

COURTSHIP

by Horton Foote

Elizabeth (early 20's) - Laura (late teens)

The Play: *Courtship* is the fifth of nine plays that comprise the Orphans' Home Cycle by one of America's most prolific playwrights, Horton Foote. Mr. Foote is the recipient of two Academy Awards, one for his film *Tender Mercies* and one for the screen adaptation of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Set in Texas, Foote's nine-play cycle deals with the life journey of Horace Robedaux beginning in 1902, when at the age of twelve his father dies, to 1928, when his twelve-year-old son (Horace, Jr.) must deal with the death of his maternal grandfather. The characters are rich and the language often poetic but always true to the heart. The courtship of the title is in part the courtship between Horace Robedaux and Elizabeth Vaughn (who by the beginning of *Valentine's Day*, the next play in the cycle, has become Horace's wife.) However, we are not to see as much of their courtship as we are to be treated to a front porch discussion of dating, marriage, infidelity, and youthful rebellion. The play opens and closes with sisters Elizabeth (the older of the two) and Laura Vaughn. Laura has been away at school and is just home in time for a local dance—a dance that they have been forbidden to attend. Elizabeth, having finished two years of music study, teaches piano in Harrison and still lives at home, under the watchful eye of the strict Mr. Vaughn. Secretly, Elizabeth has been seeing Horace Robedaux. Mr. and Mrs. Vaughn don't approve of Horace. In fact, they don't approve of the girls dating at all. If Mr. Vaughn could, he would see to it that they never marry. Struggling with this restriction in their lives, the sisters discuss their futures. It seems like every relationship presented them is troubled. During the play, a young contemporary of the sisters dies in childbirth on the same day that she marries the baby's father. The Vaughn family tree is also laced with reminders of failed love and unhappy marriage. It's no wonder Laura and Elizabeth spend so much time worrying that they won't find happiness. In the end, we realize that the painful examples in life will never replace the passion that governs the heart. Parents will try to protect their children and children will act as they must to find the destiny of their lives. Elizabeth,

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already secretly engaged to Horace, declares to her sister at the end of the play that she WILL marry Horace Robedaux when he asks.

The Scene: Elizabeth and Laura are on the front gallery of the Vaughn Home listening to the music from the dance. It's 1915. They've just heard that Sybil Thomas has died in childbirth, on this her wedding day.

Special Note: We urge the actors to explore the entire nine-play Orphan's Home Cycle as it provides wonderful insights into the history and relationships of the characters in the Horace Robedaux story.

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LAURA: How old was Sybyl Thomas?
ELIZABETH: Twenty-one. She was one year older than I am.
LAURA: She wasn't in your crowd though.
ELIZABETH: Sometimes.
LAURA: Did you like her?
ELIZABETH: She was always jolly and had a very sweet disposition.
LAURA: I thought she was pretty. Didn't you?
ELIZABETH: Yes, I did.
LAURA: I think you're very pretty, Elizabeth.
ELIZABETH: Thank you.
LAURA: I love the way you do your hair and the way you dress.
ELIZABETH: Thank you.
LAURA; Do you think I'm going to be pretty?
ELIZABETH: I think you're lovely now.
LAURA: If it wasn't for the scar on my throat.
ELIZABETH: I don't even notice it.
LAURA: I do. I'm very conscious of it.
ELIZABETH: You're lucky to be alive.
LAURA: Yes, I am. I guess they thought I would die. Do you remember it at all when I drank the carbolic acid?
ELIZABETH: Of course, I do.
LAURA: I was two, wasn't I?
ELIZABETH: Yes. I remember hearing Mama scream when she discovered it. I remember Mama and Papa both yelling at the nurse for being so careless and letting you near the bottle of acid and I remember Mama sitting by your bed, night and day nursing you. I remember Papa saying she would kill herself if she didn't get some rest.
LAURA: I try to forget the whole thing and just when I think I have, Mrs. Jordan will say to me, "We didn't expect you to live, Honey. We thought for sure we were all going to your funeral." (A pause.) Do you ever think about dying?
ELIZABETH: Sometimes.
LAURA: I wonder why did the two little girls die and not us? Why are they out in the graveyard and we are here?
ELIZABETH: I don't know.

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LAURA: You're not half listening to me. What are you thinking about?
ELIZABETH: I don't know.
LAURA: I bet I know what you're thinking about.
ELIZABETH: What?
LAURA: Horace Robedaux.
ELIZABETH: Maybe. (A pause.) I'm in love with him.
LAURA: How can you know that?
ELIZABETH: I know.
LAURA: How can you be sure of that?
ELIZABETH: I'm sure.
LAURA: I hope someday I can be sure of something like that.
ELIZABETH: You will be.
LAURA: Be careful though, Elizabeth. You were sure about Syd, but then you changed your mind. You could change your mind again. (A pause.) Ruth Amos said if Miss Agnes Sweet didn't stop singing so loud in the choir she was going to quit.
ELIZABETH: Ruth Amos is the most sensitive human being I've ever heard of. She's always getting her feelings hurt about something and walking out of the choir.
LAURA; Mrs. Cookenboo said she only joined the methodist Church so she could sing solos in the choir. (A pause.) Do you smell the honeysuckle?
ELIZABETH: Yes.
LAURA: I think my favorite smell is chinaberry blossoms in the Spring. (A pause.) It's been a dry Fall. I hope we make a good cotton crop. Papa says he needs a good cotton crop to get me to school in Virginia. I wish I weren't going quite so far away. I'm afraid I'll get lonesome. (A pause.) Do you think I'll get lonesome?
ELIZABETH: If you do, you'll get over it.
LAURA: Were you lonesome off at school?
ELIZABETH: At first.
LAURA: How long were you lonesome?
ELIZABETH: Not long.
LAURA: The dance music has stopped.

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ELIZABETH: It stopped quite a while ago.
LAURA: I wonder why it stopped so early?
ELIZABETH: Maybe they heard about Sibyl Thomas.
LAURA: Maybe they did.
ELIZABETH: Why did you ask Mama about Mrs. Borden?
LAURA: I don't know. Wasn't I supposed to?
ELIZABETH: When I tell you secrets I like to feel you won't repeat them.
LAURA: I didn't know that was a secret.
ELIZABETH: It was a secret, my knowing anything about it. My being in love with Horace Robedaux is a secret.
LAURA: I know that. I would never tell that. *(A pause.)* Does Horace know how you feel?
ELIZABETH: I don't know.
LAURA: Do you think he feels that way about you?
ELIZABETH: I don't know.
LAURA: Are you going to tell him how you feel?
ELIZABETH: Certainly not!
LAURA: What if he tells you first he feels that way about you? Would you tell him then?
ELIZABETH: I don't know.
LAURA: Would you marry him if he asked you?
ELIZABETH: I don't know.
LAURA: You'd have to be engaged first, I suppose. Do you think Mama would let you be engaged to him?
ELIZABETH: I don't know.
LAURA: What do you think?
ELIZABETH: I think Mama might, but Papa wouldn't.
LAURA: Do you think you would have to elope to marry him?
ELIZABETH: Yes.
LAURA: Would you?
ELIZABETH: Yes.
LAURA: Even if it meant Mama and Papa never would forgive you?
ELIZABETH: Yes.
LAURA: Don't say that.

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ELIZABETH: I mean it.
LAURA: Fifer Ecker's Mama and Papa never forgave her for eloping and her husband deserted her and she died all alone, in New Orleans. What if that happened to you?
ELIZABETH: I don't think it will happen to me. Not if I marry Horace. I don't think Horace would ever desert me. I think we will live together a long time and that we will be very happy all our married life.
LAURA: How can you be sure?
ELIZABETH: Because I am sure.
LAURA: Suppose he doesn't love you and is just infatuated and he meets someone out on the road while he's travelling around that he likes much better than you and he never asks you to marry him? What will you do then?
ELIZABETH: I don't know. I wouldn't know what I would do about that unless it happened.
LAURA: Would you ever marry someone older than you like Aunt Evy and Aunt Lucy did? Just because it was the sensible thing to do?
ELIZABETH: No.
LAURA: What if...what if no one you like ever asks you to marry them? And you get to be thirty or thirty-five like Aunt Sarah? And you met a nice older man, a widower say, and you didn't love him, but you respected him and he was kind and thoughtful, would you marry him or go on being an old maid?
ELIZABETH: I don't know.
LAURA: I worry about that so much. Don't you worry about things like that at all?
ELIZABETH: No. The other night when I was out riding with Horace he said he was not going to take out any other girls while he was away travelling this time. And I said I would not see any other young men. I said I would write to him at least three times a week, but I asked him not to write me but every ten days or so, because I didn't want Mama and Papa nagging me about it.
LAURA: If you're not seeing anyone else and he's not seeing anyone else does that mean you're engaged?

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ELIZABETH: In a way. *(She reaches into her dress and pulls out a ring that is on a chain around her neck. She shows it to her.)* Look here.

LAURA: What's that?

ELIZABETH: It's a ring he gave me. I keep it hidden so Mama and Papa won't ask any questions.

LAURA: Is that an engagement ring?

ELIZABETH: I consider it so.

LAURA: And he must consider it so. I bet that's why he didn't take a date to the dance tonight and why he didn't dance when he got there. Because he thinks you're engaged. Can I tell Annie Gayle?

ELIZABETH: You can't tell a living soul. *(Laura cries.)* Why are you crying?

LAURA: I think it's terrible we have to deceive and slip around this way. Why can't we be like other girls and have our beaux come to the house and receive presents and go to the dances? I think we should just defy Papa and Mama and tell them right out.

ELIZABETH: I did that with Syd and it does no good. It just means constant fighting. The boys won't come here because no one wants to be insulted.

LAURA: Of course, with Syd it was a good thing they opposed your marrying him, because you didn't really love him.

ELIZABETH: No.

LAURA: Oh, my God! That worries me so. Suppose I think I'm in love with a man and I marry him and it turns out I'm not in love with him. *(A pause.)* What does being in love mean?

ELIZABETH: Oh, Laura, you'll go crazy if you always think of the bad things that can happen. I don't think of that.

LAURA: What do you think of?

ELIZABETH: I don't think.

LAURA: I wish to heaven I didn't. Everything bad that happens to a girl I begin to worry it will happen to me. All night I've been worrying. Part of the time I've been worrying that I'd end an old maid like Aunt Sarah, and part of the time I worry that I'll fall in love with someone like Syd and defy Papa and run off with him and then realize

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I made a mistake and part of the time I worry...*(A pause.)* that what happened to Sibyl Thomas will happen to me and... *(A pause.)* could what happened to Sibyl Thomas ever happen to you? I don't mean the dying part. I know we all have to die. I mean the other part...having a baby before she was married. How do you think it happened to her? Do you think he loved her? Do you think it was the only time she did? You know... *(A pause.)* Old, common, Anna Landry said in the girls room at school, she did it whenever she wanted to, with whomever she wanted to and nothing ever happened to her. And if it did she would get rid of it. How do women do that?

ELIZABETH: Do what?

LAURA: Not have children if they don't want them?

ELIZABETH: I don't know.

LAURA: I guess we'll never know. I don't trust Anna Landry and I don't know who else to ask. Can you imagine the expression on Mama's face, or Aunt Lucy's or Mrs. Cookenboo's if I asked them something like that? *(A pause.)* Anyway, even if I knew I would be afraid to do something like that before I got married for fear God would strike me dead. *(A pause.)* Aunt Sarah said that Sibyl's baby dying was God's punishment of her sin. Aunt Lucy said if God punished sinners that way there would be a lot of dead babies.