them, expelling him into a dark night and a raging tempest. Up in Scotland, the many honors King Duncan heaps on Macbeth don't prevent the Thane of Cawdor from murdering his mentor.

In one of G.B. Shaw's most famous plays, *Pygmalion*, (the basis for the musical, *My Fair Lady*) the former Cockney flower-girl, Liza Doolittle, walks out the door on Professor Higgins at the end, determined to find her own way in life, free from the influence of her mentor. (Of course, the Broadway version erased this act of rejection, with Higgins growing "accustomed to her face," and Liza finding herself incapable of resisting his romantic neediness. )

Popular culture also exhibits its share of mentor-protégé relationships gone wrong, most notably in the classic mafia narrative, where godfathers are always discovering treachery among the god-sons, or where an aging capo is betrayed by a young confederate wearing a wire. The film *Donnie Brasco* shows the latter pattern, while *The Sopranos* exhibits the former, with Tony finding it necessary to kill his hapless nephew and protégé, Christopher.

*Collected Stories* offers its own version of the mentor-protégé relationship, one anticipated by Nietzsche in the quotation above. Lisa is the student who seeks to pluck at her teacher's laurels—that is, to surpass Ruth in literary achievement and fame. In their last scene together, Lisa declares, "The last thing I wanted was to hurt you." But Ruth is having none of that:

*Was it? O, I don't know, I think you might be deceiving yourself, dear. . . . You destroy me and claim my lover for yourself, take him to bed with you? I think you wanted to destroy me. . . . You wanted to obliterate me. . . . You've stolen my stories... . What am I without my stories? I'm nothing. I'm a cipher. I'm as good as dead.*

So the notion of murder leaps to the surface as the play moves towards its bitter conclusion: Ruth feels that Lisa is killing her. In fact, the shape of the plot reinforces this view of their relationship. The paths of these two lives cross one another, with Lisa rising toward greater fame, and Ruth falling victim to a terminal disease and fading into the literary past. Lisa draws on Ruth's insights as a teacher and her influence as a mentor to fuel her ascent, while Ruth feels robbed and discarded by her treacherous student. One is at the beginning of a brilliant career, the other at career's end. One has profited from this relationship, one feels exploited and nullified, virtually assassinated. And, given Ruth's health at the end of the play, Lisa does, in some sense, leave her for dead.

This is not to say that Ruth is right about Lisa's murderous intentions. Lisa may, in fact, be perfectly innocent, intending, as she says, to "honor" Ruth for all that her mentor has given her. But looked at objectively, the plot does show the emergence of a young writer from the mentoring womb of her literary mother, and the decline and impending death of that parent.

It's not that Margulies is suggesting that all mentor-protégé relationships turn sour and deadly. Instead, he has brought together two characters who, unintentionally, produce a calamity. In crucial ways, Lisa and Ruth are opposites: the one garrulous and socially needy, the other quiet and withdrawn from the social world. Lisa keeps no secrets of her own, and can't understand why Ruth won't use her secrets in her writing.

But Ruth is from a radically different generation. As she says in explaining why she never bore a child outside of marriage, "I was never truly Bohemian, never, that was all an act. A reaction to the fear, no doubt, of being hopelessly conventional." She doesn't tell her secrets because, as a child of the fifties, she is still marked by the moral and emotional reticence of that era, its sexual diffidence and reserve. Lisa, on the other hand, is a child of the culture of shamelessness, the hang-it-all-out era of celebrity confessionals and peeping-tom biographies. For Lisa, Ruth's reticence is incomprehensible, like writing in an alien alphabet. In bringing two such different characters together on stage, Margulies obeys the fundamental law of the drama, i.e. the need for conflict, and he sets the mentor-protégé relationship rolling on a set of tracks bound to lead to a train-wreck.

A second important theme in the play is the matter of art and morality—or, more exactly, the question of what sort of ethical limitations should we expect an artist to observe in pursuing her work. Early in the play, Ruth expresses the view that all's fair in love, war, *and* art. She cites the example of a famous photographer who thinks that he may intrude

as fully as necessary on his subject—get as close as he needs to—in order to capture the best picture. She advises Lisa not to consider other people’s feelings when writing, to rummage in her neighbors’ trash if it helps to produce a good story. Up to that point, Lisa has been sticking pretty much exclusively to her own personal and family experiences as sources for her fiction. But hearing Ruth advocate literary “rummaging” seems to set her on the path of writing a novel that uses Ruth’s life as material.

When that happens, Ruth seems to withdraw her earlier blanket support of literary freebooting. Instead she invokes the values of privacy, friendship, and respect for the intimate secrets of a mentor, and she ridicules Lisa’s attempts to write about a world—literary Jews in New York during the ‘50s—that lies outside her own personal range of experience.

In self defense, Lisa simply quotes Ruth’s earlier words back at her: you gave me permission, teacher. How can you punish me for acting on it?

If we accept the rules that Ruth lays down in the last scene of the play—tell your own stories, stick to the life you know—we would be condemning writers to produce nothing but indefinitely extended autobiographies. Surely, Shakespeare knew very little from first-hand experience about killing kings or living on a desert island, yet he wrote about both with insight and beauty.

On the other hand, if we adopt Lisa’s views—everything is fair game, including the secrets of our most intimate associates—then we create a world in which no one would ever confide in a writer. At some level this is the ethos of the gossip column and the checkout-counter tabloid: telling it all, all the time.

This dichotomy is not likely ever to be resolved. We want our writers to look beyond the limited circles of their own experience, but we don’t want a literary world in which people’s lives are ruthlessly plundered for artistic profit. *Collected Stories*, whose title points to this conflict—is the collection from my possessions, or from yours?—dramatizes the tangible results of these two views on the writers who live them.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do you interpret Ruth’s refusal to have a telephone answering machine? Is this something you sympathize with?
2. Why does Ruth become angry when Lisa rearranges the papers on her desk? Shouldn’t she be pleased that the mess has been straightened up?
3. Why doesn’t Ruth want to tell the story of her affair with Delmore Schwartz?

4. What does Lisa mean when she says that WASP culture is no culture at all?
5. Have you ever written or tried to write a piece of fiction? Did you write about your own experiences, or did you work with material outside your life?
6. Why does Ruth give Lisa her new story to read, and why is she eager to know Lisa's opinion of the work?
7. Why doesn't Lisa call Ruth immediately when she learns that her first story has been accepted for publication?
8. Why does Lisa read the poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay at the 92nd Street Y? How is it relevant to the rest of the play?
9. What draws Lisa to the story of Ruth's affair with Delmore Schwartz?
10. In the final scene, do you agree more with Ruth or Lisa? Or does your sympathy fluctuate? Why?

