

THE BROWNING VERSION

By Terrence Rattigan

A critical summary:

The Browning Version is the play that cemented Terrence Rattigan's reputation as a serious, mature playwright. It is viewed as one of his best works, and one of the best one-acts ever written. (The actual play, The Browning Version, opens in the sitting room of the home of Mr. Andrew Crocker-Harris and Mrs Millie Crocker-Harris. A young student, John Taplow, knocks at the front door, and then lets himself inside. He steals a chocolate from an open box, and then uses his walking stick to practice his golf swing.)

Frank Hunter, a young schoolmaster, watches Taplow's moves unseen. Finally, he interrupts and gives Taplow pointers on his swing. They converse for a few moments. Taplow has come for his tutoring session with Mr. Andrew Crocker-Harris, although it is the last day of school. The young man is worried, however, that Andrew will not give him his "remove." He plans to study science, which is Hunter's subject.

Taplow does a wicked impersonation of Andrew, which he almost immediately regrets. However, Frank asks him to do it again, and then suggests that since Crocker-Harris is rather late, Taplow should go play golf. Taplow is appalled at the suggestion. Despite his problems with Andrew, Taplow does like him and fears him enough to stay. Taplow relates an incident and again mimics Andrew for Frank's benefit. This time, Millie Crocker-Harris appears at the door, and she listens for a moment before coming inside. Taplow is afraid that Millie has overheard his imitation. Millie informs Taplow that her husband will be tied up at the Bursar's for a while and that he could go, but he decides to wait. Millie sends him on an errand.

Short Answer Questions:

1. Why does Taplow say Mr. Crocker Harris cannot be a sadist?

Answer: A sadist is a person who gets pleasure out of giving pain. Taplow says that Mr. Crocker Harris cannot be even a sadist because that would mean that he has some feelings but he has not at all. He is all shriveled up inside like a nut.

2. What did Mr. Crocker Harris do after Taplow laughed out at the joke that Mr. Crocker Harris made to the class?

Answer: Mr. Crocker Harris told Taplow that he was pleased at the advance that Taplow's Latin had made because it was only Taplow who understood what the rest of the class could not.

Therefore, Mr. Crocker Harris told Taplow to explain the joke to the whole class so that they could share the pleasure with him.

3. What does Millie Crocker Harris ask Taplow to do?

Answer: Millie Crocker Harris asked Taplow to take a prescription to the chemist and get the medicine made up.

4. Why was Taplow horrified to find Mrs. Crocker Harris standing by the door screen and watching Taplow and Frank?

Answer: Taplow had all the way been talking to Frank about Mr. Crocker Harris. Therefore he was horrified to find Mr. Crocker Harris's wife standing by the door screen and watching the two as he feared that she might have overheard what he had been saying.

5. Mention two character traits of Taplow

Answer: a. Taplow is humorous. He has keen power of observation.

b. He is critical about Mr. Crocker Harris for whom he has got a soft corner also in spite of his crankiness.

Long Answer Questions:

1. Make a character sketch of Mr. Crocker Harris.

Answer: The small excerpt 'The Browning Version' revolves around the character of the school teacher Crocker Harris although we do not meet him in the play directly. Whatever we get to know about him is his impression in the mind of his student Taplow as described by Taplow to Mr. Frank who is another teacher from the school where Taplow studies.

As it is described by Taplow, Mr. Crocker Harris is an unusual teacher. He is pictured as a heartless teacher without any feelings and emotions. He is set apart from the other teachers because like the other teachers he never lets the results of examinations known to the students even a day before the formal announcement of the results. He abides by the rules perfectly. He is such a person that he does not hesitate to call a student for extra duty as punishment even on the last day of his tenure in a school as it is the case with Taplow that day. He has no compassion and he never takes pain to pass a student by giving his extra marks out of compassion. For such harshness on his part, he has been nicknamed the 'Crock' by the students.

Taplow opines that Mr. Crocker Harris is not even a sadist. Sadist is a person who obtains pleasure from inflicting pain on others. It is so because had Crocker Harris been a sadist, it would mean that he has a heart and emotion. But Crocker Harris has no emotion at all. Taplow

says that in spite of all these, he has got a soft corner for Crocker Harris and Crocker Harris knows that and does not like it. That is why he has taken pain that Taplow actually hate him. As a whole, Taplow's description of Crocker Harris is very humorous.

2. Discuss the humorous elements in 'The Browning Version'

Hints:

- The play is replete with humorous description of a teacher by student
- Crocker Harris is pictured as an unusual teacher and an unusual human being
- He is a person who loves to be hated and makes attempts for that.
- He feels that Taplow likes him and so he tries to make him hate him.
- He is not even a sadist because that would mean that he has got feelings but he has got no feelings
- Only Taplow, out of compassion, laughs out at the joke Mr. Harris cracks in the class in the Latin language to which none responds. As a punishment Taplow is made to make the class understand the joke.
- Taplow's frightened reaction when he finds Crocker Harris's wife looking at them thinking she might have overheard them.

Value based Question:

Do you feel it is proper for students to present their teacher the way Taplow does? What is your opinion the relation between teacher and student should be like?

Questions for Practice

Long Questions

1. What kind of teacher student relationship does the lesson portray?
2. What is the universal aspect of the characters portrayed in the Browning Version? Short Questions:
1. What is your opinion about Frank that you form from his conversation with Taplow?
2. Do you really feel Mr. Crocker Harris is absolutely like the way he has been presented by Taplow or Taplow is exaggerating?
3. Contrast Mrs. Crocker Harris with Mr. Crocker Harris.
4. What is Taplow's attitude towards Mr. Crocker Harris?
5. Are there any differences in the school system of Taplow's school with yours? If yes, what are they?