

Play No.

3

# The Oyster and the Pearl

*(William Saroyan)*

## Characters

HARRY VAN DUSEN, a barber.

CLAY LARRABEE, a boy on Saturday.

VIVIAN McCUTCHEON, a new school teacher.

CLARK LARRABEE, Clay's father.

MAN, a writer.

ROXANNA LARRABEE, Clay's sister.

GREELEY, Clay's pal.

JUDGE APPLGARTH, a beach comber.

WOZZECK, a watch repairer.

## The Oyster and the Pearl

### SCENE

Harry Van Dusen's barber shop in O.K.-by-the-Sea, California, population 909. The sign on the window says: HARRY VAN DUSEN, BARBER. It's an old-fashioned shop, crowded with stuff not usually found in barber shops – Harry himself, for instance. He has never been known to put on a barber's white jacket or to work without a hat of some sort on his head: a stovepipe, a derby, a western, a homburg, a skullcap, a beret, or a straw, as if putting on these various hats somewhat expressed the quality of his soul, or suggested the range of it.

On the walls, on shelves, are many odds and ends, some apparently washed up by the sea, which is a block down the street: abalone and other shells, rocks, pieces of driftwood, a life jacket, rope, sea plants. There is one old-fashioned chair.

When the play begins, Harry is seated in the chair. A boy of nine or ten named Clay Larrabee is giving him a haircut. Harry is reading a book, one of many in the shop.

CLAY            Well, I did what you told me, Mr. Van Dusen. I hope it's all right. I'm no barber, though. *(He begins to comb the hair.)*

HARRY        You just gave me a haircut, didn't you?

CLAY        I don't know *what* you'd call it. You want to look at it in the mirror? *(He holds out a small mirror.)*

HARRY        No thanks. I remember the last one.

CLAY        I guess I'll never be a barber.

HARRY        May be not. On the other hand, you may turn out to be the one man hidden away in the junk of the world who will bring merriment to the tired old human heart.

CLAY        Who? Me?

HARRY        Why not?

CLAY        Merriment to the tired old human heart? How do you do that?

HARRY        Compose a symphony, paint a picture, write a book, invent a philosophy.

CLAY        Not me! Did you ever do stuff like that?

HARRY        I did.

CLAY        What did you do?

HARRY        Invented a philosophy.

CLAY        What's that?

HARRY        A way to live.



- CLAY           What way did you invent?
- HARRY         The *Take-it-easy* way.
- CLAY           That sounds pretty good.
- HARRY         All philosophies *sound* good. The trouble with mine was, I kept forgetting to take it easy. Until one day. The day I came off the highway into this barber shop. The barber told me the shop was for sale. I told him all I had to my name was eighty dollars. He sold me the shop for seventy five, and threw in the haircut. I've been here ever since. That was twenty-four years ago.
- CLAY           Before I was born.
- HARRY         Fifteen or sixteen years before you were born.
- CLAY           How old were you then?
- HARRY         Old enough to know a good thing when I saw it.
- CLAY           What did you see?
- HARRY         O.K. by-the-Sea, and this shop – the proper place for me to stop. That's a couplet. Shakespeare had them at the end of a scene, so I guess that's the end of this haircut. (*He gets out of the chair, goes to the hat tree, and puts on a derby.*)
- CLAY           I guess I'd never get a haircut if you weren't in town, Mr. Van Dusen.
- HARRY         Nobody would, since I'm the only barber.
- CLAY           I mean, free of charge.
- HARRY         I give you a haircut free of charge, you give me a haircut free of charge. That's fair and square.
- CLAY           Yes, but you're a barber. You get a dollar a haircut.
- HARRY         Now and then I do. Now and then I don't.
- CLAY           Well, anyhow, thanks a lot. I guess I'll go down to the beach now and look for stuff.
- HARRY         I'd go with you but I'm expecting a little Saturday business.
- CLAY           This time I'm going to find something *real good*, I think.
- HARRY         The sea washes up some pretty good things at that, doesn't it?
- CLAY           It sure does, except money.
- HARRY         What do you want the money for?
- CLAY           Things I need.
- HARRY         What do you need?
- CLAY           I want to get my father to come home again. I want to buy Mother a present.
- HARRY         Now, wait a minute, Clay, let me get this straight. Where is your father?

- CLAY I don't know. He went off the day after I got my last haircut about a month ago.
- HARRY What do you mean, he went off?
- CLAY He just picked up and went off.
- HARRY Did he say when he was coming back?
- CLAY No. All he said was, Enough's enough. He wrote it on the kitchen wall.
- HARRY Enough's enough?
- CLAY Yeah. We all thought he'd be back in a day or two, but now we know we've got to *find* him and *bring* him back.
- HARRY How do you expect to do that?
- CLAY Well, we put an ad in *The O.K.-by-the-Sea Gull*,... that comes out every Saturday.
- HARRY (*opening the paper*). This paper? But your father's not in town. How will he see an ad in this paper?
- CLAY He *might* see it. Anyhow, we don't know what else to do. We're living off the money we saved from the summer we worked, but there ain't much left.
- HARRY The summer you worked?
- CLAY Yeah. Summer before last, just before we moved here, we picked cotton in Kern Country. My father, my mother, and me.
- HARRY (*indicating the paper*). What do you say in your ad?
- CLAY (*looking at it*). Well, I say... Clark Larrabee. Come home. Your fishing tackle's in the closet safe and sound. The fishing's good, plenty of cabazon, perch, and bass. Let bygones be bygones. We miss you. Mama, Clay, Roxanna, Rufus, Clara.
- HARRY That's a good ad.
- CLAY Do you think if my father reads it, he'll come home?
- HARRY I don't know, Clay. I hope so.
- CLAY Yeah. Thanks a lot for the haircut, Mr. Van Dusen.
- [*Clay goes out. Harry takes off the derby, lathers his face, and begins to shave with a straight-edge razor. A pretty girl comes into the shop, closing a colorful parasol. She has long blonde hair.*]
- HARRY Miss America, I presume.
- THE GIRL Miss McCutcheon.
- HARRY Harry Van Dusen.
- THE GIRL How do you do?



- HARRY *(bowing)*. Miss McCutcheon.
- THE GIRL I'm new here.
- HARRY You'd be new anywhere, brand new, I might say. Surely you don't live here.
- THE GIRL As a matter of fact, I do. At any rate, I've been here since last Sunday. You see, I'm the new teacher at the school.
- HARRY You are?
- THE GIRL Yes, I am.
- HARRY How do you like it?
- THE GIRL One week at this school has knocked me for a loop. As a matter of fact, I want to quit and go home to San Francisco. At the same time I have a feeling I ought to stay. What do you think?
- HARRY Are you serious? I mean, in asking me?
- THE GIRL Of course I'm serious. You've been here a long time. You know everybody in town. Shall I go, or shall I stay?
- HARRY Depends on what you're looking for. I stopped here twenty-four years ago because I decided I wasn't looking for anything anymore. Well, I was mistaken. I *was* looking, and I've found exactly what I was looking for.
- THE GIRL What's that?
- HARRY A chance to take my time. That's why I'm still here. What are *you* looking for, Miss McCutcheon!
- THE GIRL Well .....
- HARRY I mean, besides a husband.....
- THE GIRL I'm not looking for a husband. I expect a husband to look for me.
- HARRY That's fair.
- THE GIRL I'm looking for a chance to teach.
- HARRY That's fair too.
- THE GIRL But this town!... The children just don't seem to care about anything, whether they get good grades or bad, whether they pass or fail, or anything else. On top of that, almost all of them are unruly. The only thing they seem to be interested in is games, and the sea. That's why I'm on my way to the beach now. I thought if I could watch them on a Saturday I might understand them better.
- HARRY Yes, that's a thought.
- THE GIRL Nobody seems to have any sensible ambition. It's all fun and play. How can I teach children like that? What can I teach them?

- HARRY English.
- THE GIRL Of course.
- HARRY *(drying his face)*. Singing, dancing, cooking.....
- THE GIRL Cooking? ... I must say I expected to see a much older man.
- HARRY Well! Thank You!
- THE GIRL Not at all.
- HARRY The question is, shall you stay, or shall you go back to San Francisco?.
- THE GIRL Yes.
- HARRY The answer is, go back while the going's good.
- THE GIRL Why? I mean, a moment ago I believed you were going to point out why I ought to stay, and then suddenly you say I ought to go back. Why?
- HARRY *(after a pause)*. You're too good for a town like this.
- THE GIRL I am not!
- HARRY Too young and too intelligent.
- THE GIRL You seem to think all I want is to find a husband.
- HARRY But only to teach. You want to teach him to become a father, so you can have a lot of children of your own to teach.
- THE GIRL *(She sits almost angrily in the chair and speaks very softly.)* I'd like a poodle haircut if you don't mind, Mr. Van Dusen.
- HARRY You'll have to get that in San Francisco, I'm afraid.
- THE GIRL Why? Aren't you a barber?
- HARRY I am.
- THE GIRL Well, this is your shop. It's open for business. I'm a customer. I've got money. I want a poodle haircut.
- HARRY I don't know how to give a poodle haircut, but even if I know how, I wouldn't do it.
- THE GIRL Why not?
- HARRY I don't give women haircuts. The only women who visit this shop bring their small children for haircuts.
- THE GIRL I want a poodle haircut, Mr. Van Dusen.
- HARRY I'm sorry, Miss McCutcheon. In my sleep, in a nightmare, I would *not* cut your hair. *(The sound of a truck stopping is heard from across the street.)*
- THE GIRL *(softly, patiently, but firmly)*. Mr. Van Dusen, I've decided to stay, and the first thing I've got to do is change my appearance. I don't fit into the scenery around here.



- HARRY Oh, I don't know. If I were a small boy going to school, I'd say you look just right.
- THE GIRL You're just like the children. They don't take me seriously, either. They think I'm nothing more than a pretty girl who is going to give up in despair and go home. If you give me a poodle haircut I'll look more, well, plain and simple. I plan to dress differently, too. I'm determined to teach here. You've got to help me. Now, Mr. Van Dusen, the shears, please.
- HARRY I'm sorry, Miss McCutcheon. There's no need to change your *appearance* at all.
- [Clark Larrabee comes into the shop.]
- HARRY You're next, Clark. *(Harry helps Miss McCutcheon out of the chair. She gives him an angry glance.)*
- THE GIRL *(whispering)*. I won't forget this rudeness, Mr. Van Dusen.
- HARRY *(also whispering)*. Never whisper in O.K.-by-the-Sea. People-misunderstand. *(Loudly)* Good day, Miss.
- [Miss McCutcheon opens her parasol with anger and leaves the shop. Clark Larrabee has scarcely noticed her. He stands looking at Harry's junk on the shelves.]
- HARRY Well, Clark, I haven't seen you in a long time.
- CLARK I'm just passing through, Harry. Thought I might run into Clay here.
- HARRY He was here a little while ago.
- CLARK How is he?
- HARRY He's fine, Clark.
- CLARK I been working in Salinas. Got a ride down in a truck. It's across the street now at the gasoline station.
- HARRY You've been home, of course?
- CLARK No, I haven't.
- HARRY Oh?
- CLARK *(after a slight pause)*. I've left Fay, Harry.
- HARRY You got time for a haircut, Clark?
- CLARK No thanks, Harry. I've got to go back to Salinas on that truck across the street.
- HARRY Clay's somewhere on the beach.
- CLARK *(handing Harry three ten-dollar bills)*. Give him this, will you? Thirty dollars. Don't tell him I gave it to you.
- HARRY Why not?

- CLARK I'd rather he didn't know I was around. Is he all right?
- HARRY Sure, Clark. They're *all* O.K. I mean.
- CLARK Tell him to take the money home to his mother. (*He picks up the newspaper, The Gull.*)
- HARRY Sure, Clark. It came out this morning. Take it along.
- CLARK Thanks. (*He puts the paper in his pocket.*) How've things been going with you, Harry?
- HARRY Oh, I can't kick. Two or three haircuts a day. A lot of time to read. A few laughs. A few surprises. The sea. The fishing. It's a good life.
- CLARK Keep an eye on Clay, will you? I mean—well, I *had* to do it.
- HARRY Sure.
- CLARK Yeah, well That's the first money I've been able to save. When I make some more, I'd like to send it here, so you can hand it to Clay, to take home.
- HARRY Anything you say, Clark. (*There is the sound of the truck's horn blowing.*)
- CLARK Well (*He goes to the door.*) Thanks, Harry, thanks a lot.
- HARRY Good seeing you, Clark.
- [*Clark Larrabee goes out. Harry watches him. A truck shifting gears is heard, and then the sound of the truck driving off. Harry picks up a book, changes hats, sits down in the chair and begins to read. A man of forty or so, well-dressed, rather swift, comes in.*]
- THE MAN Where's the barber?
- HARRY I'm the barber.
- THE MAN Can I get a haircut, real quick?
- HARRY (*getting out of the chair*). Depends on what you mean by real quick.
- THE MAN (*sitting down*). Well, just a haircut then.
- HARRY (*putting an apron around the man*). O.K. I don't believe I've seen you before.
- THE MAN No. They're changing the oil in my car across the street. Thought I'd step in here and get a haircut. Get it out of the way before I get to Hollywood. How many miles is it?
- HARRY About two hundred straight down the highway. You can't miss it.
- THE MAN What town is *this*?
- HARRY O.K. *by-the-Sea*.
- THE MAN What do the people do here?
- HARRY Well, I cut hair. Friend of mine named Wozzeck repairs watches, radios, alarm clocks, and sells jewelry.



- THE MAN Who does he sell it to?
- HARRY The people here. It's imitation stuff mainly.
- THE MAN Factory here? Farms? Fishing?
- HARRY No. Just the few stores on the highway, the houses further back in the hills, the church, and the school. You a salesman?
- THE MAN No, I'm a writer.
- HARRY What do you write?
- THE MAN A little bit of everything. How about the haircut?
- HARRY You got to be in Hollywood tonight?
- THE MAN I don't have to be anywhere tonight, but that was the idea. Why?
- HARRY Well, I've always said a writer could step into a place like this, watch things a little while, and get a whole book out of it, or a play.
- THE MAN Or if he was a poet, a sonnet.
- HARRY Do you like Shakespeare's?
- THE MAN They're just about the best in English.
- HARRY It's not often I get a writer in here. As a matter of fact you're the only writer I've had in here in twenty years, not counting Fenton.
- THE MAN Who's he?
- HARRY Fenton Lockhart.
- THE MAN. What's he write?
- HARRY He gets out the weekly paper. Writes the whole thing himself.
- THE MAN Yeah. Well, how about the haircut?
- HARRY O.K.
- [Harry puts a hot towel around the man's head. Miss McCutcheon, carrying a cane chair without one leg and without a seat, comes in. With her is Clay with something in his hand, a smaller boy named Greeley with a bottle of sea water, and Roxanna with an assortment of shells.]*
- CLAY I got an oyster here, Mr. Van Dusen.
- GREELEY Miss McCutcheon claims there *ain't* a big pearl in it.
- HARRY *(looking at Miss McCutcheon)*. Is she willing to admit there's a *little* one in it?
- GREELEY I don't know. I know I got sea water in this bottle.
- MISS McCUTCHEON Mr. Van Dusen, Clay Larrabee seems to believe there's a pearl in this oyster he happens to have found on the beach.

- CLAY I didn't *happen* to find it. I went looking for it. You know Black Rock, Mr. Van Dusen? Well, the tide hardly ever gets low enough for a fellow to get around to the ocean side of Black Rock, but a little while ago it did, so I went around there to that side. I got to poking around and I found this oyster.
- HARRY I've been here twenty-four years, Clay, and this is the first time I've ever heard of anybody finding an oyster on our beach at Black Rock, or anywhere else.
- CLAY Well, *I did*, Mr. Van Dusen. It's shut tight, it's alive, and there's a pearl in it, worth at least three hundred dollars.
- GREELEY A *big* pearl.
- MISS McCUTCHEON Now, you children listen to me. It's never too soon for any of us to face the truth, which is supposed to set us free, not imprison us. The truth is, Clay, you want money because you need money. The truth is also that you have found an oyster. The truth is also that there is no pearl in the oyster.
- GREELEY How do you know? Did you look?
- MISS McCUTCHEON No, but neither did Clay, and in as much as only one oyster in a million has a pearl in it, truth favors the probability that this is not the millionth oyster – the oyster with the pearl in it.
- CLAY There's a *big* pearl in the oyster.
- MISS McCUTCHEON Mr. Van Dusen, shall we open the oyster and show Clay and his sister Roxanna and their friend Greeley that there is no pearl in it?
- HARRY In a moment, Miss McCutcheon. And what's that *you* have?
- MISS McCUTCHEON A chair, as you see.
- HARRY How many legs does it have?
- MISS McCUTCHEON Three of course. I can count to three, I hope.
- HARRY What do you want with a chair with only three legs?
- MISS McCUTCHEON I'm going to bring things from the sea the same as everybody else in town.
- HARRY But everybody else in town *doesn't* bring things from the sea – just the children, Judge Applegarth, Fenton Lockhart, and myself.
- MISS McCUTCHEON In any case, the same as the children, Judge Applegarth, Fenton Lockhart, and you. Judge Applegarth? Who's he?
- HARRY He judged animals at a county fair one time, so we call him Judge.
- MISS McCUTCHEON Dogs or hounds?
- HARRY Hound's a little old-fashioned but I prefer it to dogs, and since both words mean the same thing. Well, I wouldn't care to call a man like Arthur



Applegarth a dog's judge.

MISS McCUTCHEON Did he actually judge dogs, as you prefer to put it, at a county fair one time? Did he even do *that*?

HARRY Nobody checked up. He *said* he did.

MISS McCUTCHEON So that entitled him to be called Judge Applegarth?

HARRY It certainly did.

MISS McCUTCHEON On that basis, Clay's oyster has a big pearl in it because he *says* so, is that it?

HARRY I didn't say that.

MISS McCUTCHEON Are we living in the Middle Ages, Mr. Van Dusen?

GREELEY No, this is 1953, Miss McCutcheon.

MISS McCUTCHEON. Yes, Greeley, and to illustrate what I mean that's water you have in that bottle. Nothing else.

GREELEY *Sea* water.

MISS McCUTCHEON Yes, but there's nothing else in the bottle.

GREELEY No, but there's little things in *the water*. You can't see them now, but they'll show up later. The water of the sea is full of things.

MISS McCUTCHEON Salt, perhaps.

GREELEY No. *Living* things. If I look hard I can see some of them now.

MISS McCUTCHEON You can *imagine* seeing them. Mr. Van Dusen, are you going to help me or not?

HARRY. What do you want me to do?

MISS McCUTCHEON Open the oyster of course, so Clay will see for himself that there's no pearl in it. So he'll begin to face reality, as he should, as each of us should.

HARRY Clay, do you mind if I look at the oyster a minute?

CLAY (*handing the oyster to Harry*). There's a big pearl in it, Mr. Van Dusen.

HARRY (*examining the oyster*). Clay... Roxanna... Greeley... I wonder if you'd go down the street to Wozzeck's. Tell him to come here the first chance he gets. I'd rather *he* opened this oyster. I might damage the pearl.

CLAY, GREELEY, and ROXANNA O.K., Mr. Van Dusen.

(*They go out.*)

MISS McCUTCHEON What pearl? What in the world do you think you're trying to do to the minds of these children? How am I ever going to teach them the principles of truth with an influence like yours to fight against?

HARRY Miss McCutcheon. The people of O.K.-by-the-Sea are all poor. Most of



them can't afford to pay for the haircuts I give them. There's no excuse for this town at all, but the sea is here, and so are the hills. A few people find jobs a couple of months every year North or South, come back half dead of homesickness, and live on next to nothing the rest of the year. A few get pensions. Every family has a garden and a few chickens, and they make a few dollars selling vegetables and eggs. In a town of almost a thousand people there isn't one rich man. Not even one who is well off. And yet these people are the richest I have ever known. Clay doesn't really want money, as you seem to think. He wants his father to come home, and he thinks money will help get his father home. As a matter of fact his father is the man who stepped in here just as you were leaving. He left thirty dollars for me to give to Clay, to take home. His father and his mother haven't been getting along. Clark Larrabee's a fine man. He's not the town drunk or anything like that, but having four kids to provide for he gets to feeling ashamed of the showing he's making, and he starts drinking. He wants his kids to live in a good house of their own, wear good clothes, and all the other things fathers have always wanted for their kids. His wife wants these things for the kids, too. They don't have these things, so they fight. They had one too many fights about a month ago, so Clark went off – he's working in Salinas. He's either going to keep moving away from his family, or he's going to come back. It all depends on – well, I don't know what. This oyster maybe. Clay maybe. *(Softly)* You and me may be. *(There is a pause. He looks at the oyster. Miss McCutcheon looks at it, too.)* Clay believes there's a pearl in this oyster for the same reason you and I believe whatever *we* believe to keep *us* going.

MISS McCUTCHEON Are you suggesting we play a trick on Clay, in order to carry out your mumbo-jumbo ideas?

HARRY Well, maybe it is a trick. I know Wozzeck's got a few pretty good-sized cultivated pearls.

MISS McCUTCHEON You plan to have Wozzeck pretend he has found a pearl in the oyster when he opens it, is that it?

HARRY I plan to get three hundred dollars to Clay.

MISS McCUTCHEON Do you *have* three hundred dollars?

HARRY Not quite.

MISS McCUTCHEON What about the other children who need money? Do you plan to put pearls in oysters for them, too? Not just here in O.K. by-the-Sea. Every where. This isn't the only town in the world where people are poor, where fathers and mothers fight, where families break up.

HARRY No, it isn't, but it's the only town where I live.

MISS McCUTCHEON I give up. What do you want me to do?



HARRY Well, could you find it in your heart to be just a little less sure about things when you talk to the kids, I mean, the troubled ones? You can get Clay around to the truth easy enough just as soon as he gets his father home.

*[Arthur Applegarth comes in.]*

HARRY Judge Applegarth, may I present Miss McCutcheon?

THE JUDGE *(removing his hat and bowing low)*. An honour, Miss.

MISS McCUTCHEON How do you do, Judge?

HARRY Miss McCutcheon's the new teacher at school.

THE JUDGE We are honored to have you. The children, the parents and the rest of us.

MISS McCUTCHEON Thank you, Judge. *(To Harry, whispering)* I'll be back as soon as I change my clothes.

HARRY *(whispering)*. I told you not to whisper.

MISS McCUTCHEON *(whispering)*. I shall expect you to give me a poodle haircut.

HARRY *(whispering)*. Are you out of your mind?

MISS McCUTCHEON *(aloud)*. Good day, Judge.

THE JUDGE *(bowing)*. Good day, Miss. *Miss McCutcheon goes out. Judge Applegarth looks from the door to Harry.*

THE JUDGE She won't last a month.

HARRY Why not?

THE JUDGE Too pretty. Our school needs an old battleaxe like the teachers we had when we went to school, not a bathing beauty. Well, Harry, what's new?

HARRY Just the teacher, I guess.

THE JUDGE You know, Harry, the beach isn't what it used to be, not at all. I don't mind the competition we're getting from the kids. It's just that the quality of the stuff the sea's washing up isn't good any more. *(He goes to the door.)*

HARRY I don't know. Clay Larrabee found an oyster this morning.

THE JUDGE He did? Well, one oyster does not make a stew, Harry. On my way home I'll drop in and let you see what I find.

HARRY O.K., Judge. *(The Judge goes out. Harry comes to life suddenly and becomes businesslike.)* Now, for the haircut! *(He removes the towel he had wrapped around the writer's head.)*

THE JUDGE. Take your time.

HARRY *(He examines the shears, clippers, and combs.)* Let's see now. *(The writer turns and watches. A gasoline station attendant comes to the door.)*

THE ATTENDANT *(to the writer)*. Just wanted to say your car's ready now.

THE WRITER Thanks. (*The attendant goes out.*) Look. I'll tell you what. How much is a haircut?

HARRY Well, the regular price is a dollar. It's too much for a haircut, though, so I generally take a half or a quarter.

THE WRITER (*getting out of the chair*). I've changed my mind. I don't want a haircut after all, but here's a dollar just the same. (*He hands Harry a dollar, and he himself removes the apron.*)

HARRY It won't take a minute.

THE WRITER I know.

HARRY You don't have to pay me a dollar for a hot towel. My compliments.

THE WRITER That's O.K. (*He goes to the door.*)

HARRY Well, take it easy now.

THE WRITER Thanks. (*He stands a moment, thinking, then turns.*) Do you mind if I have a look at that oyster?

HARRY Not at all.

*[The writer goes to the shelf where Harry has placed the oyster, picks it up, looks at it thoughtfully, puts it back without comment, but instead of leaving the shop he looks around at the stuff in it. He then sits down on a wicker chair in the corner, and lights a cigarette.]*

THE WRITER You know, they've got a gadget in New York now like a safety razor that anybody can give anybody else a haircut with.

HARRY They have?

THE WRITER Yeah, there was a full-page ad about it in last Sunday's *Times*.

HARRY Is that where you were last Sunday?

THE WRITER Yeah.

HARRY You been doing a lot of driving.

THE WRITER I like to drive. I don't know, though those gadgets don't always work. They're asking two – ninety-five for it. You take a big family. The father could save a lot of money giving his kids a haircut.

HARRY Sounds like a great idea.

THE WRITER Question of effectiveness. If the father gives the boy a haircut the boy's ashamed of, well, that's not so good.

HARRY No, a boy likes to get a professional looking haircut all right.

THE WRITER I thought I'd buy one, but I don't know.

HARRY You got a big family?



THE WRITER I mean for myself. But I don't know – there's something to be said for going to a barber shop once in a while. No use putting the barbers out of business.

HARRY Sounds like a pretty good article, though.

THE WRITER (*getting up lazily*). Well, it's been nice talking to you.

[*Wozzeck, carrying a satchel, comes in, followed by Clay, Roxanna, and Greeley.*]

WOZZECK What's this all about, Harry?

HARRY I've got an oyster I want you to open.

WOZZECK That's what the kids have been telling me.

ROXANNA He doesn't believe there's a pearl in the oyster, either.

WOZZECK Of course not! What foolishness!

CLAY There's a *big* pearl in it.

WOZZECK O.K., give me the oyster. I'll open it. Expert watch repairer, to open an oyster!

HARRY How much is a big pearl worth, Louie?

WOZZECK Oh, a hundred. Two hundred, maybe.

HARRY A very *big* one?

WOZZECK Three, maybe.

THE WRITER I've looked at that oyster, and I'd like to buy it. (*To Clay*) How much do you want for it?

CLAY I don't know.

THE WRITER How about three hundred?

GREELEY Three hundred dollars?

CLAY Is it all right, Mr. Van Dusen?

HARRY (*He looks at the writer, who nods.*) Sure it's all right.

[*The writer hands Clay the money.*]

CLAY (*looking at the money and then at the writer*). But suppose there ain't a pearl in it?

THE WRITER There *is*, though.

WOZZECK Don't you want to open it first?

THE WRITER No, I want the whole thing. I don't think the pearl's stopped growing.

CLAY He says there is a pearl in the oyster, Mr. Van Dusen.

HARRY I think there is, too, Clay; so why don't *you* just go on home and give the money *to* your mother?

CLAY Well... I *knew* I was going to find something good today! (*The children go*

*out. Wozzeck is bewildered.)*

WOZZECK Three hundred dollars! How do you know there's a pearl in it?

THE WRITER As far as I'm concerned, the whole thing's a pearl.

WOZZECK *(a little confused)*. Well, I got to get back to the shop, Harry.

HARRY Thanks for coming by.

*[Wozzeck goes out. The writer holds the oyster in front of him as if it were an egg, and looks at it carefully, turning it in his fingers. As he is doing so, Clark Larrabee comes into the shop. He is holding the copy of the newspaper that Harry gave him.]*

CLARK We were ten miles up the highway when I happened to see this classified ad in the paper. *(He hands the paper to Harry and sits down in the chair.)* I'm going out to the house, after all. Just for the week end of course, then back to work in Salinas again. Two or three months, I think I'll have enough to come back for a long time. Clay came by?

HARRY No, I've got the money here.

CLARK O.K. I'll take it out myself, but first let me have the works-shave, haircut, shampoo, massage.

HARRY *(putting an apron on Clark)*. Sure thing, Clark. *(He bends the chair back, and begins to lather Clark's face. Miss McCutcheon, dressed neatly, looking like another person almost, comes in.)*

MISS McCUTCHEON Well?

HARRY You look fine, Miss McCutcheon.

MISS McCUTCHEON I don't mean that. I mean the oyster.

HARRY Oh, that! There *was* a pearl in it.

MISS McCUTCHEON I don't believe it.

HARRY A *big* pearl.

MISS McCUTCHEON You might have done me the courtesy of waiting until I had come back before opening it.

HARRY Couldn't wait.

MISS McCUTCHEON Well, I don't believe you, but I've come for my haircut. I'll sit down and wait my turn.

HARRY Mr. Larrabee wants the works. You'll have to wait a long time.

MISS McCUTCHEON Mr. Larrabee? Clay's father? Roxanna's father? *(Clark sits up.)*

HARRY Clark, I'd like you to meet our new teacher, Miss McCutcheon.

CLARK How do you do?



MISS McCUTCHEON How do you do, Mr. Larrabee? *(She looks bewildered.)* Well, perhaps some other time, then, Mr. Van Dusen. *(She goes out. Clark sits back. Judge Applegarth stops at the doorway of the shop.)*

THE JUDGE Not one thing on the beach, Harry. Not a blessed thing worth picking up and taking home. *(Judge Applegarth goes on. The writer looks at Harry.)*

HARRY See what I mean?

THE WRITER Yeah. Well... so long. *(He puts the oyster in his coat pocket.)*

HARRY Drop in again any time you're driving to Hollywood.

THE WRITER Or away. *(He goes out.)*

CLARK *(after a moment)*. You know, Harry, that boy of mine, Clay... well, a fellow like that, you can't just go off and leave him.

HARRY Of course you can't, Clark.

CLARK I'm taking him fishing tomorrow morning. How about going along, Harry?

HARRY Sure, Clark. Be like old times again. *(There is a pause.)*

CLARK What's all this about an oyster and a pearl?

HARRY Oh, just having a little fun with the new teacher. You know, she came in here and asked me to give her a poodle haircut? A poodle haircut! I don't remember what a poodle *dog* looks like, even.

## CURTAIN

### Theme

"The Oyster and the Pearl" is a sentimental comedy. The play has humor, a happy ending, and demonstrates faith in the basic goodness of human nature. It reflects the author's attitude toward life and people, whom Saroyan finds eminently fascinating and wonderful, although a little "odd" at times.

Although there is a story line, that is not the author's main concern. He wants the reader/viewer to enjoy, to relax, to "play" as the play progresses. There is no clearly defined plot nor is there an attempt to establish a strong "hero" figure. Saroyan wants to examine the possibilities of life and the people who play a part in it. Yet he also has something serious to say. You, the reader, are to discover what it is.

## Glossary

Some of the idiomatic or colloquial expressions found in the play are explained below, in the order in which they occur.

1. you may turn out to be : you may become
2. stuff : anything; something
3. threw in the haircut : included the haircut free
4. ever since : since that time
5. fair and square : honest; just
6. now and then : sometimes
7. pretty good : quite good; better than average
8. let me get this straight : I need to understand the situation (better), let it be made clear
9. He just picked up and went off. : He simply left home without telling anyone.
10. enough's enough. : that's the end of the matter
11. ain't : isn't; aren't
12. safe and sound : safe from harm, injury, loss, etc.
13. Let bygones be bygones. : forget the past
14. at any rate : in any case; at least
15. has knocked me for a loop : has overwhelmed or defeated me
16. on top of that : in addition
17. while the going's good : while there's still a chance or conditions are favourable
18. thought I might run into : I thought that I would see or meet
19. I'd rather he didn't know I was around. : I prefer that he does not know that I was in the vicinity or area.
20. I can't kick. : I have no reason to complain.
21. keep an eye on : watch over; look after the welfare of
22. get it out of the way : complete the task (job) beforehand
23. He gets out the weekly paper. : He publishes the weekly newspaper.
24. well off : rich; wealthy
25. as a matter of fact : to tell the truth; be truthful
26. mumbo-jumbo : confusing or without meaning
27. Are you out of your mind?: Are you crazy (insane)?
28. old battleaxe : a person who establishes strong discipline (in this case, more



- experienced teacher)
29. drop in : stop by; pay a short visit
  30. gadget : a useful device
  31. yeah : yes; that's right

## Exercises

### I. Write short answers to these questions.

1. Where does the play take place?
2. Why is Harry sitting in the barber's chair?
3. According to Harry, how does one bring merriment to the tired old human heart?
4. What is Harry's philosophy?
5. How much did Harry pay for his barber shop? How long has he been in O.K. by-the-Sea?
6. How many barbers are there in O.K. by-the-Sea?
7. How much does Harry charge for a haircut?
8. Where is Clay going?
9. Why does Clay need money?
10. What has happened to Clay's father?
11. What does Clay want to put in the local newspaper?
12. Who is Miss McCutcheon? How does she feel about her job?
13. What is Miss McCutcheon looking for? How does she feel about the children of the town?
14. What does Harry advise her to do?
15. What kind of haircut does Miss McCutcheon want?
16. Can Harry give a poodle haircut?
17. What does Miss McCutcheon think that a poodle haircut will do for her appearance?
18. Where has Clark Larrabee been? How did he get to O.K. by-the-Sea?
19. What does Clark give Harry? For what purpose?
20. How far is it to Hollywood from O.K. by-the-Sea?
21. What work does the Man do?
22. What did Clay find near Black Rock?

23. What does Clay believe is in the oyster? How much is its worth?
24. Does Miss McCutcheon believe that there is a pearl in the oyster?
25. Why does Miss McCutcheon have a chair with three legs?
26. What kind of judge is Judge Applegarth?
27. What year is it?
28. What does Greeley have in a bottle?
29. Who suggests that they should open the oyster?
30. Why do they want Wozzeck to come?
31. How does Harry describe the inhabitants of O.K. by-the-Sea?
32. How does Miss McCutcheon view Harry's thinking about the pearl in the oyster?
33. Why does the Judge think that Miss McCutcheon will not last as a teacher? What kind of teacher does he think is needed?
34. What is Applegarth's complaint about the sea?
35. What kind of gadget does the writer describe?
36. Who buys the oyster? How much does he pay?
37. Does the writer open the oyster? Why not?
38. Why does Clark Larrabee return?
39. What does the writer do with the oyster?

## II. Questions for discussion

1. Do you think that it is right to allow Clay to believe that there is a pearl in the oyster? Explain briefly.
2. In your opinion, why is the writer willing to buy the pearl? What has he received in return? What does he mean by saying: "As far as I'm concerned, the whole thing's a pearl."
3. What has attracted Harry and other people to O.K. by-the-Sea? Is it the kind of town that appeals to you? Do you think that it resembles an ideal town? Give reasons for your answer.
4. Harry's philosophy is of "Take it easy" (Relax and enjoy life) nature. How does that philosophy appeal to you? Why or why not? Do you think that this philosophy works better in small towns than in large cities? Explain.
5. In your opinion, does the play reveal the author's view of life? If so, what is his view of life?
6. Would you call this play one of "The action plays"? Why or why not? How would you describe the play to a friend?



7. Do you think that this would be a good play to produce? Why or why not?

### III. WHO SAID IT?

#### Who said the following?

1. Identify the speaker.
2. Who said these lines, to whom and on what occasion?
3. Tell something about the speaker's personal appearance or characteristics.
  - a. "At the same time I have a feeling I ought to stay."
  - b. "There's no excuse for this town at all, but the sea is here and so are the hills."
  - c. "...Clay....well, a fellow like that, you can't just go off and leave him."
  - d. "It's shut tight, it's alive, and there's a pearl in it, worth at least three hundred dollars."
  - e. "It's never too soon for any of us to face the truth, which is supposed to set us free, not imprison us."
  - f. "Our school needs an old battleaxe, like the teachers we had when we went to school, not a bathing beauty."

### IV. OPTIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Write a composition of 100 – 150 words explaining why you liked, or did not like, this play.
2. Write a composition describing your ideal town.