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## Abraham and Isaac

*Author:* Unknown

*First produced:* Fifteenth century

*Type of work:* Drama

*Type of plot:* Mystery play

*Time of plot:* Biblical antiquity

*The dramatic structure of this miracle play centers on the movement of the biblical Abraham from his home to a climactic event atop a mountain, followed by his return home. The play's structure follows the basic thematic elements of a divine command, the testing of Abraham's faith, and the subsequent blessing announced to Abraham for faithfully passing his test.*

**Abraham's home.** This miracle play does not specify where Abraham lives, apart from his early statement that he understands his home to be a gift from God. According to biblical accounts, however, Abraham lived in Beersheba, a town in southern Palestine where Abraham entered into an oath with Abimelech that guaranteed him both water and grazing rights. In the play, the residents of Abraham's land practice human sacrifice; when he is called upon to take his son on a journey, he expects it will end in his son's sacrifice. After being tested on the mountain, Abraham returns home and receives further blessing.

**Mountain.** Crest of an unnamed mountain on which the play reaches its climax three days after Abraham leaves his home. Biblical texts identify this place as Moriah. Abraham's three-day journey to the mountain advances the plot and informs the audience that Abraham's son Isaac is unaware that he is to be sacrificed, although Abraham is fully aware of what he is expected to do. A raised elevation on the stage suggests the proximity to divinity of the participants. It also removes the act from the normal realm of life, thus reinforcing the sacred obligation involved. The place of devotion to God and human elevation, in this play, ironically, becomes a temporary place of despair since Abraham fully intends to slay his son.

Dramatic tension is relieved when an angel interrupts Abraham's sacrifice and a ram is substituted for his son. The mountain thereafter symbolizes complete devotion to the deity and marks a milestone in Abraham's evolving theology. The mountain is the place of epiphany on which Abraham realizes that human sacrifice is not required of him, thus separating him from his social context. It also comes to be recognized as a place of divine provision. The play's fifteenth century audiences associated Isaac symbolically with Jesus Christ and saw the play as a prefiguring of Christ's

Crucifixion; they therefore associated its mountain with the place of the Crucifixion.

—Kenneth Hada

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## Absalom, Absalom!

*Author:* William Faulkner (1897–1962)

*First published:* 1936

*Type of work:* Novel

*Type of plot:* Psychological realism

*Time of plot:* 1807–1910

*As in most of William Faulkner's fiction, Yoknapatawpha County functions in this novel both as a narrowly defined microcosm of a pre-and post-Civil War South whose racial prejudice contributes to spiritual depravity and physical devastation and as a universal setting in which Faulkner examines the struggles of what he termed the "human heart in conflict with itself."*

**Yoknapatawpha County** (YOK-nuh-puh-TAW-fuh). Fictional county in northwestern Mississippi that Faulkner called his "little postage stamp of native soil." By the time Faulkner wrote *Absalom, Absalom!* he had used this setting in five novels. For this novel, however, he drew a map of the county on which he identified places used in both this and the earlier novels. Faulkner gave the county an area of 2,400 square miles and a population of 6,298 white residents and 9,313 black residents. With the Tallahatchie River serving as the northern boundary, the Yoknapatawpha River—an old name for the actual Yocona River—as the southern boundary, Yoknapatawpha bears a remarkable resemblance to, but is not identical with, Mississippi's real Lafayette County.

**Jefferson Yoknapatawpha's fictional county seat**, is likewise patterned after Oxford; however, Faulkner also includes a town called "Oxford" in the novel. A rural, agricultural county with a large number of plantations, including Sutpen's Hundred, Yoknapatawpha is a miniature of the South during the nineteenth century. Amid a society permeated with racial prejudice and class consciousness, the character Thomas Sutpen is both spurred toward his goal and denied the opportunity for success. Despite his efforts to achieve respectability, most members of Jefferson's aristocracy regard him as an outsider and fail to recognize that he mirrors the flaws of their society.

**Sutpen's Hundred** (SUHT-penz). Plantation built by Thomas Sutpen on a "hundred square miles of some of the best virgin bottom land in the country." Having failed in an earlier attempt in the West Indies to achieve his "design,"

\*Asterisk denotes entries on real places.

Sutpen purchases land from a local Chickasaw chief. With the help of a French architect and slave labor, he ruthlessly sets out to establish a dynasty in Yoknapatawpha County. He spends two years building his mansion, leaves it unfinished and unfurnished for three years, and finally completes it in time for his marriage to Ellen Coldfield. It serves as the setting for the major actions of the story. Although the house is unquestionably grand in its early days, the various narrators of the novel focus on its later rotting, decaying, desolate stage with “its sagging portico and scaling walls, its sagging blinds and blank-shuttered windows.” The house clearly symbolizes Sutpen’s failed dream and the fallen South. When it finally goes up in flames, years after Sutpen’s death, Sutpen’s only living descendant, the idiot Jim Bond, “howls” about the place.

**\*West Virginia.** Originally part of Virginia, West Virginia became a state in 1863. Sutpen is born in a primitive farm society of the region’s mountains in 1807. During his first ten years he lives there with no real awareness of racial prejudice and class distinctions. His earliest years contrast sharply with his later experiences.

**\*Virginia.** When Sutpen’s family moves from the mountains into Virginia’s tidewater region, the ten-year-old Sutpen encounters the aristocratic southern social code in a humiliating experience that changes his life. Sent as a messenger to the home of a wealthy plantation owner, he is told by the black servant to go around to the back of the house. From his experience in this society, Sutpen formulates his “design”—his plan to gain, through whatever means necessary, the possessions and position in society to prevent ever being similarly humiliated again.

**\*Harvard University.** Prestigious institution of higher learning in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Although Mississippi is the setting for most of Sutpen’s story, the last half of the novel is narrated by Jefferson native Quentin Compson and Shreve McCannon, his Canadian roommate at Harvard. In a cold dormitory room far from his Jefferson home, Quentin tries to come to terms with his feelings about the South as he and Shreve piece together Sutpen’s story. His confusion and intense feelings about his place of birth are reflected in his response to Shreve’s asking him why he hates the South. He quickly responds that he does not hate it; however, his subsequent reiterated thoughts clearly reflect his anguished ambivalence: “I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!”

**\*Haiti.** West Indian island nation ruled by descendants of African slaves and the site of Sutpen’s first failure to achieve his design. As a young man Sutpen emigrates to Haiti. Amid a slave insurrection, he heroically helps a landowner save his

plantation and subsequently wins the hand of the man’s daughter, who then bears him a son. Soon thereafter Sutpen discovers that his wife has African blood and renounces her and all the possessions he has gained through his marriage. The romanticized land of promise has left him bereft, and his only hope is to start anew elsewhere.

**\*Oxford.** Site of the University of Mississippi, where Sutpen’s two sons, Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon, meet. The university atmosphere enables them to become close friends despite Charles’s being ten years older.

—*Verbie Lovorn Prevost*

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## Absalom and Achitophel

*Author:* John Dryden (1631–1700)

*First published:* 1681

*Type of work:* Poetry

*Type of plot:* Satire

*Time of plot:* Biblical antiquity

*John Dryden’s choice of ancient Jerusalem as the setting for his poem is mandated by the story he tells in this heroic-couplet satire. The poem recounts the rebellion of Absalom and Achitophel against King David recorded in the Old Testament, but is actually about contemporary English politics, with Jerusalem representing late seventeenth century London.*

**\*Jerusalem.** Capital city of the ancient Israelites (also called Sion), beginning with King David’s reign. Within the poem itself, Jerusalem is never described; its presence is merely assumed as the backdrop for the action, as dictated by history. What interests Dryden is not so much the location of the story, but the psychology of the characters involved in the rebellion. Insofar as he uses a biblical story to reflect political events in England, Jerusalem represents London. Dryden uses biblical events and characters in the poem to mirror the political situation in late seventeenth century London—which can be equated with Jerusalem—when Lord Shaftesbury (equated with the biblical Achitophel) opposed Charles II (King David) in the choice of his brother, James, as heir to the throne. Shaftesbury conspires with the Duke of Monmouth (Absalom), the king’s illegitimate son, to become king.

Dryden’s narration utilizes biblical history as a model for other historical events, with its characters incarnating great archetypes that recur through history. Since Absalom’s rebellion may be seen as an archetype for political uprising by a family member against a legitimate ruler,

Jerusalem may also be seen as an archetype—a symbol of any major capital city in which legitimate government is threatened by insurgency from within.

Although Dryden's contemporaries understood his poem as a veiled statement about events in London, the poem's narrative widens the potential interpretations of the story, its characters and its setting. Thus, Dryden's Jerusalem transcends time and space, becoming not only London but a city anywhere at any time whose government is threatened by internal rebellion.

—Marsha Daigle-Williamson

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## The Absentee

*Author:* Maria Edgeworth (1768–1849)

*First published:* 1812

*Type of work:* Novel

*Type of plot:* Social realism

*Time of plot:* Early nineteenth century

*Maria Edgeworth's novel chronicles the near dissolution of the Clonbrony family, whose members are caught up in the Anglo-Irish social class system that the family represents and who live lavishly in London. Ultimately, the family finds salvation by returning to Ireland. Intent on realism, Maria Edgeworth spares nothing in describing the corruption inherent in the Anglo-Irish social system and calls for the abandonment of absenteeism and the return to duty of residential landlords.*

**\*London.** Capital of Great Britain and leading city of the British Isles, in which the Anglo-Irish absentee landlord Lord Clonbrony and his ruthless, social-climbing wife maintain an extravagant lifestyle. *The Absentee* is set in a historical period when the Irish social order was split over the question of union with Britain. Although the class of people known as “Anglo-Irish”—wealthy Protestant landowners—had dominated Ireland for generations, many of them, like Edgeworth's fictional Clonbrons, spend their lives in England and on the European continent, living in luxury, while reaping profits from their Irish agricultural properties. Many of them never even set foot in Ireland, leaving management of their lands in the hands of exploitative overseers.

Ireland's absentee landlord system, coupled with the emerging greedy Irish middle-class, oppressed the disenfranchised, indigent Irish peasants. In London, the Clonbrony family, especially Lady Clonbrony, attempts to buy its way into high society. Going to great lengths to deny her Irish roots, Lady Clonbrony denigrates her former country and attempts to marry off her son, Lord Colambre, to a

local heiress. London here represents decay, and because of the absentee landlord system, the Clonbrony family sinks into decline.

**\*Ireland.** Roman Catholic country ruled by Britain. The hero of Edgeworth's novel, Lord Colambre, finds hope and salvation for the Clonbrony family in Ireland. Young and intelligent, he travels incognito to Ireland to investigate his family's Irish estates and learn whether his mother's negative ideas about Ireland are justified. Traveling anonymously to each of his father's estates, he comes to know the truth. Known as Evans, on the first of his father's estates, he finds that his father has just fired the likable and honest estate agent Burke for not extorting sufficient income from the estate's tenants. The Brothers Garraghty manage the second estate, which Lord Colambre finds in complete disorder: Its church is falling down, its roads are almost impassable, and its tenants are terribly abused. Although the brothers almost openly embezzle estate funds, Lord Clonbrony fails to take action against them because they still send him enough money to support his sumptuous lifestyle in London. Again, Edgeworth emphasizes the decay of the Anglo-Irish social order.

Lord Colambre also finds a more peaceful existence in Ireland, where he comes to realize the true quality of the people his mother so severely criticizes. Eventually, he begins to view Ireland as a haven. Upon his return to London, he promises to pay off the family debts himself on the conditions that the Garraghty brothers are let go and his family ceases being absentee landowners. They must, he declares, return to Ireland and take up their ancestral responsibility of caring for their estates. Eventually, his family finds salvation by returning to Ireland—precisely what Edgeworth urges as the political solution to the decaying Anglo-Irish social order.

—M. Casey Diana

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## The Acharnians

*Author:* Aristophanes (c. 450–c. 385 b.c.e.)

*First published:* 425 b.c.e.

*First produced:* *Achars*, 425 b.c.e. (English translation, 1812)

*Type of work:* Drama

*Type of plot:* Satire

*Time of plot:* 431–404 b.c.e.

*Numerous topical references to public figures of Aristophanes' time and a vivid depiction of locales fix the political and social criticism organic to this play firmly in*

*\*Asterisk denotes entries on real places.*

*its original Greek audiences' own time and place—Athens in 425 b.c.e.*

\***Athens.** Greek democratic city-state at the height of its power when Aristophanes wrote in the late fifth century b.c.e. and the setting for most of his plays. The play's action begins at the Pnyx, an open hillside overlooking the city center where the Assembly of Citizens meets to vote on state business. Its focus then shifts to a street in front of three houses that belong to the hero, the historical early fifth century b.c.e. tragedian Euripides, and the warrior Lamachos in a fictional juxtaposition of actual Athenian places convenient for the drama. At the hero's insistence, Euripides' house opens to reveal him in his cluttered study. The realities of peace and war contrast when weaponry is brought from Lamachos's house and festival gear from the hero's. The hero's wife observes festival preparations from the roof of the house; outside it, the hero establishes a free-trade zone, in which he negotiates illicit exchanges under his private peace treaty.

Clownish caricatures of nearby peoples at war with Athens visit the illegal market, for example, a starving bumpkin from Megara to the west and an aristocratic fop from Boiotian Thebes to the north. Athenian officials who attempt to enforce the realities of real-life war restrictions upon the hero's private market space are repelled. Other characters represent contending regional interests in the war. For example, these include a chorus of belligerent charcoal burners from the rural Athenian township of Acharnai seven miles north of Athens; the outlandish envoy from the wealthy Persian Empire, cultivated by the government in the hope of financial support; and the boorish and gluttonous Odomanian allies from Thrace to the north. An enigmatic choral reference implies that Aristophanes, himself an Athenian citizen, has family connections to Aegina, a real island subjugated by Athens and visible from her harbor.

—Elizabeth A. Fisher

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## Adam Bede

*Author:* George Eliot (1819–1880)

*First published:* 1859

*Type of work:* Novel

*Type of plot:* Domestic realism

*Time of plot:* 1799

*This novel of guilt, alienation, and retribution is set in the rural Midlands of England, where contrasting prosperity and bleakness provide a strong sense of place. That earlier,*

*turn-of-century place presents the moral coherence of the old feudal economic system and the interdependence of all those rooted within it, including tenant farmers, laborers, artisans, servants, and landowners. Squire Arthur Donnithorne's self-deluding and irresponsible seduction of Hetty Sorrel, a pretty but penniless dairy maid, violates that mutual trust, disrupts the community, and almost causes its breakup. The sense of place is further strengthened by chapter titles that name each place of action.*

**Hayslope in the county of Loamshire Midlands village in a fictional county of where Adam Bede,** a skilled carpenter, works for Jonathan Burge. Scenes alternate between the indoors (the workshop, the Bede home, the rectory, the Hall farm) and the outdoors (the green, the woods, the churchyard, the orchard and garden) picturing the full range of a community. The novel opens in the village carpentry workshop, where Adam praises industrious creativity, which, he argues, God favors as much as the religious singing, praying, and preaching of the Methodists, a group to which his “dreamy” brother Seth belongs. The workplace emphasizes Adam's strong integrity and reliability, as well as his tendency to be unsympathetic toward others' weaknesses.

**Bede cottage.** Cottage that Adam shares with his brother and parents. His work ethic dominates this place; he has been doing his father's work for several years and is disgusted because his father too often visits the nearby pub. Eventually, however, Adam relents from his hard stance toward weakness, when he and Seth discover their drunken father has drowned.

**Hall farm.** Managed by Martin and Rachel Poyser, this is the best-kept tenant farm on the estate of Squire Donnithorne. Here the reader meets the fantasy-driven Hetty, niece of Martin, and sees the visiting squire flirting with her. Mr. Irwine, the rector, accompanies the squire and cautions him against turning Hetty's head. After Hetty's disgrace, the Poyser and Adam feel they must relocate; their move over a distance of only twenty miles is presented as a complete uprooting from their former sense of permanence. George Eliot is contrasting a lost agrarian world, Old England, with mid-century industrialized England.

**Snowfield, Stoniton, and Stonyshire.** Bleak areas, unlike the fertile Hayslope of Loamshire, that are associated not with agricultural productivity, but with the cotton mill where Dinah Morris works and with Hetty's imprisonment and trial. They are also associated with the religion of the poor—outdoor Methodism—and Stoniton is the place of the upper room in which Bartle Massey looks after Adam, giving him



bread and wine. Dinah says that the harsh conditions make the inhabitants responsive to religion.

—*Carolyn Dickinson*

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## The Admirable Crichton

*Author:* James Barrie (1860–1937)

*First published:* 1914

*First produced:* 1902

*Type of work:* Drama

*Type of plot:* Satire

*Time of plot:* Early twentieth century

*The two locations in which the play is set contrast the highly artificial aristocratic society with a “state of nature,” from which the elements of subsistence—food, water, and shelter—must be directly derived. In these very different contexts the worth of an individual is determined by entirely different criteria.*

**Loam House.** Home of the Earl of Loam in London’s Mayfair district—one of the most expensive districts of London, where the cream of the English aristocracy maintained their town houses in the days before World War I. Loam House, like its eponymous owner, is apparently not of the highest rank. It contains several reception rooms of varying quality, some of which are to be “lent for charitable purposes,” while those reserved for private use are lavishly furnished. Act 1 takes place in the most luxurious of the rooms, which is lavishly equipped with a carpet, couches, and cushions. Its walls are decorated with paintings by well-known artists. A thousand roses are distributed in basins, while shelves and tables contain library novels, illustrated newspapers and, as the play opens, all the paraphernalia required for the serving and consumption of that hallowed English tradition, high tea.

By the time this room reappears in act 4, its decor has changed considerably. Various animal skins, stuffed birds, and the weapons used to kill them have replaced the paintings, and other items have been replaced by mementos of Crichton’s castaway experience. The tale tacitly told by these exhibits is, however, transparently false. Labels attached to the trophies on the walls emphasize the fact that all Crichton’s achievements have been rudely appropriated by the aristocrats, who are his social betters. However, the true story behind the sham can be perceived now, much more easily than in act 1.

**Island.** Desert island on which various members of the Loam household are shipwrecked, somewhere in the Pacific Ocean.

Its shore is fringed by a thicket of bamboo. Trees, including coconut palms, are abundant, and its fauna includes monkeys, snakes, and wildcats. In act 2 the only edifice that the castaways have erected is a half-finished hut, and the only person working constructively on it is Crichton. When act 3 opens two years later, the castaways have moved to a larger log cabin, set on higher ground close to a stream. A mill wheel erected on the stream provides the cabin with electric light.

The furniture of the cabin’s main room stands in careful contrast to that of the reception room in Loam House. Improvised spades, saws, and fishing rods are placed on the joists supporting the roof. Cured hams are suspended from hooks, while barrels and sacks of other foodstuffs are lodged in recesses. The floor is bare save for a few animal skins. Although various pieces of wreckage have been put to new uses—the ship’s steering wheel is now a chandelier, and a life buoy provides a back for one of the chairs—most of the furniture is the result of “rough but efficient carpentering.” Its main door consists of four swinging panels, and its unglazed window is equipped with a shutter. There are several sleeping rooms and a work room.

At the first appearance of this miracle of improvisation, its architect, the butler, is conspicuously absent, while other cast members drift in and out, emphasizing by their conduct that they are now entirely subservient to his mastery. The meal that is eaten when he does appear is an extreme contrast, in terms of its constituents, its apparatus, and the roles of its participants, to the tea served in the reception room of Loam House. The spontaneity of the after-dinner dancing, to the tune of a makeshift concertina, contrasts sharply with the stiff formality of social intercourse at Loam House. What kind of social progress is it, the play meekly wonders, that has transformed one setting into another, and how can such perverse artificiality possibly survive?

—*Brian Stableford*

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## Adolphe

*Author:* Benjamin Constant (1767–1830)

*First published:* 1816 (English translation, 1816)

*Type of work:* Novel

*Type of plot:* Psychological realism

*Time of plot:* Late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries

*In this semiautobiographical and psychological study of an ill-fated passion, the protagonist’s movements among various European sites mark his vacillations between his mistress and his father’s way of life. The novel shows a classical*

\*Asterisk denotes entries on real places.