

**Retreat from Moscow**  
**By William Nicholson**

**Theatre Calgary**  
**Student Matinee Study Guide**

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## Background Information on *Retreat from Moscow*

### The Author

William Nicholson was born in 1948, and grew up in Sussex and Gloucestershire. He was educated at Downside School and Christ's College, Cambridge, and then joined BBC Television, where he worked as a documentary film maker. There his ambition to write, directed first into novels, was channeled into television drama. His plays for television include *Shadowlands* and *Life Story*, both of which won the BAFTA Best Television Drama award in their year; other award-winners were *Sweet As You Are* and *The March*. In 1988 he received the Royal Television Society's Writer's Award. His first play, an adaptation of *Shadowlands* for the stage, was Evening Standard Best Play of 1990, and went on to a Tony-award winning run on Broadway. He was nominated for an Oscar for the screenplay of the film version, which was directed by Richard Attenborough and starred Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger.

Since then he has written more films - *Sarafina*, *Nell*, *First Knight*, *Grey Owl*, and *Gladiator* (as co-writer), for which he received a second Oscar nomination. He has written and directed his own film, *Firelight*; and three further stage plays, *Map of the Heart*, *Katherine Howard* and *The Retreat from Moscow*.

His novel for older children, *The Wind Singer*, won the Smarties Prize Gold Award on publication in 2000, and the Blue Peter Book of the Year Award in 2001. Its sequel, *Slaves of the Mastery*, was published in May 2001, and the final volume in the trilogy, *Firesong*, in May 2002.

He lives in Sussex with his wife Virginia and their three children.

Author's web site: <http://www.williamnicholson.co.uk/05/index.asp>

## Other works by William Nicholson

### Bibliography

- *The Society of Others* (2005)
- *The Trial of True Love* (2006)
- The Wind on Fire trilogy (children's books) *The Wind Singer* (2000) won the Smarties Gold Award 2000 & the Blue Peter Book of the Year 2001 (both prestigious UK awards).
- *Slaves of the Mastery* (2001)
- *Firesong* (2002)

### Theatre

- The Retreat from Moscow (New York production 2003, nominated for 3 Tony Awards 2004, including Best Play).
- The Retreat from Moscow (Chichester Festival, 1999)
- Katherine Howard (Chichester Festival, 1998)
- Map of the Heart (Globe Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, 1991)
- Shadowlands (Queen's Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, 1989) Evening Standard Drama Awards: Best Play of 1990
- Broadway production at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre.

### Film & TV

- Gladiator (co-writer, Dreamworks/Universal 2000) Academy Award nomination for best screenplay 2000
- Grey Owl (Allied Pictures 2000)
- Firelight (Disney 1998)
- The Noble Warriors Trilogy (children)
- Seeker (2005 UK, 2006 US)

## Summary of the play

The play opens with Edward reading a passage from an account of Napoleon's disastrous campaign into Russia to his wife, Alice, a poet and editor of poetry collections, and their 32-year-old son, Jamie. The account tells of the French forces entering an abandoned and lifeless city, taken at a huge cost, and now impossible to maintain. For Napoleon and the French, the only response is retreat.

For Edward, the historical account reflects the situation in his own marriage. He and Alice, married for 33 years after a chance meeting on a train, have settled into a life of familiar comforts and routines. Alice believes the routines must change; Edward announces that he has met someone else and is leaving. Jamie is caught in the middle, forced into playing confessor, confidant, and unwilling judge for his parents. The role he can accept is listener and witness, a kind of retreat of its own.

As the three-cornered battle plays out, each is left to account for what the preceding years have meant, and what the future will bring.

## A Play about a Family

This preface appears in the published edition of *A Retreat from Moscow*.

"Many years ago...I fell in love. It took me most of the that first term to pluck up the courage to reveal my love, but when at last I did, I found to my astonishment that I was loved in return. I realized then that I had found the one person in all the world who could make my unfinished life complete. I marvelled at my good fortune. As a lover, I was faithful and devoted. I wanted her happiness more than my own, because so long as I made her happy she would go on loving me, and so long as she went on loving me, I had all I wanted in life.

She left me in the summer term. I know now that the demand I made of her – that she make my life complete – was illegitimate, and tiresome. The love that left me as a gift landed on her as a burden. She fled.

I was devastated. The pain was so intense I could barely move, and certainly had no desire to speak. I flinched from the sight of anything that brought her back to me; places I had been with her, clothes I had worn with her, music I had played with her. Since this added up to just about everything, I entered a kind of blank of my own making.

In those days, my home was still my parents' house, and there I hid myself away. My mother saw my unhappiness and wanted to help me, so she reached out to me in the only way she knew: through poetry. My mother has loved poetry all her life, and has a remarkable memory for poems. She gathered together all the poems she knew on the subject of lost love, and made me an anthology to show me that others before me had suffered as I suffered....I was not grateful. I didn't even read them. In the isolation of my pain, I refused consolation.

Time passed. I moved on to other relationships, other mistakes. And my parents' marriage began to disintegrate. By the time I was in my mid-twenties, I was watching helplessly as my good and gentle father found out that he could no longer live with my strong and loving mother. Caught between them, I only wanted the pain to stop....

Writing is an odd enterprise. Why take the fragments of lived experience and rearrange them in some new pattern? Why tell stories at all? For a while I supposed the

urge came from a need to tidy up the mess of life, to impose meaning on the meaningless. More recently I have come to see that I am in the grip of a greater drive...to read the truth of my life. This is hard. Like everyone else, I tell lies all the time, most of all to myself. I lie about who I am and what I want and how much I hurt. I lie to survive. I tell a story of myself that I hope will make others love and admire me. But more and more, I write to strip away these lies, and say, Look, this is how it really is. What then? I look. I recognize the truth. That's all. No moral. No lesson. No consolation. And yet, it's profoundly satisfying. This is the experience the great writers give me.

One day I came upon the anthology my mother made for me all those years ago, and read it, and was overwhelmed....So I decided to write about the failure of my parents' marriage. This play is the result. It's not a documentary. I don't really know what happened inside their hearts and minds. But I know what's been going on inside my own heart and mind, so I know about the characters of the play....

...I was forty before I married, and more honest that I used to be. My marriage has made me deeply happy. We have three children, now growing up. We do our best to keep telling each other the truth about what we want. My wife says she has my parents to thank for our happiness. So maybe some lessons can be learned.

Marriages are made in Heaven.

- Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Aylmer's Field*

If marriages are made in Heaven, they should be happier.

- Thomas Southerne, *The Fatal Marriage*

Marriage is a noose.

- Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

Marriage is that relation between man and woman in which the independence is equal, the dependence mutual, and the obligation reciprocal.

- Louis K. Anspacher

More than man desires to marry, woman desires to be married.

- Talmud: Yebamoth, 113A

There is no more lovely, friendly and charming relationship, communion or company than a good marriage.

- Martin Luther

A good marriage is one which allows for change and growth in the individuals and in the way they express their love.

- Pearl S. Buck

Love is not love that alters when it alteration finds.

- William Shakespeare

## **Napoleon's Retreat from Moscow, 1812**

On June 24 1812, Napoleon's Army of 691,500 men headed towards Moscow. In addition 80,000 National Guards had been conscripted for full military service defending the imperial frontier of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw. With these included, French imperial forces on the Russian border and in Russia totalled some 771,500 men.

According to most modern estimates, the Russian army numbered less than the French initially. Total Russian armies numbered about 500,000 (some estimates place the number as low as 350,000, while others go anywhere up to 710,000 - probably a figure in the vicinity of 400,000 is more accurate) on the eve of war.

The invasion commenced on June 23, 1812. Napoleon initially met little resistance and moved quickly into the enemy's territory. The Russian army could only muster half of its strength and was forced to retreat, leaving the road to Moscow open. The evacuation of the city had been ordered. Napoleon moved into an empty city that was stripped of all supplies. Fires broke out and the city, constructed mainly of wooden buildings, burnt down almost completely, effectively depriving the French of shelter in the city.

Napoleon started his long retreat. Supplying the army became an impossibility - the lack of grass weakened the army's remaining horses, almost all of which died or were killed for food by starving soldiers. With no horses the French cavalry ceased to exist, and cavalymen were forced to march on foot. In addition the lack of horses meant that cannons and wagons had to be abandoned, depriving the army of artillery and support convoys. As starvation and disease took their toll the desertion rate soared. Most of the deserters were taken prisoner or promptly executed by Russian peasants.

The remnants of the Grand Army were further diminished, and only about 22,000 of Napoleon's men survived the Russian campaign.

### **Research Links**

Napoleon's Invasion of Russia

<http://www.geographia.com/russia/rushis05.htm>

The Napoleonic Campaigns and Historical Perspective"

[http://scarab.msu.montana.edu/history/bug/napoleon/typhus\\_russia.htm](http://scarab.msu.montana.edu/history/bug/napoleon/typhus_russia.htm)

Eyewitness Account of French Retreat from Moscow

[http://www.napoleonguide.com/campaign\\_russ\\_coignet3.htm](http://www.napoleonguide.com/campaign_russ_coignet3.htm)

Retreat from Moscow by Gen. Count Phhilib de Segur

<http://kitecam.port5.com/geocities/ney.html>

Review of Out in the Cold by Adam Zamoyski

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A44099-2004Aug4.html>

## Excerpts from Reviews of *Retreat from Moscow*

# ST. LOUIS

William Nicholson's *The Retreat From Moscow*, which has opened a five-week run at the Repertory Theater of St. Louis, lacks the sweetness of his memorable – and multiple-award-winning – *Shadowlands*, but it shares with that play a meticulous attention to the nuances of human relationships. It is this clarity of insight that lifts a small and potentially humdrum story into the rarified atmosphere of genuine drama.

<http://www.talkinbroadway.com/regional/stl/stl4.html>



The best part about **The Retreat from Moscow** was watching the other couples in the audience. Things appeared fairly tense during intermission where groups and couples stood in circles penetrated by awkward silences, sloshing their coffee in attempts to avoid eye contact. And who could blame them? By then, Act One had already milked all the melodrama it could get from its forlorn family trio (with a little help from overworked violins and the minimal but dreary stage set) and we were *still* left wondering how this horrific dysfunctional family was going to right itself in Act Two. When the play ended, we couldn't help but eavesdrop on the fleeing couples, particularly the elder one we followed down 7<sup>th</sup> who were arguing about the overall "message" of the play. Admittedly, we too, *discussed* the show all the way home, both of us maintaining our cool.

"We're not like them, right?" I asked David, after we got on 94 and bumped into unexpected traffic, which he wasn't happy about. "I mean, we communicate, right?" Like the play's leading couple, Edward (**Steven D'Ambrose**) and Alice (**Barbara Kingsley**), we tend to be a couple that defers to certain roles in times of unspoken tension; David is laid-back, whereas I need to know the plan at all times. Like Alice, I want David to throw a party every time there is good news, so when we fight, it's usually about my need for reassurance, and his consequent need for me to trust that he is feeling something under that thick skin of his. Things come to a head when I get on him (in *Moscow*, since set in Britain, the expression is "go for him") for not saying what he wants or expressing his-god forbid-feelings. The part I don't get is that even if David isn't feeling or wanting anything at all, I experience his silence as passive sulking and brooding. In all fairness, I have to give the play credit for keeping young lovebirds like us on our toes. "I'm not bossy, am I? You're not going to just up and leave because I am too forthright are you? I mean, that would be news to me if you did. Just like it was to Alice."

Reviewed by Roxanne Sadovsky and David Erickson

<http://www.aislesay.com/MN-RETREAT.html>

Talkin' Broadway's  
***Broadway Reviews***

**The Retreat From Moscow**

Theatre Review by [Matthew Murray](#) - October 23, 2003

The best word to describe *The Retreat from Moscow* might well be "succinct." William Nicholson's new play at the Booth is succinctly written, succinctly (but superbly) acted, and succinctly designed. There's almost nothing about it that isn't concisely measured and well thought out, from the impact of a couple of well-placed laugh lines to the dispensing of an expected profundity or two.

But succinctness does not necessarily exciting drama make. Here, there are no earth-shaking revelations, no single moment that will cause you to bolt upright in your seat with a masterful revelation about human relationships that you've never been able to precisely articulate before. You'll far more likely find yourself nodding in agreement or smiling in recognition of Nicholson's points. Still, the writing and the direction (provided, succinctly of course, by Daniel Sullivan) are strong enough that, within the play's own boundaries, it can be considered both interesting and effective at deconstructing the elements from which any long-term relationship is built.

<http://www.talkinbroadway.com/world/RetreatFromMoscow.html>

## Before the Curtain Rises – Student Activities

**The following activities can be used to prepare your students for viewing the play. You may wish to consult a copy of the script, available from Theatre Calgary.**

1. What makes a good review? How reliable are reviews? Do you read them either before or after encountering plays, movies, or the music that is reviewed? How do reviews influence your judgement and enjoyment of theatre, cinema, recorded music, or concerts?

Be prepared to write a review of this play after you have seen it. Guidelines for writing a review are included.

Read a review of this play. Find one that was published in a local newspaper about this production, or do some internet research and find a review of another production (three reviews are included). What **expectations** do you have after reading the review?

Read a summary of the play. What expectations do you have after reading the summary?

2. How is the **viewing** of a play different from encountering other texts? Considering these differences, how can you prepare yourself for the viewing of any play?
3. Compose a **personal response** after considering the following questions. After viewing the play, reconsider what you have written. You may want to make additions and revisions.

**Family:** How well do we know the people we live with, the people in our family? Do you get along better with your father or your mother? Which person in your family do you know they best? Which member of your family understands you best?

**Perception:** In what ways does your memory of events differ from the way your siblings or parents remember events? Often we don't know that assumptions we've made until these assumptions have been challenged. How can we be sure that our perceptions and assumptions match reality?

**Communication:** To what extent is it necessary to be open and honest in relationships? Is it possible, and even desirable, to be completely honest in any relationship? Is it easier to allow the words of others (a poet, a songwriter) to speak for us?

**Love:** Is love enough to save a family? We often use the cliché that opposites attract, but is that cliché true when applied to relationships? Would people who are opposite in nature have a good marriage? What might be some advantages and disadvantages of a close relationship with someone who is opposite to you? When is love a gift and when is it a burden? When does love get in the way?

## While the Curtain is Up – Student Activities

### Plot

Note that a number of important events have taken place before the play opens, or take place off-stage and are described by characters.

### Character

Watch how a character moves and relates to other characters in the scene. How do you picture Angela, who is mentioned but not seen?

### Setting

This play takes place in the family home. Note how set has been designed to facilitate the movement of characters, rather than the conventional uses of a room.

### Direction

Listen for sound effects and music and consider how these help to develop mood.

Note what each character is wearing, and how this helps to develop character. Is lighting used for effect?

### Staging

The staging directions for the play suggest that all three actors remain onstage throughout. When one character is no longer present in a scene, he becomes still, and the lights go down on him. The audience can still see him, but the other actors cannot. The shadowed actor sits or stands, suspended in time, and does not react to what takes place around him. What is the effect of having all three actors on stage throughout the play?

### Theme

Think about the essential questions this play asks about the nature of human experience. Reconsider the themes of Family, Perception, Communication and Love, that you explored in your personal response. As you watch the play, consider also the following questions:

- How does previous experience affect current behaviour?
- How much of our identity, and the way we deal with experience, is a product of our family?
- In what ways do the expectations of others affect the way we behave?
- What are the important experiences that help us to understand ourselves?
- Is it easy to recognize and accept our essential characters?
- To what extent is communication necessary to a good relationship?

## After the Curtain Falls – Student Activities

### Reviewing the Play

Before you attended the performance, you read three reviews of the play when it was performed in other cities. How accurately do those reviews your experience of the play?

Before writing your own review, read the following guidelines.

#### What is a review?

A review is a critical evaluation of a text, event, object, or phenomenon. Reviews can consider books, articles, entire genres or fields of literature, architecture, art, fashion, restaurants, policies, exhibitions, performances, and many other forms.

Above all, a review makes an argument. The most important element of a review is that it is a commentary, not merely a summary. It allows you to enter into dialogue and discussion with the work's creator and with other audiences. You can offer agreement or disagreement and identify where you find the work exemplary or deficient in its knowledge, judgments, or organization. You should clearly state your opinion of the work in question, and that statement will probably resemble other types of academic writing, with a thesis statement, supporting body paragraphs, and a conclusion.

Typically, reviews are brief. In newspapers, they rarely exceed 1000 words so they need to be succinct.

First, a review gives the reader a concise summary of the content. This includes a relevant description of the topic as well as its overall perspective, argument, or purpose.

Second, and more importantly, a review offers a critical assessment of the content. This involves your reactions to the work under review: what strikes you as noteworthy, whether or not it was effective or persuasive, and how it enhanced your understanding of the issues at hand.

Finally, in addition to analyzing the work, a review often suggests whether or not the audience would appreciate it.

## History as Metaphor

The first words of dialogue in *The Retreat from Moscow* are spoken by the character of Edward, reading from a book:

“As men dropped in the intense cold, their bodies were stripped of clothing by their own comrades, and left naked in the snow, still alive. Others, having lost or burned their shoes, were marching with bare feet and legs. The frozen skin and muscles were exfoliating themselves, like successive layers of wax statues. The bones were exposed, but being frozen, were completely insensitive to pain. Some officers suffering from Diarrhoea, found themselves unable to do their trousers up. I myself helped one of these unfortunates to put his asterisk-asterisk-asterisk back, and button himself up. He was crying like a child.”

Edward is fascinated by eye-witness accounts of Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow, one of the best-known military campaigns in world history.

In what ways does Nicholson use this historical account as a metaphor for the events, the characters and the themes? Consider the following quotations from the play.

1. Alice: It’s horrible, Edward. Why do you go on reading it?  
Edward: It is horrible. But it’s curiously compelling, too. I suppose because it exposes the way human beings behave in extremis. When it’s a matter of survival, people show no mercy.
2. Edward: [Alice] found me in the staffroom. There was something I’d forgotten, or failed to do, something very minor. She went for me in front of my colleagues, which I consider unacceptable. What could I do? I walked out of the staffroom. To avoid the embarrassment of it. She came after me, saying, “Talk to me. Answer me. Look at me.”...I went out onto the playing fields...Then she started to take off her clothes. ...It was unbearable. She looked pitiful, standing there, trembling, in the middle of the playing field. So of course I had to turn and face her. And she said, “There. I’ve made you look at me at last.”
3. Alice: That’s [Edward’s] retreat from Moscow. That’s his big excuse. We’re all going to die, but he can be one of the survivors if he doesn’t have to drag me along too. It’s his rotten stinking cowardly way of making out it’s alright to dump me in the snow. But let me tell you, if we really were on the retreat from Moscow, he’d be the one who wouldn’t make it, not me.

## Poetry Links

Edward: She could recite whole poems, on any subject, hundreds of them. It was like a trick, only it wasn't a trick, it was a passion. Alice taught me to love poetry. It rubbed off on me by sheer proximity. I've always been grateful for that.

The following poems are quoted in the play.

1. "The Impulse" by Robert Frost  
<http://www.poemtree.com/poems/Impulse.htm>
2. "Two in the Campagna" by Robert Browning  
[http://www.web-books.com/Classics/Poetry/anthology/Browning\\_R/Two.htm](http://www.web-books.com/Classics/Poetry/anthology/Browning_R/Two.htm)
3. "The Collar" by George Herbert  
<http://www.bartleby.com/40/221/html>
4. "The Confirmation" by Edwin Muir  
<http://www.mrbauld.com/edwinmuir/html>
5. "Ozymandias" by Percy Bysshe Shelley  
<http://www.savagenet.com/oz/Oz/>
6. "Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold  
<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/arnold/writings/doverbeach.html>
7. "Autumn" by Rainer Maria Rilke  
<http://www.poemhunter.com/p/m/poem.asp?poet=6608&poem=30135>
8. "Sudden Light" by Dante Gabriel Rossetti  
<http://www.potw.org/archive/potw52.html>
9. "The Flower" by George Herbert  
<http://www.bartleby.com/40/222.html>
10. "The Fields are Full of Summer Still" by Edward Shanks  
[http://www.recmusic.org/lieder/get\\_text.html?TextId=14905](http://www.recmusic.org/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=14905)

### Activities:

Choose one poem that has a personal connection for you and read it in its entirety. Write a personal response to the poem.

Choose one poem that expresses a familiar emotion and read it in its entirety. Who would you give this poem to? Under what circumstances?

In what ways does Alice use other people's words to speak for her? Choose one poem and read it in its entirety. Connect it to one of themes discussed earlier. How does this poem reflect the theme? What might Alice, or William Nicholson, been trying to communicate with this poem?

## Poetry Anthology

For this assignment you will choose a number of poems all linked to the same topic. After choosing an appropriate topic, you will find and include in your collection six different poems. Seek approval of your topic from your teacher before you proceed.

The following criteria must be met by the six poems you have chosen:

- ❖ use 3 different sources
- ❖ choose 5 different poets
- ❖ include one Canadian poet
- ❖ include one female poet
- ❖ include one poem that was written at least 100 years ago
- ❖ reflect your topic in a different way
- ❖ complete a chart for each poem

Poem #1 – Write an analysis of the poem, including a summary of the poet's background and how it affects the poem.

Poem #2 – Write a creative response.

Poem #3 – Write a journal response.

Poem #4 – Create a Visual representation

Poem #5 – A poem you've written, including your own reflection and analysis, and a visual representation.

When compiling your anthology, you must:

- ❖ enclose it in a duotang or folder or binder
- ❖ include a cover page
- ❖ include a table of contents
- ❖ include a bibliography
- ❖ handwrite or retype the poems; do not hand in photocopies; do not forget titles and poets' names
- ❖ have only one poem per page, and only the poem on the page
- ❖ include your writing (analysis, journal response, etc) on the pages following the poem

### Scoring Guide

Element	Total	Criteria
Title Page	5	- all necessary information included - visually appealing
Table of contents	5	- complete and detailed
Bibliography	5	- correct format
Poem #1 • analysis and background	20	- content, thought and detail - writing skills
Poem #2 • creative response	15	- completeness - harmony, balance and symbolism of visual elements
Poem #3 • journal response	15	- use of poetic techniques discussed in class
Poem #4 • visual representation	15	- meet all criteria for poem selection - meet all criteria of individual assignments
Poem #5 • creation • reflection and analysis • visual representation	20	