

***The 13<sup>th</sup> of Paris***  
**By Mat Smart**  
**Produced at The Public Theatre**  
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**A STUDY GUIDE**  
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**THE PLAYWRIGHT.** Mat Smart, the author of several full-length plays, attended the University of Evansville, majoring in acting and writing, and went on to take an M.F.A in playwriting at the San Diego branch of the University of California. According to *The Pittsburgh Post Gazette*:

[Smart] says, ‘I write plays about something I don't understand and am trying to find the answer to.’ In *13th of Paris* (the title refers to an area of the city), that's ‘what if you have an idea of what love can be, but what you have is very different? How do you reconcile that?’

Clearly the question has autobiographical relevance. ‘In a way, the play is helping me live my life better,’ Smart says. ‘I used to write plays much more overtly political. I'm much more interested now in love stories.’

Smart discussed his experiences in Paris with an interviewer from *Playbill*:

Smart told Playbill.com, ‘I first went to Paris about ten years ago and was very unimpressed. It was the middle of the winter — cold, gray, raining and snowing. There were numerous strikes that closed down the museums and the trains, and everything was inconvenient. Even the streets were filthy. Then about two-and-a-half years ago, I took a trip to Cameroon in Africa. On the way, I had a couple-day layover in Paris. I got a cheap hotel in the 13th District. I had no expectations of the city. But it was May and there was beautiful weather, and I found it to be the wonderful city that it is known to be. I started writing the play in the little cafe at the hotel, while looking at an old black and white photograph on the wall of an older man at a cafe with his dog.’

Does Smart have an interest in ghost stories?

‘I don't really think of Jacques — Vincent's grandfather — as a ghost, but rather a real person who just happens to have died 40 years ago. I am fascinated by the

differences in generations. Did people love more fully 40 years ago? A hundred years ago? Do cell phones and email lessen the romance in our lives? What can be done about it? It just so happens that the person Vincent is having this debate with is no longer living.

So this play is in significant measure based on the playwright's own personal encounter with Paris and its 13<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement.

**THE SETTING.** The title of the play refers to a particular administrative district of Paris—which, as we saw above, happens to be the section of town where the author first discovered the city's charms. Ironically, the 13<sup>th</sup> doesn't figure in the tourist trade as one of Paris's more attractive neighborhoods. It does border on the River Seine—but along an industrialized stretch of its banks. And much of the district is marred by modern high-rise apartment towers—hardly the geography of romantic fantasy. So it is with good reason that the 13<sup>th</sup> lies off the beaten tourist path. But it does have its redeeming features, including a vibrant Chinatown, and some older neighborhoods—including the Rue des Gobelins—that recall the allure of the central city.

But it is not the number of the arrondissement that counts most in the title; it is the name of the city: “Paris”—a byword in the popular imagination for all things romantic and beguiling. A search of the internet yields 155 million listings under the heading “Paris and love.” A random sampling of internet prose on the subject produces this:

Paris is one of the most romantic cities in the world. Find out the best spots to snuggle and smooch with your sweetheart. Everyone knows about the [Eiffel Tower](#), but there are two other ways to get high with your honey. The [Arc de Triomphe](#) and Notre Dame both provide stunning views of the city. There are few better places to put your arms around your lover than atop these two attractions.

And this:

Night or day, Paris lives. It's a city for lovers and a city to fall in love with. Every thing you do in Paris seems to be touched by the glow of romance, whether it is queuing for croissants or sitting on a café terrace sipping an aperitif and watching the world go by.

Then there are the innumerable images of Paris-the-city-of-love that have enthralled us at the movies for decades. Just for starters, Paris is where Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn played out their dangerous charade; where Gigi's sparkle turned to fire and her warmth became desire; where Marlon Brando lurched through his erotic last tango; where Gene Kelley was a light-footed American; where Fred Astaire fell for Audrey Hepburn's funny face; and where Belmondo and Seberg were breathless.

To say the word, “Paris,” is to tap into all these images and fantasies. To put that word into the title of a play, and to make the city it names the setting of the action, is to raise expectations of romantic enchantment.

The apartment in which the action unfolds, a small flat at 14 Rue des Gobelins—one of the few picturesque streets in the 13<sup>th</sup>—also invites romantic fantasy. As the stage-directions tell us,

There are brightly-colored, strangely-angled walls and an unusually high, strangely-angled ceiling. The apartment is full of bizarre, flea market furniture.

The strange angles, bright colors, and bizarre furnishings all tell us that we have stepped out of the prosaic world of rectilinear architecture and muted good-taste, and have entered a far more exotic zone where odd events should not surprise us.

**THE PLOT.** Vincent, an American in his late twenties, has fled to Paris from Chicago following a disastrous dinner with his girlfriend, Annie. As he tells his French grandfather, Jacques,

I love her. I want us to have a lovely conversation, but I can't think of anything. And we're just eating. Eating. Silence. Silence. . . . Because we have nothing . . . to talk about. . . . And then I look up and see this middle-aged couple across the restaurant. . . . Frumpy. And they aren't talking either. . . . [A]nd they are just slowly shoveling the food into their mouths and grunting and I look at Annie and we're just shoveling food into our mouths . . . and we're totally bored too.

Fearing that he and Annie will wind up like that couple, he retreats that very night to Paris with a suitcase full of letters written by his grandfather to his grandmother, Chloe, during their lifelong love affair. These letters seem to Vincent to reveal the emotional depth and intensity that elude him in his relationship with Annie. And so he has come to the apartment of his grandparents in the 13<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement to learn from his grandfather the art of love. After all, as Vincent declares, Paris is the place where, “Love is possible.”

Jacques, however, is impatient with his grandson's emotional confusion, and especially displeased by something that has been embarrassingly obvious from the outset: Vincent isn't wearing any pants. For Jacques, the two deficiencies are connected, both being symptoms of a generation's failure to respect “the substance” of life, those fundamental rituals and customs on which love is built. So he must take Vincent in hand, and get him to put on his pants both literally and metaphorically.

As a first step, he persuades his grandson to dress himself fully. As it happens, Vincent, in his desire to capture the romantic spirit of his grandfather, has bought himself a pinstripe suit and a hat just like Jacques'. When the two of them stand in front of the mirror, the stage directions tell us, “They are dressed identically” with even their hats “at the same angle.”

“Look at this man in the pinstripe suit,” Jacques commands. “You see? He is young. He is dashing. He understands that he must show up and give all of himself to love. He cannot sit back and stuff his face full of food and say nothing.”

But the image of his pinstriped self in the mirror fails to instill in Vincent the emotional fortitude of a self-confident lover.

VINCENT. I’m not like you! I wish I was. I don’t know how to look at things the way you look at things, okay?”

JACQUES. A man doesn’t behave like this in a pinstripe suit.

VINCENT. You’re right. A man doesn’t.

With this admission of defeat, the day seems to have come to a dispiriting end, and Jacques pulls down the apartment’s hideaway bed for Vincent. But Vincent is hesitant to sleep on it.

VINCENT. I don’t think I could ever sleep there because. . .

JACQUES. Because this is where I died?

And so we learn that for the past quarter hour we have been watching a young man conversing with a ghost—or at least with a figment of his imagination. This figure isn’t in fact his grandfather, Jacques. Instead it is “Jacques,” a creature conjured up from the suitcase full of letters, and perhaps from a few faded photographs. The real Jacques, we learn, died many years before Vincent was born, when his mother was herself only a twelve-year-old girl studying in America. And Chloe, Vincent’s grandmother, committed suicide on the same day, unable to go on living after losing the love of her life. And the day that Vincent has chosen to come to Paris—immediately following his disastrous meal with Annie—is the anniversary of these two deaths.

At this moment, Chloe herself arrives on stage—or at least a Chloe figment to match the insubstantial figure of Jacques. She seats herself at a café table where she and Jacques will re-enact their first meeting on a day in April more than fifty years ago.

Meanwhile, Jessica, Annie’s best friend from high school—now living in Paris—calls Vincent to announce that she and her new husband are going to drop by for a late night visit.

As Vincent finishes talking to Jessica, Annie appears elsewhere on stage and takes a seat at a table at the Mexican restaurant in Chicago where she and Vincent are supposed to be meeting for dinner at this very hour. Because Annie has no idea that he has rushed off to Paris in search of wisdom, Vincent decides that he needs to phone her to explain the situation. The call rapidly turns into an anxiety-dump, as Vincent exposes his fears about the bleak future of their lives together: “Sometimes I think if we stay together, we’re going to ruin each other’s lives. . . . [D]on’t you worry that we’re gonna be that fat, fifty-year-old couple at the restaurant. . . . Agh.”

Moreover, he is unable to tell Annie when he plans to return, his anxieties having backed him into a position of emotional paralysis. Unable to elicit any satisfactory account of Vincent's behavior or his future plans, Annie begins talking pure gibberish, a stream of imaginary space-alien nonsense-syllables. Vincent responds in kind, and we learn that alien-talk is a game they often play, usually for simple amusement. But at this moment the game is a stand-in for their failed attempt at communication.

Jacques is revolted by this conversation, and tells Vincent that he has been "talking like an idiot." But Vincent defends himself, reminding him that men treat women differently now than they did in his grandfather's day, not like "delicate flowers" but like equals. Which means that "we say anything and everything we feel. . . We don't keep secrets. We know everything about everyone. Annie's had sex with sixteen different guys. I'm number seventeen."

Jacques is so offended by Vincent's subsequent enumeration of Annie's erotic experiences that he literally hauls his grandson to the sink and washes his mouth out with soap. Or rather, since Jacques is only a phantom, we must assume that Vincent has willed—or imagined—his own mouth-washing, a result, perhaps, of some lingering, old-fashioned sense of guilt and propriety.

In any case, Jacques reprimands Vincent, not for talking about sex, but for speaking "without dignity." Then, to show how one ought to practice romance, he re-enacts his first meeting at with Chloe. He steps into the past, joining Chloe at a café on a day in April long ago. She is in her thirties; he is considerably older.

On that spring day, each notices that the other has been writing a letter, and each wants to know whom the other has been writing to. After much charming banter, we learn that Jacques has been composing a letter to Chloe's "beautiful young husband," whom he advises to "stand on the balcony with your beautiful wife for—at the very least—four or five hours" every morning. As it turns out, though, there is no young husband, because, as Chloe explains, "I have come close to love many times, but never close enough. I am afraid that I am too picky."

Chloe then discloses that she has been writing to Oscar, Jacques' dog, an admission which Jacques interprets, correctly, as an invitation to join her at her table.

Vincent then weighs in with the story of his first meeting with Annie, a distinctly prosaic event that took place at a "bar in Chicago" called The Village Tap. And that's that. No graceful details, no charming banter, no whimsical letter-writing—just a meeting in a bar in the Windy City. Once again, in his own eyes, Vincent has drawn the short straw in the game of love. Just as Jacques is attempting to convince his grandson that he shouldn't dwell self-defeatingly on such banalities, we hear Jessica, Annie's high-school friend, calling up from the street to announce her presence.

As Jacques and Vincent hurriedly pack the ancient love letters into a suitcase, the older man is horrified to learn that modern couples are leaving no such paper trail of their own

emotional lives. Instead, people communicate by email. “You don’t write letters by hand?” Jacques asks incredulously. “You read all of my letters to Chloe over and over, but you do not write letters yourself? . . . I cannot believe my ears!” In light of this horrifying information, Jacques sits Vincent down before a blank sheet of paper and commands him to write a letter to Annie. This piece of romantic “homework” must be deferred for the moment because of the arrival of Jessica and her husband, but writing an actual letter of his own will stand as a challenge to Vincent throughout the rest of the play.

Jessica arrives bearing an “oversized bottle of red wine,” already fairly drunk, and determined to get drunker. All that wine turns Jessica into an emotional gusher, teary at the idea that Vincent and Annie, guests at her recent wedding, are thereby “witnesses” of her marriage, friends whom she now invites to be “guardians of our love.” In the spirit of reciprocity, Vincent asks Jessica to perform an act of witness and guardianship concerning his relationship with Annie. “Do you think Annie and I are right for each other?” he asks, much to the disgust of Jacques, who is invisibly looking on and kibitzing.

Jessica’s response is eye-opening, and includes information about Annie that comes as a revelation—and a shock—to Vincent, who has been mostly impressed by how “measured and sure” Annie has been about their love for each other.

Measured and sure, it turns out, were the last adjectives one would have applied to Annie in her school days. In fact, according to Jessica, ever since high school Annie has been “kind of a mess.” By which she means academically erratic, self-destructively promiscuous, psychologically disturbed, and occasionally violent. Annie was so unbalanced that when she decided to move to Chicago to “reinvent” herself, all her friends were certain she would “crash and burn.” But instead, a miraculous transformation has taken place. When Annie turned up at Jessica’s wedding, the bride saw a new woman, someone “beaming this pure joy for life and this pure love for you. . . . And she says—‘I am finally happy . . . I am in love and happy.’”

Having continued to drink from that oversized wine bottle, Jessica is now several sheets to the wind, and when Vincent tells her the story of his grandparents, the apartment, the letters, and the love suicide, she is overcome by a rush of emotion and desire. Not to be denied, she hauls her new husband, William, off to the communal bathroom to have sex. But her urgency is such that they only get as far as the hallway before getting down to business. As they gasp and cry out in passion—loudly enough for all to hear—Vincent rejoices in the news about Annie’s love for him, though he remains unsure about what his next steps should be.

Done with lovemaking, William manages a brief private conversation with Vincent in which he begs his friend to talk Jessica into staying in Paris while he travels to England. As he tells it, he needs a break from his wife’s insatiable appetite, which leads her to demand satisfaction “a substantial number of times per day.” When Vincent broaches William’s proposal to Jessica—minus the business about William’s sexual fatigue—she

explodes, and demands to be taken home immediately. While William is fetching the car, Vincent decides to inform Jessica of the motives behind her husband's attempted escape to England. This leads, via the twisted pathways of drunken logic, to an attempt by Jessica to seduce Vincent—a physical overture that ends with her passing out on the floor with her skirt above her waist.

When William returns, Vincent must explain to him how things came to this pass, a conversation that leads to Vincent's questioning whether William's marriage—with its quasi-pathological erotic intensity—can possibly pass muster as authentic, healthy love. William responds by punching Vincent in the face. Reconciliation follows as quickly as the outburst of violence, and William picks up his unconscious wife and exits.

With the passing of this emotional whirlwind, Vincent resumes his dialogue with Jacques, asking him why the cache of letters includes only those from him to Chloe, and none of hers to him. Jacques explains with a demonstration: standing on the balcony holding one of his letters, he pretends it is from Chloe to him and reads it, savors its look, feel, and smell, and then . . . drops it over the railing. A letter, he explains, takes “thoughts and feelings that are for only a single moment in time and—fft—sets them down for good. Traps them.” By disposing of all of Chloe's letters over the years, he has liberated those momentary thoughts, sending them fluttering all across Paris. Since Jacques is in fact a product of Vincent's imagination, this gesture must represent some unacknowledged longing on the young American's part to free himself from the burden of the letters by simply throwing them away.

Having demonstrated the proper attitude toward letters—they are to be momentarily relished, and then tossed into the wind—Jacques finally manages to browbeat Vincent into writing one of his own. As Vincent sits over the blank page, pen in hand, Jacques disappears, leaving his grandson alone for the first time in the play. Noticing Jacques' absence, Vincent clicks his pen, fidgets, and finally lunges for the telephone—that modern substitute for letter-writing. He dials Annie, but she is not there. So he leaves a message in which he leaves his Paris address.

He then phones his mother in America, and once again finds himself talking to an answering machine. Having twice failed to telecommunicate, he returns to the old-fashioned business of putting words on paper, at which point letters begin dropping from the sky. Jacques and Chloe cavort in the descending missives, like children in a snowstorm, while Vincent continues to write, oblivious to the blizzard falling around him. Eventually Vincent nods off at his desk, while the phantasmagorical Chloe and Jacques end their dancing and fall asleep on the fold-out bed. Night passes, the couple awake, and in a vision being dreamed by Vincent, they exchange rapt greetings and declare fervid welcomes to the new day. Jacques sets off to shop for essentials: croissants, raspberries, bubbly water, and a new, bigger mattress for the conjugal bed.

As their images fade in the morning sun, Annie arrives at the apartment, having taken a page from Vincent's book and flown impulsively to Paris in pursuit of love—or at least of Vincent. She enters, bright orange watering can in hand, and proceeds to drizzle water

on his head as if he were a desiccated love-plant in desperate need of irrigation. She then reads him a letter she has written on the plane, declaring that she was, in fact, “furious” at Vincent’s abrupt departure for France, but that despite all his foolishness, she loves him very much.

So here she is in Paris, ready to love and be loved, offering Vincent a forthright proposition: “let’s be happy.” But Vincent still isn’t quite ready to accept something so direct and simple. Instead, he tells her the tale of the apartment, his grandparents, the letters—that whole narrative of Parisian romance compared with which the story of his own emotional life seems so paltry.

And as he narrates, we see a final vision of Jacques and Chloe—this one showing the end of their love story. Considerably older than his wife, Jacques has known all along that his life would end while she is still relatively young. We witness that moment of separation as Jacques dons his pinstripe suit, pulls his hat down over his eyes, and dies. Chloe immediately begins writing a letter to her daughter in America, urging her not to cry, advising her to forget her parents, to stay in America, and never to think of her and Jacques again. She then steps out onto the balcony and plunges to her death. This moment is what the Germans call *liebestod*—the consummation of love through death. It is the stuff of opera and epic—mythic, grand, absolute, a vision that has dominated Vincent’s imagination since he has been old enough to read his grandparents’ letters. Compared with this episode of Eros transcendent, how could his love life ever be anything but a prosaic anticlimax?

“Do you think we could ever have something like that?” he asks Annie when he has finished telling her the story. To which she responds, un-poetically,

I hope not. . . . We can try to love each other more and more everyday. But when you die, I’m not going to kill myself. I can imagine growing old with you and loving you, but if you die before me, I will have a long life afterwards. Full of quilts and taking care of our children and grandchildren. And shuffleboard. . . .

With a few down-to-earth words, Annie brushes away Vincent’s romantic fantasy in order to clear a path for their journey through life, one guided by their own commonsense compass.

On this new note of realism, Vincent declares—in an unwritten “letter” that he improvises on the spot—that he had “no idea how much I needed a morning sprinkling from a bright orange watering can . . . from a beautiful woman. . . . Thank you.” Having made his declaration, he proceeds to discard the paper chain that has bound him to his grandparents’ seductively romantic past.

Vincent goes to the suitcase, takes out a bunch of letters and then hands half [of them] to Annie. . . . [They] throw the letters from the balcony. . . . Suddenly, a great wind sweeps through the apartment. The letters swirl into the air. . . . [They] fly back [to] where they came from and disappear.

With the disappearance of the letters, the apartment itself disappears, and, implicitly, Paris as well, leaving Vincent and Annie totally liberated from the past, and prepared to lead their lives according to their own inclinations, no longer bound to follow the narrative of Jacques and Chloe. Vincent picks up the watering can and sprinkles Annie and himself together, watering their own garden of love.

**THE CHARACTERS.** As we saw above, the playwright thinks of Jacques, not as a ghost, but as “a real person who just happens to have died forty years ago.” Unfortunately, this view fails to explain how Vincent can meet and talk with this dead man, how he can argue with him about love and morality, and seek his approval on matters sartorial and epistolary. Logic suggests that Jacques can be present to Vincent only if he is a ghost or, more likely, a figment of Vincent’s imagination—an adult version of an imaginary friend. If the latter is the case, then Jacques is really something like Vincent’s alter ego—a make-believe French self more suave, more confident, more worldly than the insecure American who flees to Paris for lessons in love.

Character reveals itself in choice. A character *is* what he or she *does*. The first choice VINCENT makes in the play is to appear without pants. As the stage directions tell us, he “stands in the middle of the room” wearing “a new pinstripe suit, but no pants. The pants are draped over a nearby chair.”

What is the meaning of this gesture? Not to wear pants while at the same time wearing a shirt and suit jacket is to choose to appear unfinished, incomplete. The jacket and the shirt cry out for the pants, but Vincent declines to put them on. He thereby exposes himself—literally—as a work in progress, an overgrown boy still trying to become a man, a fledgling whose adult plumage—the pinstripe suit—is only half donned. As Vincent explains to Jacques, “I don’t go outside like this. After the day—I come in the door. I take off my shoes. I take off my pants.” Out of sight of the world, Vincent reverts to his underwear, a virtual child in diapers padding around in the safety of his grandparents’ house.

And in fact he has accepted an ongoing state of dependency on Jacques and Chloe—the emotional dependency of a boy on his elders.

But where there is dependency, there is often also resentment and rebelliousness, attitudes that might well account for Vincent’s in-your-face resistance to repeated pleas from Jacques to put his pants on. Something in Vincent doesn’t *want* to be the pinstriped, old-world smoothie, the practiced charmer who knows the right way to talk to the ladies. He apprentices himself to Jacques in the art of love, but he is a rebellious apprentice, simultaneously bound to the master and resentful of those bonds.

So Vincent’s personality is wrapped around a core of conflict—which is pretty much the norm for any interesting dramatic character—and the action of the play takes him through a series of steps which lead to the resolution of this conflict.

In the beginning, Jacques talks Vincent into putting his pants on and completing his Parisian self. “Jacques adjusts Vincent’s tie and collar,” then instructs him in the appropriate way to button his jacket, then smooths Vincent’s hair, then places on his head a hat identical to his own, and then adjusts it so that it sits at precisely the jaunty angle favored by Jacques. As they stand before the mirror, as we have seen, they present a striking image: two men, one old one young, “dressed identically.” Jacques seems to have succeeded at turning Vincent into a replica of himself.

But as the action proceeds, Vincent repeatedly attempts to establish his independence from Jacques, to assert himself as something other than his grandfather’s double. For example, despite Jacques’ vigorous attempt to stop Vincent from making or receiving phone calls—outside intrusions into the classroom of love—the grandson insists on picking up the persistently ringing telephone, interrupting his lessons with granddad.

After yet another phone conversation, this time with Annie, Vincent rejects his grandfather’s acerbic criticism of his extreme candor:

JACQUES: ‘Sometimes I think we are going to ruin each other’s lives.’ That is a horrible thing to say to anyone. Man or woman.

VINCENT: Well, it’s how I feel sometimes, so I said it.

JACQUES: Most things you should keep to yourself.

VINCENT: You see? That’s another way things are different now. Now—we say anything and everything we feel. Everything is about our feelings. . . . If we feel it, we can share it. . . .

JACQUES: That sounds irresponsible.

VINCENT: We don’t keep secrets. We know everything about everyone.

So Vincent asserts his new-world prerogatives of self-affirmation, emotional spontaneity, and damn-the-torpedoes honesty directly in the face of his grandfather’s plea for restraint, tact, propriety—the civilized norms of old-world decorum.

But then the poetic re-enactment of the first meeting of Jacques and Chloe takes place, and we are back in a universe of indirection, erotic tact, and high good manners—all of it cooked up in Vincent’s imagination as fed by the letters. Staged as it is in Vincent’s head, we might view this romantic scene as Vincent’s self-rebuke, his attempt to make amends for the crass realism of his recent excursus on Annie’s sex life.

Vincent is further befuddled by the arrival of Jessica and William. Here is a couple whose passionate spontaneity and endless erotic energy would seem to rule out any prospect of their turning into that boring middle-aged couple that Vincent encountered in the Chicago restaurant. Moreover, their utter lack of sexual restraint puts them at the furthest possible remove from Jacques’ romantic circumspection. And yet Vincent, a sometime rebel against Jacques’ love-curriculum, finds their behavior seriously disturbing—he wants nothing to do with their erotic anarchy.

This see-sawing back and forth between the disciplined emotional world of his dead grandfather and the emotional free-for-all represented by Jessica and William lands William in a state of seemingly un-resolvable confusion—a condition that results in his paralyzed inability to decide when and if he is returning to Annie, or even if he should be in love with Annie at all.

It is only when Annie takes the initiative to come to Paris herself that Vincent is shaken out of his static despondency. The ghostly influence of Jacques yields to the vibrant living presence of Annie. But Vincent's present will always bear the stamp of his romantic infatuation with the past.

As befits an illusion, **JACQUES** embodies two French archetypes. Part Maurice Chevalier, part Decartes, he is the epitome both of charming gallantry and intellectual precision. The gallantry is on display in his dealings with Chloe; the precision in his impatience with his grandson's moral and intellectual confusions and contradictions. He wants Vincent to be both a charmer and a clear thinker, somebody who can bring clarity of purpose to romance.

His most conspicuous actions are those in which he forces Vincent to take steps toward patching up his disheveled appearance and the disorderly soul it evinces. Cramming his grandson into a pinstripe suit, washing his mouth out with soap, firmly sitting him down to write a proper love letter: these are the corrective steps any concerned elder would take toward a wayward youth.

And unlike so many contemporary parents, Jacques is unfazed by self-doubt or insecurity concerning the wisdom of his actions. He knows that he knows best, and he proceeds accordingly.

A father disciplines, a grandfather charms: Jacques does both. In fact, Vincent never makes mention of his father in the play, and his grandfather has actually been dead for some forty years. So the imaginary Jacques seems to be playing not one but two very important roles in Vincent's life.

**ANNIE** has been through a life-crisis far more traumatic than Vincent's, and has come out on the other side a changed person—the person we see in the play. Our first encounter with her is via Vincent's telephone call from Paris as she sits in a Mexican restaurant waiting for him to show up. Her tone—calm, measured, playful—reveals a person who is in control of her thoughts and feelings.

Most significantly, as Vincent anxiously presses her tell him whether she was awake or asleep the last time he kissed her—a seemingly minor matter that that has ballooned to vast importance in his agitated soul—Annie laughs. And why? For the best and simplest of reasons. As she explains it, "I'm just laughing. I'm happy. I'm laughing." There's nothing complicated there: no angst, no inner contradiction, no despair, no self-contempt. In short, none of the symptoms of Vincent-ism.

Also unlike Vincent is her spontaneity. She feels happy, so she laughs. She doesn't back herself into a corner wondering whether she *should* be laughing, or whether laughter is *appropriate* at such a moment, or whether her laughter will give offense or elicit approval. She just laughs—the sound of a spirit free from Vincent's demons of insecurity.

When Vincent attempts to explain to her why he has impulsively fled to Paris to wrestle with his worries about their relationship, Annie's response is revealing.

VINCENT: [S]ometimes I think that I've never been so happy . . . and in love. But then sometimes I am like . . . so bored. By you. And me. And I can't figure out how it got like this. . . Don't you ever feel that way?  
ANNIE: Vincent, I . . . I love being around you. It doesn't need to be non-stop excitement.

Again, Annie speaks with the voice of spiritual equanimity, which in her case is emphatically not the same as passivity or indifference, neither of which is conceivable for the Annie that Jessica describes—that emotional train wreck who would avenge herself on abusive boyfriends by “throwing beer bottles through windows, slashing tires . . . handcuffing herself to this guy who had dumped her and he finally had to have her arrested.” Annie is no longer dominated by these passions; instead she has moved through them to a state of sanity.

Far from being passive in the face of Vincent's flight to Paris, Annie herself follows suit, buys a two-thousand dollar ticket to France, and shows up unannounced in the apartment on Rue des Gobelins. The difference between her action in heading for Paris and Vincent's version of the same behavior is clear and crucial.

Vincent flees because he doesn't know what he wants or what he should do. He is running away from his confusions to commune with the spirit of a long-dead grandfather who, he hopes, will straighten him out. Everything about his impulsive decision is motivated by free-floating anxiety and self-doubt. He has no idea what he is going to do once he gets to Paris, no idea of when he will return, no idea of what goal he wants to achieve.

Annie, on the other hand, has a clear objective: to pull Vincent back into the real world of flesh-and-blood relationships—with their ups and downs, their disappointments, and their moments of joy and laughter. She borrows the orange watering can with a definite purpose in mind. She will shock him into two-fold recognition: of her as a wonderful woman whom he had better hang on to and cherish, and of himself as a foolish vacillator who needs to start growing (and growing-up), like a plant requiring water.

Aristotle tells us that the most satisfying plots contains powerful moments of recognition and reversal. The former occur when characters pass from ignorance to knowledge about some crucial matter; the latter is the change that results from this new knowledge—a change from one condition to its opposite, a one-hundred-and-eighty degree turnabout.

Recognition and reversal are what Annie brings about by her forceful arrival in Paris. She causes Vincent to recognize the truth: about her, about himself, and about the value of their relationship. And she reverses the situation from Vincent's paralysis in the face of reality to his enthusiastic embrace of everyday love.

**JESSICA AND WILLIAM** provide counterpoint to Vincent and indirectly to Annie. Where Vincent is emotionally immobilized, they are an emotional engine in overdrive. Where Annie has evolved from a state of spiritual anarchy to one of equilibrium, they ride a roller-coaster of libidinous passion.

During their single scene, Jessica travels from moderate intoxication, to complete drunkenness, to unconsciousness. In the process she gushes to Vincent about his and Annie's role as love-guardians; demands sex on the spot from her erotically over-taxed husband; engages in noisy intercourse on the floor of the hallway outside the apartment; vomits in the common bathroom; flies into a rage when she learns that William wants to spend some time without her; gropes Vincent; and passes out on the floor with her skirt around her hips.

William is scarcely less volatile. For most of the scene, he keeps a moderately low profile. But following his latest bout of lovemaking with Jessica, he secretly begs Vincent to help him get away from his amorous wife for a few days. When Vincent questions the sanity of their relationship, William punches him in the nose. But within 30 seconds, he is offering to shake and make up. Like a strike-anywhere match, he flares up in an instant and burns out in a few seconds.

If Jacques represents the sophisticated, Continental, old-world school of love—suave and well-mannered—Jessica and William embody a kind of erotic primitivism. Vincent, in the end, can't bring himself to embrace either. It is Annie he wants—the woman too commonsensical for the *liebestod* of Jacques and Chloe, and too mature for the volcanic passions of Jessica and William.

**THEMES.** The word "romance" was originally applied to a kind of medieval story written in one of the vernacular languages descended from the Roman tongue and dealing with the adventures of knights-errant as they encountered dragons, giants, and damsels in distress. A "romantic" story was one marked by exotic danger, wild fantasy, and courtly love—experiences far removed from the quotidian facts of daily life.

One famous author explored the idea of romance as a threat to sanity, a kind of literary drug that could damage the soul. It was an obsession with romantic fiction that drove Cervantes' Don Quixote over the brink into his delusional adventures with windmills mistaken for giants and with a peasant girl imagined as a beautiful princess. Quixote had debauched his imagination through his addiction to romantic tales, and as a result suffered a rupture with reality.

Eventually, the term “romantic” came to focus specifically on the kind of exalted love portrayed in these medieval stories, a passion that transcended ordinary experience. It is mostly this sense of “romance” and the “romantic” that this play explores—while also keeping an eye on the perils of Quixotic delusion.

Jacques, as we have seen, is continuously striving to raise love above the limits of everyday reality. He is a romancer who, through his letters and his memories, is constantly elaborating the story of his great passion for Chloe. What he has created is a kind of poetry—a transmutation of life into art.

Vincent, like Quixote, longs to enter this realm, even experiencing in his encounters with the non-existent Jacques something like the Spanish knight’s fantasies.

But constantly undermining romance is the noisy, unglamorous world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with its cell-phones and answering machines dislodging the perfumed letter and the well-turned compliment. In lieu of emotional refinement, it coughs up Jessica and William, the clay-footed horn dogs who supplant the exalted lovers of Jacques’ imagination.

Fortunately for Vincent he is not so far-gone in his attachment to the romantic vision as Quixote, who dies of a broken heart when his sanity is restored and his dreams are dispelled. Neither is he tempted to let it all hang out like Jessica and William. Vincent weans himself from the beautiful, but no longer accessible, ideals of Jacques, but unlike Quixote, who never found Dulcinea, he winds up under a watering can with a real, flesh-and-blood woman.

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. If Jacques is dead, how can Vincent be talking to him? What’s going on here?
2. What ideas and emotions do you associate with Paris? Does the city conjure up particular associations?
3. What is the meaning of the term “romance?” Does it always have to refer to love?
4. Why is Jacques so insistent that Vincent put his pants on?
5. Why does Vincent resist wearing pants? Does this tell us anything important about his character?
6. Have you ever written a letter on a piece of paper and mailed it in an envelope? Have you ever received such a letter? Is writing or receiving such a letter very different from sending or receiving e-mail? If so, how? Why?

7. Have you ever read old letters written by members of your family? If so, how did it make you feel? If not, how do you think it would make you feel if you were to read such letters?
8. Do you agree with Vincent when he suggests that there is something unhealthy in the relationship between Jessica and William? If so, why?
9. Do you think Jacques is right about the need for people to practice restraint in what they say and how they act? If so, why? If not, why?
10. Why does Annie pour water on Vincent from a watering can? Why is the can orange? What does the action mean beyond itself?