

Southern Comforts

By Kathleen Clark

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A STUDY GUIDE

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THE AUTHOR. Kathleen Clark is the author of two plays that have been staged both in New York City and at regional theaters around the country: *Secrets of a Soccer Mom* and *Southern Comforts*. The former was first produced in New York in early 2008 and staged at The Public Theatre in the fall of that year. *Southern Comforts* received its first New York production in 2006. Both plays were developed at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in New London, Connecticut.

In an interview with Cristin Kelly of Word Press, the playwright discloses that “the origin [of *Southern Comforts*] is from my family. My mother left Tennessee when she was 18 and moved to New Jersey. Her mother followed her up with her siblings. My mother met my father, who was from New Jersey. Then her mother met a man in New Jersey. They both married New Jersey men. So, two Southern women married to Northern men—that inspired the play.”

THE SETTING. The action takes place in a Victorian house in Morris County, New Jersey. A suburban enclave 25 miles west of New York City, it is one of the ten richest counties in the United States, which means that we are dealing with characters whose material wants are well cared-for, and whose conflicts center on emotional and spiritual needs.

The house belongs to Gus, one of the play's two characters. As we first encounter it, it embodies certain core features of his personality. To begin with, it is very sparsely furnished,

the living room containing only “an armchair and ottoman in front of a television set, a desk and chair. . . .” From this we infer Gus’s attachment to a simple style of life, free of physical and emotional complications. We also learn that Gus was born in this house, and that, with the exception of a few years early in his marriage, he has lived here for his whole life. This attachment to a single place is deeply characteristic of Gus, who dislikes travel, and who is convinced, as he says at the beginning of the second scene, that “people don’t change.”

If he were right about that, the play would come to an end on the spot, since drama is about the way characters change as they struggle with the obstacles that stand between them and their objectives. No change, no drama. And change, in the person of Amanda Cross, enters Gus’s Victorian stronghold, which she transforms from a Spartan widower’s retreat to a Southern belle’s sanctuary. After Amanda moves into Gus’s house, her *“furniture fills the living room, including pictures, bookcases, an armchair and ottoman and lace curtains on the window. Antimacassars are on any chairs or couches, doilies on any side tables.”* This change in the appearance of the house mirrors a major change in the lives of its occupants. Gus no longer leads the pared-down life of a single man. Instead, he has taken on Amanda and all the profusion of possessions and emotional exuberance that she brings with her—a change that also entails a conflict. In this way, the setting underlines and expresses the major thrust of the action—the movement of two people from single life to marriage.

The chronological setting of the action must be sometime in the mid-1990s, since Gus tells us he married immediately after returning home from the war, or around 1945 or 1946. Since he was married for forty-five years, and since his wife has been dead for five years, that puts the war fifty years in the past. Also since he tells Amanda that he entered the military at age 18, he would have been about twenty when the war ended. That makes Gus about 70. Amanda is about the same age, or perhaps two or three years younger.

THE PLOT. The action begins on a Sunday afternoon in July as Gus is tending to his storm windows while watching a baseball game on t.v. Amanda comes by to drop off the donation envelopes from Gus’s church, of which her daughter is a member. Amanda herself is visiting New Jersey from her native Tennessee, which explains why Gus hasn’t previously seen her at church. As they chat, a thunderstorm arrives, delaying Amanda’s departure. Gus frets about the storm, shutting doors and unplugging appliances. “[I]t puts me back in the war,” he explains, beginning to lay out some of the details of his personal life for his visitor from the South. Amanda reciprocates, with stories about her daughter, the gossipy church ladies she can’t abide, and the charms of her home state. We learn that she is a widow and he a widower, and that her husband was also in the war and could never escape its influence. Gus tells her about his own marriage, which he admits was loveless and unhappy, and about his son, whom he rarely sees. Disclosure brings reciprocal disclosure, until they end up knowing a great deal about each other, including their shared dislike of over-talkative commentators on t.v. baseball games. As the storm peters out, Gus feels it’s safe to turn the game back on, and they begin to watch it together. With no downpour to keep her at Gus’s house, Amanda lingers anyway, ending the scene by inviting herself to stay on: “Maybe I’ll just wait for the innin’ to be over. Three more outs.”

The second scene begins one week later, on another summer Sunday, with Gus and Amanda returning to his house after church—and lunch. “I sure was surprised to see you at church, Amanda remarks. “You said you never go.” But now that Gus knows he is likely to run into Amanda during the service, “never” has become inoperative.

The process of getting to know each other begun in the first scene continues, with further, more intimate revelations, especially about their previous marriages. “You get rejected enough, you stop trying,” Gus says. “And then you start doing the rejecting. The more she pulled away, the more I pulled away.”

Amanda responds with her painful memories about her husband’s “accidental” death:

I’ve never said this to anyone, but I’ve never been sure that it was an accident. One night he was out late, driving way too fast. . . . anyway the roads were wet and slippery and. . . well, that was that. I think it was the only way he could get rid of those awful nightmares he brought home with him.”

So both these people who have experienced relationships blighted by pain and loss now seem to be inching toward a new beginning with one another.

“You ever think of movin’ up here,” Gus asks. “You seem to be right at home wherever you are.” But Amanda demurs, saying that Northerners don’t seem very welcoming, and seem to “make fun of the way I talk.” To which Gus gallantly responds, “I like the way you talk. . . . It’s soft, your voice. . .and calming. That’s what it is. . . makes me feel calm.” After Amanda tells him a story about her first joyride in her father’s car, and her good luck at winning her current car in a lottery, Gus presses her to go to a baseball game with him. “Let me think about it,” Amanda responds. And Gus offers another option, bringing the scene to a close: “Come on, let me show you those roses. Won’t take long.”

Two months have passed as the third scene begins, and it is now September. Gus and Amanda have reached the point where they are seriously discussing the pros and cons of marriage. Before taking so momentous a step, they need to have a frank talk about obstacles and problems. First there is the matter of their children, who will probably object. Then there is the fact of their conflicting political affiliations, she being a Democrat, he not. Next there is the fact that he often seems not to hear—or at least to listen to—what she says about herself, while she “remember[s] every word” he has ever said to her. Traveling comes up: she loves it; he likes to stay put. Then there’s sex, a must-discuss for her because, as she says, “Oh yes sir, you stir me right up.” Fortunately, it turns out that Gus shares the same feeling—and not just the feeling, but the physical ability to follow through on it. “Of course it’s been a long time,” he admits, “but I think I’m . . . healthy.”

With all these matters settled, what further hurdles could be left to leap? Only the most important of all: furniture. As we saw above, Gus likes to live simply, in a house the playwright describes as “bare.” But Amanda has possessions—lots of them—including a sizeable library. Big enough to fill twelve bookcases, an appalling prospect for Gus: “I don’t want to be walking

around feeling like I'm in some kind of tomb with towers of books ready to fall on top of me. . . . It's too much." While they settled their other differences with relative ease, the heap of books presents what seems like an insurmountable obstacle. Gus, exhausted at the idea of books and furniture, feels the need to break off their discussion, and offers to drive Amanda home; Amanda huffily agrees to go. They are on the verge of splitting up when Gus violates every principle of his cautious, routine-bound self and "*grabs her and kisses her. AMANDA . . . hugs and kisses him. They kiss passionately.*" Theoretical sex has turned real, and the scene ends with Gus inviting Amanda to spend the night "[w]ith me in my bed."

As the fourth scene begins, November has arrived, and Gus and Amanda are married. As threatened, her furniture and books now fill the house. Gus tries to carry on as before, hanging up his storm windows in advance of the cold weather while Amanda sits and writes—stories about her family, a project that has been a long-time ambition. But Gus's fussing with the windows distracts her, especially when he climbs onto the roof and nearly slips off. When he does manage to get the window hung, he finds out that he can't open it wide enough to get back into the room. Finally, Amanda lays cushions on the floor and pushes the window open with a curtain rod. Gus dives through, landing safely on the cushions and gives a whoop of triumph. "Hey, you know, it's not quite dark yet," he says ending the scene. "We could do one more window if we hurried."

Scene 5 takes us to December, with Gus and Amanda preparing to go "shopping for gravestones." Amanda assumes that they will be buying a headstone for both of them, but Gus has other ideas. He plans to be buried next to his first wife, with his name on the same stone as hers. Amanda is crushed by this discovery: "I've been thinkin' all week about our names together on the stone. Us being buried right next to each other. Haven't you thought about that? Where did you think I was goin' to be?" Gus then informs Amanda that he has been having "strong feelings" about his first wife recently, mostly guilt and regret over their loveless marriage, and has decided that, "what you're asking me to do. . . . It seems like a betrayal. A broken promise. I'm a man of my word and the stone seemed to be a promise to her."

This admission precipitates the first major crisis of their relationship. Amanda declares that they seem always to be thinking about what's best for Gus, and not enough about her. And so she decides to do what she wants, which is to return home to Tennessee. "It's important for a person to know where they belong," she says. Gus replies, "You belong here." But Amanda's answer is deeply revealing: "I'm not sure about that. (*Pause*) I have to think." With those words, she heads for the door, ending the scene.

Scene 6 begins with Amanda returning to Gus after two weeks at her daughter's house. Gus offers to drive her to Tennessee, and she angrily assumes the purpose of the trip would be to claim her plot in the family burial ground. This prompts Gus to leave the room. Offended, Amanda declares that there's nothing more for them to say to each other, but just at that moment Gus returns pulling a dolly "*with a gravestone on it. The inscription on the stone reads: AMANDA AND GUS KLINGMAN—wife and husband.*" This dramatic revelation stuns Amanda, and sets the stage for a long declaration from Gus about his love for her and his realization that

the major purpose of his life is making her happy. In response, Amanda seemingly raises the stakes, asking where “this handsome stone” is going to be placed, and suggesting Celebration Hill, the cemetery in Tennessee where her family members are buried. Is Gus eager enough for her happiness to consent to his eternal exile from home? “Celebration Hill? We are *not* going to be buried there,” he declares emphatically. But then there is a pause during which the assertion turns tentative, becoming the question on which the play comes to an end: “Are we?”

THE CHARACTERS. From the outset, we see that Gus and Amanda are peas from two very different pods. We first encounter Gus at home, pottering with his storm windows, contentedly doing what he likes best: staying put and tending to the house he has lived in all his life. Amanda, on the other hand, is being social and outgoing, calling on a stranger, pressing him to come to church, to meet and mingle. While he is on deeply familiar turf, she is exploring new ground. The playwright spends the rest of the play elaborating on the differences implicit in this opening situation.

Here’s a typical early exchange:

AMANDA. I like travelin’. . . . [S]omeday, I’ll do more of it.

GUS. Not me.

AMANDA. No?

GUS. Never found a place worth all the trouble it took to get there.

Then there’s this, as they talk about their deceased spouses:

GUS. Helen preferred the other house, but, like most things, she left it up to me.

AMANDA. Same with my husband. Everything always up to me.

On one level, these seem to be parallel experiences, but if we look at them more closely we see that instead they mirror each other: they are similar but reversed.

This is also the case with their respective marriages. She is a widow and he is a widower—again, a similarity. And both failed to talk to their partners about the most important problems troubling their lives, another point in common. But Amanda’s husband died only three years after their wedding, hounded by the demons he brought home with him from the war, while Gus spent forty-five years in a loveless relationship—fifteen times longer than Amanda’s marriage. Hers was brutally truncated, but Gus’s was a long, drawn-out march toward mutual rejection. Amanda is still searching for the bond she lost; Gus has learned through bitter experience to go it alone. We can also see this in their relationships with their children: Amanda spends weeks at a time visiting her daughter and her grandchildren; by contrast, Gus’s son Edgar, “Doesn’t come around much. Once or twice a year to see if I’m still living.”

What the play shows us is these two contrasting characters building a bridge between one another, he working cautiously and tentatively, and she going at the project with gusto. We see this with particular clarity when, by the middle of the play, they have become close enough to discuss marriage. It is Amanda who raises the question of sex, a potentially delicate topic for people their age. But Amanda doesn’t let that stop her, becoming the verbal seductress while Gus allows himself to be swept along by her enthusiasm:

AMANDA. [W]hen I saw you standin' in church that day . . . and you were singin' . . . and had on that handsome blue jacket, you looked so...well...oh never mind, you don't want to hear this.

GUS. No, no, go on.

AMANDA. I just thought you might be embarrassed. You seemed a little embarrassed when I told you, you were handsome.

GUS. I'll stop you when I get embarrassed.

AMANDA. Well, I thought yu looked very attractive standin' there singin'. . . .

GUS. You found me attractive?

AMANDA. Oh my yes. And your eyes. . . . Oh, yes sir, you stir me right up. . . .

GUS. Why was I under the impression southern women were shy and inhibited about this kind of thing?

AMANDA. Obviously you never knew any southern women.

Amanda also displays her vivacity in the possible epitaphs she composes for her tombstone:

'Amanda Klingman lived with a song in her heart.' ... 'Amanda Klingman lived and loved well.' ... 'Amanda Klingman knew when to leave a party?'

To which Gus's response is, "Amanda, I don't think you're suppose to put stuff like this. . . . '[L]iving well, birds singing;. That doesn't belong."

But despite all their differences, the bridge finally does get constructed, the last building-block being the headstone that Gus, a retired mason, carves with his own hands and presents to Amanda in the final scene. That gesture represents the culmination of a process of change through which these characters have gone since their first encounter with each other less than six months earlier. Gus has opened his house to Amanda, and she has filled it with her furniture and her energy. Amanda has moved from her beloved Tennessee to the northern fastness of New Jersey, adapting to life in an alien world. Each has changed to accommodate the other, a transformation memorialized, ironically, by a headstone confirming the eternal changelessness of their relationship .

THE THEMES. The most famous line from Jean-Paul Sartre's dour existentialist play, *No Exit*, is Garcin's declaration just before the curtain falls: "Hell is—other people." *Southern Comforts* is a play that carries us toward an opposite conclusion: redemption is other people, or at least one other person you can talk to.

It's true, as we have seen, that both Amanda and Gus have had hellish relationships. She lost a young husband, possibly to suicide, because he wouldn't talk to her about his anguish. Her whole life has been shaped by that loss.

Gus has had forty-five years of a nightmarish marriage. "Did you fight a lot?," Amanda asks. "Just silence," Gus replies, a situation even worse than constant conflict. "When she got sick," Gus recalls, "I thought about talking to her about what had happened between us. You know, before she died. But I never did. I feel bad about that." This emotionally unconsummated

relationship has tainted his life, turning him into the defensive, suspicious, solitary figure we and Amanda meet in the first scene.

“[A]ll I was looking for was to find one person who’d be sad when I died,” Gus observes as he begins to grow closer to Amanda. But to his astonishment he finds infinitely more than that. When he senses the presence of his first wife late in the play it is “because I was feeling sorry she never got a chance to find out what it’s like to live your life with somebody you love. The way I did.” And now that his marriage to Amanda has given him “a second chance,” he makes a profound discovery:

[A]fter all these years of living, what is it that I want? And it just seemed so simple. I want you to be happy, that’s what I want. Isn’t that the damndest thing? After all these years. . . . Nothing means more to me than you. In my whole life.

Saint Paul tells us that the greatest of the virtues is charity, also translated as “love”— that spiritual quality that “seeketh not her own,” but rather leads us to seek the good of the beloved as the highest moral objective. This is what Gus and Amanda have inspired in each other.

And what about the significance of the play’s title? Southern Comfort is an alcoholic beverage compounded of bourbon whiskey and fruit flavorings. It is both sweet and intoxicating, like love. And that sweet intoxication is what the southerner, Amanda Cook, brings to the lonely house of Gus Klingman, who decides to let go of his stubborn old ways and instead to cling to her for the rest of his life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do the first few minutes on stage tell us about the characters of Gus and Amanda? Why does the playwright place the action in Gus’s house and make Amanda the visitor?
2. What’s the meaning of the fact that Gus spends so much of his time on stage in the first half of the play fussing with his storm windows? Does that tell us anything important about him?
3. What is the importance of the fact that Gus rarely sees his son, while Amanda spends lots of time visiting her daughter and grandchildren?
4. What does the physical change in Gus’s house after Amanda moves in tell us about the change in their lives?
5. What do you make of Gus’s initial decision to be buried next to his first wife rather than Amanda? What does it tell us about him as a character?
6. Why is Amanda so disturbed by that decision?

7. Why does Amanda tell Gus the “frog in the pan story?” What is she trying to get him to understand?
8. Why is it important that Gus is a retired stonemason? How does that relate to other elements of the plot?
9. Why does Gus refer on the headstone to himself and Amanda as “wife and husband” instead of the more familiar “husband and wife?”
10. Do you think Gus will agree to being buried in Tennessee?