

# Sylvia

A modern romantic comedy by A.R. Gurney  
13th April – 21st July 2023

The English Theatre  
Frankfurt

*I'm here to please*  
**SYLVIA** 

A modern romantic comedy about a marriage and a dog by A.R. Gurney

Playing from **13th April 2024**

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## Teachers' Resource Pack

This teachers' pack includes information as well as tasks and topics to be dealt with in the classroom. The tasks do not necessarily build on each other. Cut and paste as you please, and please consult the official program for additional information.

# Background information

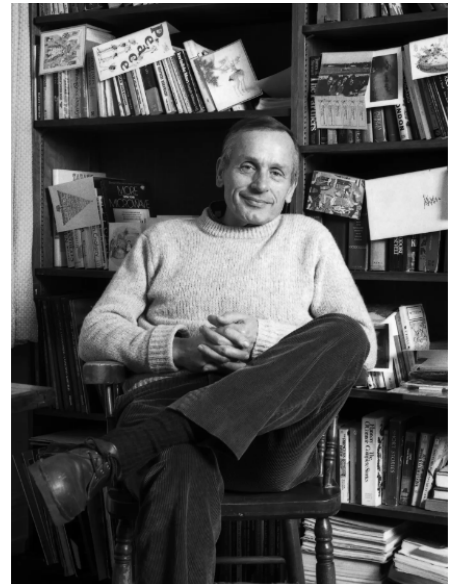
## The Author

### A. R. Gurney

Albert Ramsdell Gurney Jr. (November 1, 1930 – June 13, 2017) (sometimes credited as **Pete Gurney**) was an American playwright, novelist and academic.

Gurney is known for plays including *The Dining Room* (1982), *Sweet Sue* (1986/7), *The Cocktail Hour* (1988), and for his Pulitzer Prize nominated play *Love Letters* (1988). His series of plays about upper-class White Anglo-Saxon Protestants life in contemporary America have been called "penetratingly witty studies of the WASP ascendancy in retreat."

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A.\\_R.\\_Gurney](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A._R._Gurney)



## The Director

### Bethany Pitts



Bethany Pitts is an award winning director and dramaturg, specialising in new work with a focus on female driven stories, contemporary political work and revisions of classical texts.

She loves to collaborate closely with writers, and has also worked extensively with actors in training, for which she has great passion.

Her recent credits include: *A Different Class* (Queen's Theatre, Hornchurch), *The Misandrist* (Arcola Theatre) and *The Beach House* (Park Theatre).

## Sylvia - Synopsis

Middle-aged, upper-middle class Greg finds Sylvia, a dog (played by a human), in the park and takes a liking to her. He brings her back to the empty nest he shares with Kate. When Kate gets home, she reacts very negatively to Sylvia and wants her gone. They eventually decide that Sylvia will stay for a few days before they decide whether she can stay longer, but Greg and Sylvia have already bonded. Over the next few days, Greg spends more and more time with Sylvia and less time at his job. Greg and Sylvia go on long walks; they discuss life and astronomy. Already dissatisfied with his job, Greg now has another reason to avoid work.

Tension increases between Greg and Kate, who still does not like Sylvia. Eventually, Greg becomes completely obsessed with Sylvia, and Kate fears their marriage is falling apart. Kate and Sylvia are at odds with each other, each committed to seeing the other defeated. Greg meets a strange character at the dog run, who gives Greg tips on how to manage Sylvia and his predicament involving Kate. Greg has Sylvia spayed. Sylvia is angry and in pain, but she still loves him completely.

Kate's friend pays a visit and is repulsed by Greg and Sylvia. She eventually flees from the flat to get away from the dog.

In order to get a handle on their marital problems, Greg and Kate visit a therapist, Leslie, who is ambiguously male and female depending on her patients' state of mind. After a session with Greg, Leslie tells Kate to get a gun and shoot Sylvia.

Kate, who does not follow her therapist's advice, is asked to teach abroad, in London later on, and tells Greg that the English have a six-month quarantine for any dogs coming into the country and that he can only come along with her, if Sylvia stays behind. Greg is unwilling, but eventually, he succumbs and gives the news to Sylvia, that he must give her away, to a family who have a farm in Westchester County. Greg and Sylvia have a heated and tender moment. Kate and Sylvia say goodbye; but, before Greg and Sylvia leave for Westchester, Sylvia returns the annotated and slightly chewed version of "Alls Well That Ends Well" that Kate has been looking for, and Kate has a change of heart.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sylvia\\_\(play\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sylvia_(play))

## Character descriptions

### Sylvia

A somewhat scruffy stray dog who finds shelter with Greg who admires her and finally sneaks into Kate's heart even though she has not behaved in an exemplary manner before.

### Greg

A middle-aged empty nester who is unhappy with his current situation and experiences a midlife crisis. He finds the dog Sylvia in the park who makes him feel important and loved again. He likes Sylvia so much that he becomes a little too obsessed with her.

### Kate

Greg's wife and a very successful and ambitious teacher. Being afraid that the dog might disrupt her new found freedom after Kids grew up and she and her husband moved back into the city, she objects strongly against keeping Sylvia. Later on, she even feels replaced by the dog in her marriage.

### Phyllis

A good friend of Kate's who thinks that Sylvia is very intrusive and even leaves the house to escape from the dog.

### Tom

Owner of the golden retriever called Bowser. He gives Greg advice on how to handle a dog and tells him about the meaning of dog names.

### Leslie

A therapist who, depending on her clients, is perceived as either male or female. She advises Kate to divorce Greg and to kill Sylvia.

## Midlife Crisis and Empty Nest Syndrome

The definition of a midlife crisis is **a period of transition in life where someone struggles with their identity and self-confidence**. It happens anywhere **from 40 years old to 60 years old and affects men and women**. A midlife crisis is not a disorder but is mainly psychological. It occurs when someone looks at where they are in life compared to where they think they should be by a certain age. About one in four people claim to have had a midlife crisis. Criteria for midlife crisis are not well-defined, but, according to experts, they are often marked by **strong feelings, unhealthy coping skills and behaviour changes**. A midlife crisis can be **triggered by any number of major factors**, such as divorce, the death of a loved one, boredom or a significant life event.

**Common signs and symptoms** may include anxiety, financial irrationality and excessive spending, sleep pattern disruption, withdrawal from normal routines, depression or major mood changes, etc.

The amount of time a person experiences the symptoms of a midlife crisis depends on the frequency of their feelings and how they choose to resolve them. Even though it is not a disorder, the midlife crisis should be treated like any other crisis in life. It often is helpful to seek the advice of a professional to help the people concerned to cope this crisis and its effects.

For parents a midlife-crisis can be triggered by or coincide with children moving out of the family home. **Empty nest syndrome** refers to the grief that many parents feel when their children move out of home. This condition is typically more common in women, who are more likely to have had the role of primary carer. Unlike the grief experienced when (for example) a loved one dies, the grief of empty nest syndrome often goes unrecognised, because an adult child moving out of home is seen as a normal, healthy event. In many cases, empty nest syndrome is compounded by other difficult life events or significant changes happening around the same time, such as retirement or menopause.

### Are Greg and Kate having a midlife crisis?

In the play "Sylvia", the couple, Greg and Kate, are at the age which is typical for a midlife crisis. While Kate seems to handle the situation in which she finds herself very well, **Greg has some serious issues to deal with a midlife crisis**. His emotional state is unstable and, before meeting Sylvia, he has no idea what to do with his life. The very fact that he takes a dog home and then wants to keep it forever is not evidence of a normal and rational thinking adult. He is unhappy with his job which becomes obvious when he talks about his days at work ("I took a break from office. I had another fight with Harold." p.10) and his marriage begins to fall apart, partly because of his behaviour. He more or less presents Kate with a *fait accompli* as far as the situation with Sylvia is concerned. Additionally, Greg shows Sylvia more respect and affection than his wife and even makes Kate feel out of place which hurts her feelings.

For people experiencing midlife crisis it often is important to find a new meaning to life. When Greg meets the dog, he suddenly starts to feel important to someone again. This pleasant feeling leads to an unhealthy relationship to the dog because Greg becomes more and more obsessed with Sylvia. The crisis intensifies for him because he withdraws from his old life instead of talking to Kate.

In Greg's case, the midlife crisis is compounded by **empty nest syndrome**. Although he never mentions any grief caused by the moving out of his children, we learn through Kate that the family home had been sold in order to move into a flat in the city and that a new era of freedom has just begun. While she thrives in finding a new role besides motherhood, Greg lost his role as bread winner. Providing for his family had made his job bearable. Now, since the children moved out, he technically is still financially responsible for their well-being and future success, but – like at his job – the effects of his efforts are not tangible for him. The feeling of dissatisfaction probably is intensified when his children move out.

This is a frequently occurring phenomenon. **Empty nest syndrome and midlife crisis often coincide** and can influence and reinforce each other, as the feelings and problems of both are similar and strongly linked. For a long time in the play, it seems as if Greg is unable to overcome his midlife crisis, until at the end of the play he decides to move to London with Kate and start a new chapter in his life. Even if he doesn't move away in the end, he has made the decision to steer his life in a different direction by turning his attention back to his wife.

All in all, it can be said that Greg is more affected by a midlife crisis than Kate but is able to overcome it by the end of the play.

<https://acendahealth.org/am-i-having-a-midlife-crisis-and-how-do-i-handle-it>

<https://www.forbes.com/health/mind/midlife-crisis>

<https://domental.com/blog/how-to-deal-with-midlife-crisis>

## Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism may be defined as the “attribution of human motivation, characteristics, or behavior to inanimate objects, animals, or natural phenomena.”<sup>1</sup> The use of anthropomorphism is a vexed question for those who work at the intersection of performance studies and animal studies, a field that Una Chaudhuri has named zooësis. As Chaudhuri has pointed out, while decrying the impulse to impose human characteristics on animals, many scholars and artists in the field work in the service of humanizing animals, to give them “a soul, a place in our moral universe, and the opportunity to be seen and known as our fellows.”<sup>2</sup>

Anthropomorphic animal characters are familiar throughout contemporary culture, from the most widespread popular forms of cartoons, sports mascots, Disney “characters,” puppets and muppets to those occupying the more rarefied air of the legitimate theatre. In the theatre, they are of course most closely associated with children’s theatre, but they have a significant role in adult theatre as well. In some twentieth-century plays, such as Eugene Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* (1959) and Edward Albee’s *Seascape* (1975), the anthropomorphic characteristics are established by the playwright as part of the play’s ontology and often serve as a metaphor through which to express a thematic statement [...]

In other plays, such as Mary Chase’s *Harvey* (1944), A.R. Gurney’s *Sylvia* (1995), and Albee’s *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* (2002), anthropomorphic characteristics are projected onto the animal by

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<sup>1</sup> American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, new college ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), s.v. “anthropomorphism.”

<sup>2</sup> Una Chaudhuri, “(De)Facing the Animals: Zoo.sis and Performance” tdr: The Drama Review 51, no. 1 (2007), 15.

a character, and the other characters' acceptance of this anthropomorphic vision, or their inability or refusal to share it, has fundamental generic implications. [...]

[T]he incongruity in *Sylvia* comes from the dog-like behavior that is enacted by the human body of the actor. This role was played memorably by the original *Sylvia*, Sarah Jessica Parker, in the 1995 Manhattan Theatre Club production. Vincent Canby wrote in the *New York Times*, "I've never seen a dog portrait in films or on the stage that quite matches the truth and wit of Ms. Parker's performance."<sup>3</sup> [...]

Beyond the behavioral humor, the relationship between human and animal is complicated and made uncomfortable in *Sylvia* by the fact that the dog is completely anthropomorphic and costumed as a woman, not a dog. As the stage directions describe her, "she is pert and sexy. Her hair is messy and she wears rather scruffy clothes: a baggy sweater, patched jeans, knee pads, and old boots. A small name-tag in the shape of a heart hangs around her neck."<sup>4</sup> After her grooming, she wears "a new hair-do, a bow in her hair, and a corny outfit."<sup>5</sup>

In her final scene with Greg, she wears the iconic New York outfit, "a very attractive little black dress."<sup>6</sup> Gurney has said, "it took me several years to get this play on stage because most of the theatres we offered it to felt it was insulting to women to be asked to play a dog."<sup>7</sup> And this is intensified in the audience's first impression of Greg and *Sylvia*, when in the opening minutes, he "gives her a gentle smack on the butt with his rolled up newspaper," and orders her to "SIT. DOWN."<sup>8</sup> She does, and he pats her on the head, saying "good girl."<sup>9</sup> This makes for an uncomfortable moment for the audience, confronted with this unacceptably demeaning man-to-woman behavior, in which is reflected human-to-dog behavior, which the audience members are probably in the habit of accepting. Gurney calls attention to this nexus of feelings with the dialogue:

SYLVIA You don't have to hit, you know.

GREG It didn't hurt

SYLVIA It most certainly did!

GREG Then I'm sorry.

SYLVIA You ought to be.

GREG I just want you to be on your best behavior. Kate gets home any minute.

SYLVIA Who's Kate?

GREG My wife, O.K.?

SYLVIA O.K., but you don't have to hit.

GREG Then I won't. Ever again. I promise.

SYLVIA O.K.<sup>10</sup>

The uncomfortable elision between human and animal continues as *Sylvia* tells Greg that she loves him—even when he hits her—and sees him as God, sitting adoringly at his feet while he reads the paper. This, of course, is meant to be the behavior of a dog, but, here, enacted by a woman, it wrenches the human-dog relationship out of its accustomed framework for the audience. At the same time, the performance of the actress playing *Sylvia*, emphasizing the incongruity between the human form and such doggyish behavior as sniffing around the apartment, trying to jump up

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<sup>3</sup> Vincent Canby, "Sylvia, Gurney's Notion of a Very Different M.nage . Trois," review of *Sylvia*, by A.R. Gurney, directed by John Tillinger, Manhattan Theater Club, New York, *New York Times*, May 24, 1995, C15.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Albee, *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* (Notes toward a definition of tragedy) (Woodstock, ny: Overlook Press, 2003), 7. All references to the play are from this edition, cited by page number.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>7</sup> A.R. Gurney, "Sylvia (1995)," A.R. Gurney, Playwright.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

on the couch, approaching the crotches of visitors, barking (“Hey, Hey, Hey”), running around with the other dogs in the park, is a constant source of humor. Dog and human behavior play off each other when Sylvia spies a cat under a car:

SYLVIA Knew it!

GREG Just an old pussycat.

SYLVIA Let me at it.

GREG (Holding her leash.) Easy now.

SYLVIA I said let me at that thing. I want to kill that fucker.

GREG (Holding her back.) No, Sylvia. No.

SYLVIA (To the cat.) Hey you! Hey kitty! You’re a sack of shit, you know that?

GREG Let’s move on, Sylvia.

SYLVIA You’re disgusting, kitty! You’re a disgrace to the animal kingdom!

GREG Leave it, Sylvia. Let’s move along!

SYLVIA (Backing away.) Smell that damn thing! Can you smell it? I can smell it from here! (Coming down again.) You stink, kitty! Take a bath sometime!

GREG Now, now.

SYLVIA (Now looking at the cat upside down.) Who are you staring at, you sneaky bastard? You staring at me?

GREG (Dragging her away.) Let’s go, Sylvia!

SYLVIA (Over her shoulder to the cat.) Fuck you, kitty! Up yours with a ten-foot pole!

GREG Come on now.

SYLVIA (To the cat.) You should be chased up a tree, you cocksucker!

I’d like to bite off your tail and shove it up your ass! I hate your fucking guts, kitty, and don’t you ever forget it! (Turning to Greg. Suddenly very sweetly.) Well. Out of sight, out of mind. Let’s move on.

GREG Wow, Sylvia.

SYLVIA I’m sorry, but I had to do it.

GREG You’re full of surprises, aren’t you?

SYLVIA You want instinct, you got instinct.

GREG I sure did.

SYLVIA A whiff of the jungle, right? Nature, tooth and claw.

GREG I’ll say.

SYLVIA I must say it helps to express your feelings.<sup>11</sup>

Greg’s feelings for Sylvia are more complicated, and they increase the level of discomfort for the audience. As a comedy, the play centers on Greg’s mid-life crisis and the threat to his marriage represented by his relationship with Sylvia, which his wife Kate recognizes as far more intense than is normal, even between dog and dog-lover. She tells her therapist that Greg has “totally” fallen in love with Sylvia, complaining that he says things to her he never says to Kate, like “you look beautiful, you look wonderful, I love you...even when we were first married, he never looked at me the way he looks at Sylvia...a sort of deep, distant light in his eyes. A sort of...primeval affection.”<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, Kate is sure that there is nothing physical between Greg and Sylvia besides the usual patting, pawing, stroking, and licking. The therapist tells Greg that he has projected onto Sylvia the character of Kate before the children grew up and she embarked on her career, “the subservient little wife you once kept in the suburbs. You wanted the worshipful daughter who once hung on your every word.”<sup>13</sup> Greg tells the therapist, “Sylvia is more than just a name, or a gene, or a psychological symptom, or anything else that tries to pin her down. Any dog-owner knows

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 57–58.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 61.

this.<sup>14</sup> For her part, Kate sees that the relationship is deeper than an affair: "I feel I'm up against something that has gone on for hundreds of thousands of years—ever since the first wolf came out of the forest and hunkered down next to the cave-man by his fire."<sup>15</sup> She hates Sylvia, and expresses the desire to kill her by putting D-Con in Sylvia's dish, finally declaring war, and telling her she plans to do everything she can to get her out of the apartment.

A comedic New Order is achieved in this broken marriage by acts of self-sacrifice on the part of both Greg and Kate to save it. Realizing that it truly is a question of keeping his wife or his dog, Greg prepares to sacrifice Sylvia, sending her away to a family in the suburbs. When Kate tells her she wishes it could have been otherwise, Sylvia, showing a good deal of anthropomorphic wisdom, warns her that "otherwise" could be much more damaging, a man who ran away with his grandchildren's au pair, or one who took a shot at his wife, or "those sad couples sitting in restaurants night after night, eyeing each other, with absolutely nothing to say."<sup>16</sup> She says that Greg could not have been happy with her unless Kate liked her too, "which is why he is always foisting me on you. Which is called sharing, Kate. Which is what some people sometimes call love."<sup>17</sup> In her act of sacrifice, Kate relents and accepts Greg's relationship with Sylvia. The final scene reveals that the three lived together for eleven years, until Sylvia died, Kate insisting she and Sylvia merely tolerated each other while Greg says they got on famously. The important change was that, over the years, Greg and Sylvia talked less, while he and Kate talked more, and Sylvia's looks changed too. The play's final image is the projection of a snapshot of Sylvia that Greg carries in his wallet, one that Kate took a year before she died. It is not a picture of the actress playing Sylvia, but "an appealing blown-up photograph of an ordinary dog," which Greg describes as "absolutely gorgeous."<sup>18</sup> The New Order of the marriage is established as the lights fade on "Greg and Kate, very much together, looking at Sylvia's picture."<sup>19</sup>

While trying to explain his love for Sylvia, Greg tells the therapist that he has found a "poem" Shakespeare wrote about Sylvia, reciting "'Who is Sylvia? What is she, / That all our swains commend her?... Holy, fair, and wise is she... The heavens such grace did—'"<sup>20</sup> This is actually part of a song that appears in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, praising Sylvia, to whom the changeable Proteus professes his love. Earlier in the scene, Proteus complains:

But Silvia is too fair, too true, too holy,  
To be corrupted with my worthless gifts.  
When I protest true loyalty to her,  
She twits me with my falsehood to my friend;  
When to her beauty I commend my vows,  
She bids me think how I have been forsworn  
In breaking faith with Julia whom I loved.  
And notwithstanding all her sudden quips,  
The least whereof would quell a lover's hope,  
Yet, spaniel-like, the more she spurns my love,  
The more it grows and fawneth on her still.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>21</sup> William, Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, ed. Kurt Schlueter (Cambridge, uk: Cambridge University Press, 2012), iv, ii, 1635–1645.



Complete with the spaniel reference, this is an appropriate intertextual link for Gurney's protagonist to suggest, alluding as it does to the damage his marriage has incurred due to his love for Sylvia.

Murphy, Brenda: "Who is Sylvia? Anthropomorphism and Genre Expectations. In: Edward Albee and Absurdism, S. 174–185.

## Shakespeare references in A.R. Gurney's "Sylvia"

Kate: I'm trying to put Shakespeare into the junior high curriculum.

Phyllis: Is that possible? I mean, at that age? I mean, these days? I mean, up there?

Kate: I hope so. If we can hook these children in junior high, we might have them for life, Phyllis.

Phyllis: I wish I could believe that, Kate.

Kate: It's not just Shakespeare, Phyllis. It's language in general. These kids are fascinated by words. They rap, they rhyme, they invent these exciting phrases and metaphors just the way Shakespeare did. If we can take their energy and curiosity and imagination, and give them words, more words, good words in significant contexts, then maybe— (Sylvia, Page 34-35)

In the wake of their last child going to college, Kate is focused on her project of teaching Shakespeare to a younger demographic and thus very passionate about his writings' relatability. Throughout the play, she quotes his works and uses Shakespeare's words to express her feelings, particularly about her relationship with Greg and the confusion of Sylvia's existence in her life.

The first play quoted is *Hamlet*, a tragedy about the Danish prince Hamlet contemplating revenge for his father's murder at the hands of his uncle. *'I must be cruel only to be kind. This bad begins, and worse remains behind'* - *Hamlet Act Three Scene 4, Line 199-200*

In *Sylvia*, this is said after Greg first brings Sylvia home. Kate watches Greg and Sylvia go off after she reluctantly agrees to keep Sylvia around for a few days, and laments her lot in life with this quote.

The second reference is from *Henry IV Part One*, one of the history plays based on English political history. King Henry IV ruled England from 1399 to 1413, and the play, focused on Henry IV and his son Hal, culminates in the year 1403 after the battle of Shrewsbury.

*'Lord, Lord, how this world is given to lying'* - *Henry IV, Part One, Act 5 Scene 4, Line 148-149*

In *Sylvia*, it's quoted after Kate is called by Greg's boss about Greg missing work. The 'lie' in question is to both Kate and Greg's boss, who were unaware of Greg's actual whereabouts while he was supposed to be at work.

The third quote is from *Twelfth Night*, a comedy of errors about a web of relationships complicated by cases of mistaken identity.

*'If this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction'* - *Twelfth Night, Act 3 Scene 4, Line 136-136*

In *Sylvia*, Kate says this after Leslie, rushing to leave her own office, tells Kate to divorce Greg and kill Sylvia. Kate laments the absurdity that Sylvia has introduced to her life.

Greg, in a similar manner, also quotes Shakespeare. He uses a song written for *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* to express his feelings about Sylvia—a name that is incidentally also used

in the original song.

'Who is Sylvia? What is she,

That all our swains commend her?

Holy, fair, and wise is she

The heavens such grace did [lend her

That she admirèd be]' - *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Act 4 Scene 2, Line 41-45

In *Sylvia*, the song is quoted and interrupted during Greg's portion of the marriage counselling scene in Act 2. Greg uses it to provide a glimpse into his relationship with Sylvia for Leslie, who is disturbed by it. In the context of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the song is used as a serenade of romantic love.

Another Shakespeare reference can be found outside of direct quotation, in the choice of character names. Both Kate and Sylvia are names used in Shakespeare: Sylvia in the above-mentioned *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* as an object of desire, and Kate as a wife in a few different plays.

Lady Percy, wife to Hotspur in *Henry IV Part One*, is called Kate and participates in one particular scene that can be paralleled with Greg and Kate's relationship in *Sylvia*. As in *Sylvia*, Shakespeare's Kate finds herself trying desperately to get her husband to confide in her while her husband rushes off without much of a response to her concerns. In the first scene of *Sylvia*, Kate is trying to remind him of a concert they were meant to go to and expresses her worry for Greg, his job, and their relationship. Greg, with an enthusiastic Sylvia on a leash, exits while only expressing concern for Sylvia rather than his upset wife.

<p>Lady Percy: But hear you, my lord. Hotspur: What say'st thou, my lady? Lady Percy: What is it carries you away? Hotspur: Why, my horse, my love, my horse. Lady Percy: Out, you mad-headed ape! A weasel hath not such a deal of spleen As you are tossed with. In faith, I'll know your business, Harry, that I will. I fear my brother Mortimer doth stir About his title, and hath sent for you To line his enterprise; but if you go— Hotspur: So far afoot, I shall be weary, love. Lady Percy: Come, come, you paraquito, answer me Directly unto this question that I ask. In faith, I'll break thy little finger, Harry, An if thou wilt not tell me all things true. Hotspur: Away!</p> <p>(Henry IV Part One, Act 2 Scene 3 Lines 78-94)</p>	<p>Greg: Tell you what: we'll go out. Kate: Out? Now? Sylvia: Did I hear the word "out"? Greg, to Kate: I meant Sylvia Kate: Oh. Greg, to Sylvia: Let's go out, Sylvia. [...] Kate: What about the Waldmans? Sylvia: Let's go, Greg. Greg: The Waldmans? Kate: Dinner! The concert! Sylvia: Come on, Greg! Greg: Take Betsy in my place. She loves concerts. Kate: Sweetheart— Greg: Sylvia needs to go! Kate: I'm worried, Greg. I'm worried about your job, I'm worried about you, I'm worried about us. Greg: I'm worried about Sylvia at the moment.</p> <p>(Sylvia Act 1 Page 19)</p>
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Kate quotes *Henry IV Part One* just after finding out that Greg left work early without telling her, which doubly connects this particular Shakespeare play with Kate expressing her worries over Greg and his actions. While her other two quotes refer to her and her feelings, the Henry IV Part One parallels are more directly addressing Greg.

This is, however, not the only time a wife named Kate was a character in Shakespeare's plays. Katherine of France plays a role in Shakespeare's histories as a marriage prospect in *Henry V*. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, a play that centres around the idea of what a good wife ought to be, Kate plays a more prominent role. She is the titular 'shrew', a temperamental woman, and is deemed in need of 'taming' like one would do with a wild animal. This taming is quite violent and abusive, including starving Kate, to get her to become a subservient woman. By the end of *The Taming of the Shrew*, Kate is a trained, obedient wife.

The parallels between *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Sylvia* are mostly based on the concept of training an animal and a woman, as well as an opinionated wife called Kate. Throughout *Sylvia*, Kate is outright saying no to Greg many times, which he oversteps for the sake of 'training' Kate to enjoy Sylvia's company. He seemingly puts more effort into training Kate to like Sylvia than he does training Sylvia, the dog in question. While he does not put Kate through the things her namesake suffers, he does 'starve' her of his presence in the life Kate is hoping to build for them, instead leaving her to worry on her own. In the end, *Sylvia's* Kate is remorseful for her dislike of Sylvia and has become attached, despite her earlier contemplations of needing to kill Sylvia to fully have Greg back in her life.

The influence of Shakespeare on *Sylvia* is undeniable, be it through direct quotations or subtle influences. Both Kate and Greg use Shakespearean writing to convey their emotions to the audience or Leslie the marriage counsellor, proving Kate's statement about the relatability of Shakespeare even in the modern day. While at odds throughout the play, the couple rely on the same source to express themselves, which shows that they do have shared interests and that perhaps they can make things work. As we see at the end of the play, they figure things out.

Sources:

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<https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/the-two-gentlemen-of-verona/>

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# Lesson Material

## Pre-Watching Tasks

### Anthropomorphism

- 1) *In class:* Describe the picture.
- 2) *In class:* Comment on the picture.
- 3) *Pair and Share:* The picture is an example for *anthropomorphism*. Define the term and explain how it relates to the picture.



## The Pros and Cons of Getting a Pet

1) Read the text below and mark the main statements.

Cats and dogs offer health benefits but they are also a big commitment. Pets can offer a range of physical and emotional health benefits. Studies have found that contact with pets can reduce stress, anxiety and depression. "Interacting with animals has been shown to decrease levels of cortisol and lower blood pressure," said the US

Department of Health and Human Services. Pets can also help people feel less lonely. Dogs encourage physical activity through their need for regular walks, which improves physical health.

The cost of pet ownership can be significant, including food, grooming, veterinary care, vaccinations and emergency medical expenses. Some breeds of dogs also have specific health issues, which lead to even higher healthcare costs. All this really adds up. Over their lifetime, the average cost of owning a pet is between 18 700€ and 38 600€ for a dog or cat.

Some pet owners find their companions make them feel safer. Dogs, in particular, can provide a sense of security as several breeds have natural guarding instincts, and even smaller dogs can act as a deterrent by barking at strangers or alerting their owner to unusual noises. But dogs are not the only pets to provide security for their owners. "For example geese, the loud noise and the aggressive nature of this species will make people think twice before entering your grounds," said PetHelpful.

Owning a pet requires a significant time commitment. Daily care, feeding, grooming, exercise and playtime are important, which can be challenging for people with busy schedules. A poll of 2,000 dog and cat owners found that more than a third admitted they were "totally unprepared for the commitment", said the Mirror.

Pet ownership can also make spontaneous travel more difficult, as you'll need to find pet care or arrange for your pet to accompany you on your journey, which will not always be possible.

Caring for a pet can help people to develop a stronger sense of empathy and compassion. Growing up with a pet can teach children valuable life skills, such as understanding and patience.

"Owning pets is great for teaching children responsibility," said PDSA, the UK vet charity for pets in need, as "they get the reward of seeing their pets happy and healthy and learn to consider others ahead of themselves".

Owning exotic pets can raise specific ethical concerns, including the impact on local ecosystems and the potential danger to public health, including the risk of zoonotic diseases.

<https://theweek.com/news/society/960180/the-pros-and-cons-of-getting-a-pet>

2) Name four pro and contra arguments for/against getting a pet.

3) Decide which statements are true and correct the wrong ones.

a) All breeds of dogs have the same health issues which are expensive.

b) Pets can encourage physical activity and help people feel less lonely.

c) A lot of people know about and are ready for the time commitment that comes along with a pet.

d) Growing up with a pet has many advantages.

- e) Dogs are the only pets to provide security for their owners.
- f) It's always possible to take your pets with you on difficult journeys.
- g) Having exotic pets raises no problems.

## Working with the Script

In A.R. Gurney's play "Sylvia", the protagonist Greg finds a dog named Sylvia in the park and decides to keep her. Sylvia is played by an actress pretending to be a dog.

- 1) Read the following excerpt.
- 2) Sum up in class what the excerpt is about. Give a short characterization of the characters.
- 3) Brainstorm together methods for the actress to present animal behaviour without it being completely ridiculous. Think about facial expressions, body language, sounds...

### ACT ONE

*Before rise: Romantic music, evoking New York. A Benny Goodman Quartet, Gershwin, or something else suggesting the city.\**

*At rise: Greg and Kate's apartment. Sylvia comes on, followed by Greg, holding a 'leash and a newspaper. She is pert and sexy. Her hair is messy and she wears rather scruffy clothes: a baggy sweater, patched jeans, knee pads, and old boots. A small name-tag in the shape of a heart hangs around her neck. Greg wears business clothes, but his tie is loose. He watches Sylvia wander inquisitively around the room. She occasionally might take a sniff of something.*



- GREG. What are you doing, Sylvia?  
 SYLVIA. Looking around.  
 GREG. Relax, why don't you?  
 SYLVIA. I gotta get used to things. *(She prowls again.)*  
 GREG. Sit, Sylvia. *(She tries kneeling, gets up immediately.)*  
 SYLVIA. I'm not ready to sit.  
 GREG. I said, sit.  
 SYLVIA. I'm too nervous to sit.  
 GREG. Down, Sylvia. Down.  
 SYLVIA. *(Checking the couch.)* I'm worried about where I sleep. Do I sleep on this couch?  
 GREG. *(Going to her.)* I said sit DOWN, Sylvia. *(As she comes by, he gives her a gentle smack on the butt with his rolled up newspaper.)* SIT. DOWN.  
 SYLVIA. Ouch.

GREG. Then sit!

SYLVIA. I'm sitting, I'm sitting. (*She sits.*)

GREG. Good girl. Now stay.

SYLVIA. I'm staying.

GREG. (*Patting her on the head.*) Good girl. That's a very good girl. (*He goes to his chair, sits, starts to read the paper.*)

SYLVIA. You don't have to hit, you know.

GREG. It didn't hurt.

SYLVIA. It most certainly did!

GREG. Then I'm sorry.

SYLVIA. You ought to be.

GREG. I just want you to be on your best behavior. Kate gets home any minute.

SYLVIA. Who's Kate?

GREG. My wife. O.K.?

SYLVIA. O.K. But you don't have to hit.

GREG. Then I won't. Ever again. I promise.

SYLVIA. O.K. (*He reads. Sylvia sits looking at him. Finally.*) I love you.

GREG. You do?

SYLVIA. I really do.

GREG. I think you do.

SYLVIA. Even when you hit me, I love you.

GREG. Thank you, Sylvia.

SYLVIA. (*Getting up.*) I think you're God, if you want to know.

GREG. No now sit.

SYLVIA. But I think you're God.

GREG. No now stay, Sylvia. Stay. And sit.

SYLVIA. I want to sit near you.

GREG. Well all right.

SYLVIA. Nearer, my God, to thee.

GREG. O.K. As long as you sit. (*Sylvia settles at his feet.*) Good girl. Now let me read the paper. (*He reads. She looks at him adoringly for another long time.*)

SYLVIA. You saved my life.

GREG. I guess I did.

SYLVIA. You did. You saved my goddamn *life*. I never would have survived out there on my own.

GREG. I did what anyone would do, Sylvia.

SYLVIA. Oh no. Someone else might have ignored me. Or shooed me away. Or even turned me in. Not you. You welcomed me with open arms. I really appreciate that.

GREG. Thanks, Sylvia.

SYLVIA. I hardly knew where to turn. I was beginning to panic. I thought my days were numbered. Then there you were.

GREG. There I was, all right.

SYLVIA. I felt some immediate connection. Didn't you?

GREG. I did, actually.

SYLVIA. I feel it now.

GREG. So do I. (*Puts down his paper; looks at her.*) I do, Sylvia. (*He scratches her ears.*) You're a good girl, Sylvia. I'll try to give you a good home.

- 4) Go into pairs and choose a role each. Prepare to play the scene. Remember the methods to characterize a dog.
- 5) When you're satisfied with your result, switch roles and play the scene again.
- 6) *Teacher task: Choose one random pair and have them perform the scene. Who presents which role does not matter.*  
Present your version of the scene in front of the class.
- 7) In class: Reflect on how you felt when you played the dog. Say why.

## While Watching Tasks

### Quiz

- 1) Where did Greg get Sylvia from?
  - a) Sylvia jumped on his lap when he was sitting in the park
  - b) He found her at a shelter
  - c) She tried to steal his meatball sandwich in the park
  - d) His friend sold her to him
- 2) What does the name Sylvia mean?
  - a) "She of the woods"
  - b) "Friend of nature"
  - c) "Companion"
  - d) "She who frolics"
- 3) Why does Kate not want to have a dog?
  - a) She's allergic
  - b) She isn't over the loss of her previous dog
  - c) She was bit by a dog when she was 3 years old
  - d) She doesn't need one at this point in her life
- 4) Why does Greg not enjoy his job anymore?
  - a) His boss has a tendency to overwork his employees
  - b) He was never passionate about the field he entered
  - c) His responsibilities have gradually become less tangible as the years have gone on
  - d) Due to a series of inexplicable events one of his coworkers has become obsessed with Sylvia
- 5) What is Sylvia's dog friend called?
  - a) Waluigi
  - b) Kevin
  - c) Bowser
  - d) Toad
- 6) What four letter word does Kate dislike when Greg says it?
  - a) Fuck
  - b) Shit
  - c) Ball
  - d) Dick (short for Richard, an ex-boyfriend of hers)



7) What does Kate's friend Phyllis do when Sylvia won't stop sniffing her crotch?

- a) Asks Kate to control her dog
- b) Breaks her sobriety and drinks scotch
- c) Throws her drink in Sylvias face
- d) Starts smoking again

8) Why did Greg get temporarily laid off?

- a) He called his boss a tyrant
- b) He made sexist remarks about a colleague
- c) He lost one of the company's key investors
- d) His boss thought he needed counselling

9) Why does Kate hate Sylvia's guts?

- a) She thinks dogs are carriers of disease
- b) She thinks Sylvia is interfering with her marriage
- c) Sylvia tends to pass gas
- d) Kate is more of a cat person

10) When Sylvia is in heat what does she accuse Greg of being?

- a) A misogynist
- b) Weirdly invested in her sex life
- c) Jealous of her mating with other dogs
- d) Too much like her father

11) Why is Greg angry that Kate got a grant to work in England?

- a) He thinks England is a garbage country
- b) He thinks his wife is too ambitious
- c) Because he realizes, she applied for the grant to get rid of Sylvia
- d) Because he doesn't want to bring Sylvia to England

12) What does Kate tell Leslie about the relationship between Greg and Sylvia?

- a) It's causing her anxiety to skyrocket
- b) She says he is starting to act like a dog himself
- c) She thinks Greg is in love with Sylvia
- d) She thinks Greg is using Sylvia as a replacement of his son

13) What does the therapist recommend Kate should do after talking to Greg?

- a) Divorce Greg and shoot Sylvia right between the eyes
- b) Leave Greg in the middle of the night
- c) Dognap Sylvia and hold her for ransom
- d) Give in and learn to love Sylvia

14) What gives Kate the impulse to stop Greg from giving Sylvia away in the end?

- a) Accidentally sitting on Sylvia's red ball
- b) Sylvia demonstrates her love for Kate in returning something long lost
- c) Greg wants to leave Kate
- d) She finds out Sylvia's new family is abusive.

## Inner Monologue

Right after the first scene of the play, when Greg brings Sylvia home, Sylvia meets Kate for the first time.

Either write an inner monologue from Sylvia's perspective from the moment when she hears Kate's name for the first time. Or choose Kate and write her inner monologue from the moment she opens the door.

Take into account what is actually said in the scene and integrate it into your monologue.

SYLVIA. You don't have to hit, you know.

GREG. It didn't hurt.

SYLVIA. It most certainly did!

GREG. Then I'm sorry.

SYLVIA. You ought to be.

GREG. I just want you to be on your best behavior. Kate gets home any minute.

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GREG. Then I won't. Ever again. I promise.

SYLVIA. O.K. *(He reads. Sylvia sits looking at him. Finally.)* I love you.

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[...]

SYLVIA. I felt some immediate connection. Didn't you?

GREG. I did, actually.

SYLVIA. I feel it now.

GREG. So do I. *(Puts down his paper; looks at her.)* I do, Sylvia. *(He scratches her ears.)* You're a good girl, Sylvia. I'll try to give you a good home.

SYLVIA. Thanks, Greg. And I'll try to show my appreciation. *(He returns to his paper. She sits staring at him adoringly, her chin on the arm of the chair. She sneezes. He smiles at her. Then sud-denly she jumps to her feet.)* Hey!

GREG. What's the matter?

SYLVIA. *(Looking off.)* Hey! Hey! Hey!

GREG. What? *(He listens.)* Oh, that. That's the door. That's just Kate. Home from work.

SYLVIA. Hey! Hey!

GREG. Stop barking, Sylvia! She's a teacher. She likes an orderly classroom. Now show her you can be a good girl.

SYLVIA. *(Unable to control herself.)* Hey! Hey! Hey! Hey!

GREG. No, now quiet, Sylvia! Quiet down! Be a good, quiet girl.

KATE. *(Calling from off.)* Hello!

SYLVIA. Hey! Hey!

GREG. PLEASE, Sylvia. Please. Make a good first impression.

*(Kate comes on, brisk, well-dressed; carrying a large tote bag.)*

KATE. Am I crazy? I thought I heard a - *(Sees Sylvia.)* Dog.

GREG. This is Sylvia, Kate.

SYLVIA. *(Approaching Kate.)* Hi.

GREG. Sylvia, this is Kate.  
KATE. What's going on, Greg?  
SYLVIA. (*Walking around Kate, looking her over.*) Hi. I like you. I think I like you. Hi. (*Gives Kate a tentative kiss.*)  
KATE. (*Brushing her off.*) Stop that. Go away! (*To Greg.*) Greg, what is this?  
GREG. Now Kate... Sit, Sylvia.  
SYLVIA. I was just trying to -  
GREG. I said SIT. (*Sylvia sits immediately.*)  
SYLVIA. See?  
GREG. Good girl. (*To Kate.*) Isn't she a good girl?  
KATE. What's the story, Greg?  
GREG. I found her in the park.  
KATE. The park?  
GREG. I was sitting in the park, and she jumped right into my lap.  
KATE. Back up, please. You were *sitting?* In the *park?* When were you sitting in the park?  
GREG. This afternoon. I took a break from the office.  
(*Pause.*) I had another fight with Harold. (*Pause.*) So I went to the park to cool off.  
KATE. Oh Greg.  
GREG. I was just sitting there. And up came Sylvia.

## Post-Watching

A. R. Gurney, the author, has said, "it took me several years to get this play on stage because most of the theatres we offered it to felt it was insulting to women to be asked to play a dog."<sup>22</sup>

Explain and comment on the reason, theatres had to turn down the play. Make references to the English Theatre's production.

Write a review for your local newspaper in regards to the ETF's production of Sylvia.

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<sup>22</sup> A.R. Gurney, "Sylvia (1995)," A.R. Gurney, Playwright.




## Appendix

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12-14 correct answers	6-11 correct answers	0-5 correct answers
 Congratulations! You understood a lot!	 Quite good already! Talk to your classmates again about the show, you might tap into new levels of understanding!	 Don't give up! Talk to your classmates about the parts of the show that are still a bit fuzzy to you.