Alison’s House, by Susan Glaspell, was first produced off-Broadway at the Civic Repertory Theater in the fall and winter season of 1930. At the heart of this play is a poet, Alison Stanhope, who has been dead eighteen years. Although only a handful of her poems were published during her lifetime, they have captured the attention and affection of people all over the country. Alison’s spirit lives on in the hearts of her family and her fans. Alison’s House is about the poet’s family, their relationships, and the discovery of a portfolio containing hundreds of previously unknown poems by Alison.

Glaspell wanted to write her play about enigmatic New England poet Emily Dickinson, but the Dickinson family refused to give her permission to use their name or to quote from Emily’s poetry. Undaunted, Glaspell moved the setting to her home state of Iowa and recast the Dickinson family as the Stanhopes. Unable to quote Dickinson’s poetry, Glaspell quoted from Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose work was beloved by Dickinson. Emerson’s poem, “The House,” inspired the title of Glaspell’s play.

Glaspell was an established and well-regarded novelist and playwright as well as the cofounder, with her husband George Cram Cook, of the Provincetown Players. When Glaspell wrote Alison’s House, Cook had died, and Glaspell had married writer Norman Matson. Alison’s House won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1931, which was a huge surprise to everyone because it had not been a favorite of critics and audiences. Production of
Alison’s House was immediately moved to Broadway where lukewarm reception forced the play to close after two weeks.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Susan Keating Glaspell was born July 1, 1876, in Davenport, Iowa, to Alice and Elmer Glaspell. Her year of birth is sometimes given as 1882, which Glaspell herself perpetuated to make herself six years younger. She received her bachelor’s degree from Drake University in 1899 and worked briefly as a reporter in Des Moines, unconsciously gathering material for her later fiction and dramatic works. After successful sales of some of her short stories, Glaspell left journalism in 1901. She pursued full-time writing, publishing her first novel, The Glory of the Conquered, in 1909.

Glaspell was introduced to her husband, George Cram Cook, through a bohemian society, and they married in 1913. Glaspell and Cook soon moved to Greenwich Village in New York City. They spent their summers in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where, in 1915, they founded the experimental theater, Provincetown Players. Their work with the Provincetown Players was at the vanguard of the new theater movement in North America, which had slowly been picked up from its popular incarnations in Europe. Glaspell and Cook helped launch the careers of several aspiring playwrights, including Eugene O’Neill, whom they met in 1916. Glaspell’s popular play Trifles (1916) was written to be performed along with O’Neill’s Bound East for Cardiff (1916). Trifles was reworked a year later as the much-anthologized short story, “A Jury of Her Peers.”

In 1922, Glaspell and Cook separated from the Provincetown Players after Cook experienced some failure and O’Neill left to do commercial theater. The couple went to Delphi, Greece, where Cook worked on his writing. He died two years later, in Greece, and Glaspell returned to Provincetown. She married writer Norman Matson in 1925, and they divorced in 1931. Alison’s House was first produced in 1930 and won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1931. People were surprised and disappointed by this honor because Alison’s House was not widely regarded as a successful play. After its failure on Broadway, Glaspell left New York City. She worked briefly as director of the Federal Theater Project and then retired to Provincetown to write novels. Glaspell’s work is notable for its pioneer spirit, regional Iowan flavor, and sexual tension between male and female characters. Her works often deal with questions about the meaning of life. In her lifetime, she published forty short stories, twenty plays, and ten novels. Glaspell died of pneumonia on July 27, 1948, in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

PLOT SUMMARY

Act 1

Alison’s House begins in the library of the Stanhope house, with Ann, the family secretary, sorting through old papers in a trunk. The housekeeper, Jennie, shows Knowles, a young reporter, into the library. He is looking for information about the late Alison Stanhope before the family finishes clearing out the house and sells it. He also desperately wants to see Alison’s room. Knowles shares his passion for Alison’s poetry with Ann, even showing her a poem he wrote. Ted, the youngest Stanhope, comes into the library. Ann introduces Knowles to Ted, and Ted is persuaded to take Knowles up to Alison’s room, against the rest of the family’s wishes.

Shortly after they leave, Louise comes in and questions Ann sharply about the reporter. Ann
Eben joins Elsa and Ann in Alison’s room. Ann admits she is going to marry Knowles. Eben is hesitant at first but gives Ann the picture of Agatha in her youth for Knowles to put in his story. Ann thanks them both profusely and leaves. Eben feels terrible for his father, who will be losing Ann, and so soon after losing his sister Agatha. Eben recalls beloved Aunt Alison aloud, what she looked like, and how she would sit and compose her now famous poetry. Elsa shows Eben the mysterious portfolio just as Mr. Stanhope joins his two grown children. Mr. Stanhope recognizes the portfolio as belonging to Alison, and Elsa recounts how Agatha bequeathed it to her with her dying breath.

Jennie enters, determined to carry out a wish of Agatha’s. Mr. Stanhope figures out that Agatha made Jennie promise to burn the portfolio. Jennie does not know what it is, but she wants to do right by her employer and is distressed. Mr. Stanhope, Elsa, and Eben convince Jennie that she absolved of her promise because Agatha gave the case to Elsa at the last minute. Jennie is distraught that since Alison and Agatha are dead she has no one to look after. Mr. Stanhope says he needs her to look after him, and he sends her off to bed.

Elsa finally opens the contents of the portfolio and discovers packets of Alison’s poetry—poems that no one has ever seen before. The three of them are absorbed with reading these poems, poems that are so revealing of the person they knew and loved, which is why she never published them. Ted arrives, apologizing for his tardiness. He was summoned home after Aunt Agatha’s death. Ted is astonished to see these new poems, but Eben sends him away so that Mr. Stanhope can have peace while he reads.

After they read for a while, Mr. Stanhope tells Elsa and Eben that he was instrumental in keeping Alison from running away with her beloved. She was in love with a professor at Harvard who was married with children. Ted returns, demanding to read the poems also. Mr. Stanhope becomes protective of Alison and says he will do what Agatha could not and burn Alison’s poems. His children disagree, decrying that the poems belong to them as well. Ted is very passionate and even stuffs some of the poems in his pocket. Mr. Stanhope threatens to kill him and then is shocked by his own outcry. Elsa convinces Ted to leave, and Eben also goes out to get sherry. Elsa speaks a little with her father about the world of shame and happiness she lives in and how Alison would not disapprove of her. Eben returns, and they drink to Alison’s memory. The poems are gathered, and Eben says of them, “They were too big for just us. They are for the world.” Ann, Ted, and Knowles come to the bedroom to add their voices to Eben and Elsa. Ann implores Mr. Stanhope to let Alison’s poems go out in the world, invoking his forbidden love of her mother. Mr. Stanhope is stricken. Ann, Ted, Knowles, and Eben leave once Mr. Stanhope has been convinced to leave the poems to Elsa, as Agatha bequeathed. Alone, Elsa and her father talk about his unhappy marriage to her mother. He is angry with her for running off with a married man after he lived the lie all of his life, denying himself his true love, Ann’s mother. They feel Alison’s poems were written for each of them and take this as a sign of their universal appeal. Mr. Stanhope builds up the fire, takes the portfolio, and appeals to Elsa one last time to join him in protecting Alison’s good name. As the hour strikes the new year and new century, Mr. Stanhope finally turns over the poems to Elsa and father and daughter embrace and are reunited.

CHARACTERS

Aunt Agatha
Aunt Agatha is the sister of Alison and of Mr. Stanhope. She lives alone in the historic family home in the Iowa countryside, near the Mississippi River, cared for by her maid, Jennie. Agatha is upset about being moved out of her home and repeatedly blames her brother for turning her out. She does not seem to regard his strained finances as any kind of justification for selling the house. All the talk about Alison that comes up from the move and from Knowles’s arrival drives Agatha to worry about the unpublished poetry of Alison’s, which she is hid- ing. Because of its scandalous content, Agatha knows she must destroy the poems, but she cannot bring herself to do it. Although Agatha never specifies, one might conclude from the other characters that Agatha is unable to destroy these poems because of their beauty. Agatha tries to burn the house down and later dies just after failing a second time to burn the portfolio. She leaves the poems to Elsa.

Father
See Mr. Stanhope

Mr. Hodges
Mr. Hodges buys the Stanhope family manor. He and his wife plan to drastically alter the building,
Edward Stanhope

See Ted Stanhope

Elsa Stanhope

Elsa Stanhope, Mr. Stanhope’s daughter, ran away with Bill who was married to Louise’s best friend Margaret. Elsa and Bill live in exile from their families because of the scandal their relationship created. Elsa shyly returns home for a visit when she hears that her father is selling the family house. Louise is irate at Elsa’s presence and will not stay in the house with her, but Mr. Stanhope permits Elsa to stay, despite the dishonor she has brought to the family. Elsa is given Alison’s portfolio of unpublished poems by Aunt Agatha and fights with her father for their preservation. Elsa convinces him that they cannot destroy Alison’s story and that it should be shared with the world. She completes the story of love and loneliness told through Alison’s poetry. Elsa has her own, different loneliness, but now, with the acceptance of her family, it need not be as severe as it was for Alison.

Louise Stanhope

Louise Stanhope, Eben’s wife, is an example of a typical, upstanding late-nineteenth-century woman, but her rigid character clashes with the Stanhope family. Louise worries more than anyone else about what other people are saying about their family. She and Eben have children, but they are not happily married. Although Eben has not fallen in love with another woman, Eben may eventually find a reason to leave her. Louise seems unconcerned that this could actually happen, probably because breaking up a marriage is still a very serious social transgression.

Mr. Stanhope

Mr. Stanhope, the patriarch of the family and Alison Stanhope’s brother, lives in the city and is being forced to sell the historic family home where his sister, Agatha, and her maid, Jennie, now live. Mr. Stanhope is saddened to see the home in which he was born and grew up go to the soulless Hodges but strained finances and concern for Agatha are forcing him to sell. Like Alison, Mr. Stanhope has suffered his own share of heartache, pinning after Ann’s mother even though he remained in an unhappy marriage to the mother of his children. Nonetheless, he is a good father and close to his children. Rigid Louise is a foil for Mr. Stanhope, showing him to be reserved and private but not uptight or overly concerned with gossip. When Elsa arrives at the house unexpectedly, Mr. Stanhope will not turn her away even though he is upset with her for bringing shame to the family name. He is reluctant to give up Ann, who is like a daughter to him and his only remaining connection to the woman he once loved, but he see that Knowles is a kind man. Mr. Stanhope does not want to reveal what may be seen as a scandal regarding Alison, but for the first time in his life, he chooses love. Thus, he is able to reconcile with Elsa and release Alison’s poems.

Ted Stanhope

Ted Stanhope, Mr. Stanhope’s youngest son, is a student at Harvard University. Ted is too young to remember Alison and seems to lack the sensitivity toward life that Eben and Elsa exhibit, although he does not lack for passion and argues vehemently with his father for the preservation of Alison’s lost poems. Throughout the play, Ted seeks new information about mysterious Aunt Alison in order to get better grades with his English professor, but his family refuses to cooperate with him. He does not understand what the big deal is—Ted is the only family member not touched by forbidden love. Ted also does not want to go into the family business and is more attracted to speculating in rubber.

THEMES

Forbidden Love

Forbidden love is a theme that runs throughout the lives of the characters in Alison’s House. The title character, Alison Stanhope, is known to have loved a married man. She would have run away with him except that her brother stopped her. Her loneliness and love inform much of her unpublished poetry, which her sister and brother try to suppress. Alison’s brother, Mr. Stanhope, has also experienced forbidden love. He was in love with Ann’s mother even though he was married with three children. He denied himself this love although Mr. Stanhope kept Ann and her mother in his household so that he could enjoy Ann’s mother’s company.

Elsa is the only character who has acted on her forbidden love. Although it was scandalous to her family, Elsa ran away with the man she fell in love with, and he left his wife and children to be with her. It is perceived as improper for her to come back home, but she is moved to see her childhood home before it is sold, and her father and brothers
TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

• Select your favorite Dickinson poem. Read it aloud to your class and explain what you think it is about and why you like it best.

• Individually or in small groups, select an author whose work you admire. Script a fifteen-minute dramatization of an important event in that person’s life and perform your short play for the class. For added effect, work some of the author’s writing into the script.

• Glaspell liked to write about her home state of Iowa where *Alison’s House* is set. Research the history of Iowa and write a brief report about a significant event that took place in Iowa or an important person who lived there.

• In the early 2000s, divorce is much more commonplace and socially accepted in the United States than it was a century earlier. What are the divorce rates then as compared to now? Do you agree with Elsa’s position to live only for love no matter what other people say or with Mr. Stanhope’s position to deny love and stay in an unhappy marriage because that is what is proper, especially when one has children? Write a short essay defending your point of view, using evidence from Glaspell’s play.

• Write a poem that reflects on one of the themes in *Alison’s House*. Have a poetry slam party where participants read their poems using visuals, sound, lighting, performance, or audience interaction, as desired.

• *Alison’s House* takes place on December 31, 1899, at the turn of the nineteenth century. How are people recognizing the turn of the century in this play? How does it compare to the recent millennial celebration at the turn of the twentieth century? How do you like to celebrate New Year’s Eve? Write a short story about a fictional New Year’s Eve celebration—set on December 31, 2099.

• Alison Stanhope is modeled after New England poet Emily Dickinson. Read a biography of this poet. Write an essay describing the similarities and differences between the poet’s life and Glaspell’s portrayal. What do we know about Dickinson and her family that Glaspell and Dickinson’s biographers did not know in the 1930s? Do you feel *Alison’s House* is an accurate portrayal of the Dickinson family?

• Emily Dickinson admired the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American poet and philosopher who first expressed the philosophical ideas of American transcendentalism in his long essay *Nature* (1836). Research American transcendentalism, including reading *Nature*, and prepare a poster or other visual aid that summarizes this philosophy, gives examples of works that are considered transcendental, and describes some well-known adherents from the nineteenth century to today. Display your poster in the classroom or school public space.

• Dickinson and Walt Whitman were two influential American poets from the nineteenth century. They were very different in their personalities and writing styles. Read a selection of poems from each poet. Which do you prefer and why? Be specific in your answers: point to specific lines, images, or emotions, and use literary device terminology. Share your responses with your classmates in a roundtable discussion of the lives and works of these two prominent American poets.

• Theater-going has declined since the 1930s, when *Alison’s House* was produced. Select a show to attend at a nearby theater, whether civic or professional. You can go individually to different shows or as a class to the same show. Write a review of the play you see, focusing on the performances, sound, lights, setting, directing, writing, and anything else that catches your attention. Include compliments as well as criticisms to make your review balanced. For extra credit, submit your review to a local newspaper for publication consideration.