Build Background

A Silver-Tongued Lawyer In The Devil and Daniel Webster, a New England man asks a famous American statesman for help. Although the play is fictional, Daniel Webster was not. Webster was one of the greatest lawyers and best public speakers of the early and middle 1800s. He argued many important cases before the Supreme Court. As a congressman and a senator, Webster strongly defended the Constitution and the Union. His famous words “Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable!” inspired Northern soldiers during the Civil War.

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS HISTORICAL DRAMA A historical drama is a play that is set in the past. In all dramas, the plot and characters are developed through dialogue and through action, which is described in the stage directions. In this example from the play you are about to read, the dialogue and stage directions work together to reveal that Jabez Stone is nervous about a secret he has kept from his wife:

Jabez. I wasn’t thinking about Mr. Webster. (He takes both her hands.) Mary, I’ve got something to tell you. I should have told you before, but I couldn’t seem to bear it.

As you read this play, use both stage directions and lines of dialogue to help you learn about Jabez Stone and Daniel Webster.

ACTIVE READING VISUALIZING WITH STAGE DIRECTIONS Visualizing is an attempt to imagine what something looks like based on written or spoken information. To visualize while you are reading a play, look for the following in the stage directions:

- details about the sets, furniture, props, and lighting
- descriptions of the characters’ appearance and actions

READER’S NOTEBOOK As you read the stage directions in this play, pause to visualize the scenes that are being described. Draw or sketch the scenes. Then jot down a few words that describe how you might feel if you were in such a scene.
The Devil and Daniel Webster

STEPHEN VINCENT BENET

CAST

Jabez Stone  Mary Stone

Daniel Webster
Mr. Scratch
Men and Women of Cross Corners, New Hampshire
Justice Hathorne's Clerk
Justice Hathorne
The Fiddler
King Philip
Walter Butler
Simon Girty
Teach

Scene—Jabez Stone's farmhouse.
Time—1841.
he scene is the main room of a New Hampshire farmhouse in 1841, a big comfortable room that hasn’t yet developed the stuffiness of a front parlor. A door, right, leads to the kitchen—a door, left, to the outside. There is a fireplace, right. Windows, in center, show a glimpse of summer landscape. Most of the furniture has been cleared away for the dance which follows the wedding of Jabez and Mary Stone, but there is a settle or bench by the fireplace, a table, left, with some wedding presents upon it, at least three chairs by the table, and a cider barrel on which the Fiddler sits, in front of the table. Near the table, against the sidewall, there is a cupboard where there are glasses and a jug. There is a clock.

A country wedding has been in progress—the wedding of Jabez and Mary Stone. He is a husky young farmer, around twenty-eight or thirty. The bride is in her early twenties. He is dressed in stiff, store clothes but not ridiculously—they are of good quality and he looks important. The bride is in a simple white or cream wedding dress and may carry a small, stiff bouquet of country flowers.

Now the wedding is over and the guests are dancing. The Fiddler is perched on the cider barrel. He plays and calls square-dance figures. The guests include the recognizable types of a small New England town, doctor, lawyer, storekeeper, old maid, schoolteacher, farmer, etc. There is an air of prosperity and hearty country mirth about the whole affair.

At rise, Jabez and Mary are up left center, receiving the congratulations of a few last guests who talk to them and pass on to the dance. The others are dancing. There is a buzz of conversation that follows the tune of the dance music.

First Woman. Right nice wedding.
First Man. Handsome couple.

Second Woman (passing through crowd with dish of oyster stew). Oysters for supper!
Second Man (passing cake). And layer cake—layer cake—
An Old Man (bobbling toward cider barrel). Makes me feel young again! Oh, by jingo!
An Old Woman (pursuing him). Henry, Henry, you’ve been drinking cider!
Fiddler. Set to your partners! Do-si-do!

Women. Mary and Jabez.
Men. Jabez and Mary.
A Woman. Where’s the State Senator?
A Man. Where’s the lucky bride?
(With cries of “Mary—Jabez—strike it up, fiddler—make room for the bride and groom,” the Crowd drags Mary and Jabez, pleased but embarrassed, into the center of the room and Mary and Jabez do a little solo dance, while the Crowd claps, applauds and makes various remarks.)

ACTIVE READING
VISUALIZE Close your eyes and picture the wedding. What do you see?
A Man. Handsome steppers!
A Woman. She’s pretty as a picture.
A Second Man. Cut your pigeon-wing, Jabez!
The Old Man. Young again, young again, that’s the way I feel! (He tries to cut a pigeon-wing himself.)
The Old Woman. Henry, Henry, careful of your rheumatiz!
A Third Woman. Makes me feel all teary—seeing them so happy.

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1. Do-si-do (dō′sē′dō′): a signal to perform the square-dance movement of the same name. Other square-dancing terms follow, such as “cut your pigeon-wing,” “scratched for corn,” and “left and right—grand chain.”
(The solo dance ends, the music stops for a moment.)

The Old Man (gossiping to a neighbor). Wonder where he got it all—Stones was always poor.

His Neighbor. Ain't poor now—makes you wonder just a mite.

A Third Man. Don't begrudge it to him—but I wonder where he got it.

The Old Man (starting to whisper). Let me tell you something—

The Old Woman (quickly). Henry, Henry, don't you start to gossip. (She drags him away.)

Fiddler (cutting in). Set to your partners! Scratch for corn!

(The dance resumes, but as it does so, the Crowd chants back and forth.)

Women. Gossip's got a sharp tooth.

Men. Gossip's got a mean tooth.

Women. She's a lucky woman. They're a lucky pair.

Men. That's true as gospel. But I wonder where he got it.

Women. Money, land and riches.

Men. Just came out of nowhere.

Women and Men (together). Wonder where he got it all—but that's his business.

Fiddler. Left and right—grand chain!

(The dance rises to a pitch of ecstasy with the final figure—the fiddle squeaks and stops. The dancers mop their brows.)

First Man. Whew! Ain't danced like that since I was knee-high to a grasshopper!


Third Man. No, wait a minute, neighbor. Let's hear from the happy pair! Hey, Jabez!

Fourth Man. Let's hear from the State Senator!

(The crowd around Jabez and push him up on the settee.)

Old Man. Might as well. It's the last time he'll have the last word!

Old Woman. Now, Henry Banks, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!

Old Man. Told you so, Jabez!

The Crowd. Speech!

Jabez (embarrassed). Neighbors—friends—I'm not much of a speaker—spite of your lecturing me to State Senate—


Jabez. But we're certainly glad to have you here—me and Mary. And we want to thank you for coming and—

A Voice. Vote the Whig ticket!

Another Voice. Hooray for Daniel Webster!

Jabez. And I'm glad Hi Foster said that, for those are my sentiments, too. Mr. Webster has promised to honor us with his presence here tonight.

The Crowd. Hurrah for Dan'l! Hurrah for the greatest man in the U.S.!

Jabez. And when he comes, I know we'll give him a real New Hampshire welcome.

The Crowd. Sure we will—Webster forever—and to hell with Henry Clay! 3

Jabez. And meanwhile—well, there's Mary and me (takes her hand)—and, if you folks don't have a good time, well, we won't feel right about getting married at all. Because I know I've been lucky—and I hope she feels that way, too. And, well, we're going to be happy or bust a trace!

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2. Whig: a political party founded in the 1830s. Daniel Webster was one of its leaders.

3. Henry Clay: a famous American congressman of the time and a rival of Daniel Webster.
(He wipes his brow to terrific applause. He and Mary look at each other.)

A Woman (in kitchen doorway). Come and get the cider, folks!
(The Crowd begins to drift away—a few to the kitchen—a few toward the door that leads to the outside. They furnish a shifting background to the next little scene, where Mary and Jabez are left alone by the fireplace.)

Jabez. Mary.
Mary. Mr. Stone.
Jabez. Mary.
Mary. My husband.
Jabez. That's a big word, husband.
Mary. It's a good word.
Jabez. Are you happy, Mary?
Mary. Yes. So happy, I'm afraid.
Jabez. Afraid?
Mary. I suppose it happens to every girl—just for a minute. It's like spring turning into summer. You want it to be summer. But the spring was sweet. (Dismissing the mood) I'm sorry. Forgive me. It just came and went, like something cold. As if we'd been too lucky.

Jabez. We can't be too lucky, Mary. Not you and me.

Mary (rather mischievously). If you say so, Mr. Stone. But you don't even know what sort of housekeeper I am. And Aunt Hepsy says—

Jabez. Bother your Aunt Hepsy! There's just you and me and that's all that matters in the world.

Mary. And you don't know something else—

Jabez. What's that?

Mary. How proud I am of you. Ever since I was a little girl. Ever since you carried my books. Oh, I'm sorry for women who can't be proud of their men. It must be a lonely feeling.

Jabez (uncomfortably). A man can't always be proud of everything, Mary. There's some things a man does, or might do—when he has to make his way.

Mary (laughing). I know—terrible things—like being the best farmer in the county and the best State Senator—

Jabez (quietly). And a few things, besides. But you remember one thing, Mary, whatever happens. It was all for you. And nothing's going to happen. Because he hasn't come yet—and he would have come if it was wrong.

Mary. But it's wonderful to have Mr. Webster come to us.

Jabez. I wasn't thinking about Mr. Webster. (He takes both her hands.) Mary, I've got something to tell you. I should have told you before, but I couldn't seem to bear it. Only, now that it's all right, I can. Ten years ago—

A Voice (from off stage). Dan'l! Dan'l Webster!

(Jabez drops Mary's hands and looks around. The Crowd begins to mill and gather toward the door. Others rush in from the kitchen.)

Another Voice. Black Dan'l! He's come!

Another Voice. Three cheers for the greatest man in the U.S.!

Another Voice. Three cheers for Daniel Webster! (And, to the cheering and applause of the crowd, Daniel Webster enters and stands for a moment upstage, in the familiar pose, his head thrown back, his attitude lionine. He stops the cheering of the crowd with a gesture.

Webster. Neighbors—old friends—it does me good to hear you. But don't cheer me—I'm not running for President this summer. (a laugh

4. Black Dan'l: a nickname Webster received as a child because of his dark complexion.
5. lionine (l.e3'n-in): like a lion.
always being some when he has things—like try and the besides. But however hap-hap-hap's going on yet—and ng.

Mr. Webster

Webster. (He got some /ve told you ear it. Only years ago— /Webster! looks around. /or toward the en.)

me! greatest man

Daniel Webster

of the crowd, /or a moment head thrown is the cheering

—it does go /me—I'm not mer. (a laugh

ed as a child

from the Crowd) I'm here on a better errand—to pay my humble respects to a most charming lady and her very fortunate spouse.

(There is the twang of a fiddlestring breaking.)

Fiddler. 'Tarnation! Busted a string!

A Voice. He's always bustin' strings.

(Webster blinks at the interruption but goes on.)

Webster. We're proud of State Senator Stone in these parts—we know what he's done. Ten years ago he started out with a patch of land that was mostly rocks and mortgages and now—well, you've only to look around you. I don't know that I've ever seen a likelier farm, not even at Marshfield[6]—and I hope, before I die, I'll have the privilege of shaking his hand as Governor of this State. I don't know how he's done it—I couldn't have done it myself. But I know this—Jabez Stone wears no man's collar. (At this statement there is a discordant squeak from the fiddle, and Jabez looks embarrassed. Webster knits his brows.) And what's more, if I know Jabez, he never will. But I didn't come here to talk politics—I came to kiss the bride. (He does so among great applause. He shakes hands with Jabez.) Congratulations, Stone—you're a lucky man. And now, if our friend in the corner will give us a tune on his fiddle—

(The Crowd presses forward to meet the great man. He shakes hands with several.)

A Man. Remember me, Mr. Webster? Saw ye up at the State House at Concord.

Another Man. Glad to see ye, Mr. Webster. I voted for ye ten times.

(Webster receives their homage politely, but his mind is still on music.)

Webster (a trifle irritated). I said, if our friend in the corner would give us a tune on his fiddle—

Fiddler (passionately, flinging the fiddle down). Hell's delight—excuse me, Mr. Webster. But the very devil's got into that fiddle of mine. She was doing all right up to just a minute ago. But now I've tuned her and tuned her and she won't play a note I want.

(And, at this point, Mr. Scratch makes his appearance. He has entered, unobserved, and mixed with the crowd while all eyes were upon Daniel Webster. He is, of course, the devil—a New England devil, dressed like a rather shabby attorney but with something just a little wrong in clothes and appearance. For one thing, he wears black gloves on his hands. He carries a large black tin box, like a botanist's collecting box, under one arm. Now he slips through the crowd and taps the Fiddler on the shoulder.)

Scratch (insinuatingly). Maybe you need some rosin on your bow, fiddler?

Fiddler. Maybe I do and maybe I don't. (Turns and confronts the stranger) But who are you? I don't remember seeing you before.

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6. Marshfield: a small town southeast of Boston, where Daniel Webster had a farm.
Scratch. Oh, I’m just a friend—a humble friend of the bridegroom’s. *(He walks toward Jabez. Apologetically.)* I’m afraid I came in the wrong way, Mr. Stone. You’ve improved the place so much since I last saw it that I hardly knew the front door. But, I assure you, I came as fast as I could.

Jabez *(obviously shocked).* It—it doesn’t matter. *(With a great effort)* Mary—Mr. Webster—this is a—a friend of mine from Boston—a legal friend. I didn’t expect him today but—

Scratch. Oh, my dear Mr. Stone—an occasion like this—I wouldn’t miss it for the world. *(He bows.)* Charmed, Mrs. Stone. Delighted, Mr. Webster. But—don’t let me break up the merriment of the meeting. *(He turns back toward the table and the Fiddler.)*

Fiddler *(with a grudge, to Scratch.* Boston lawyer, eh?

Scratch. You might call me that.

Fiddler *(tapping the tin box with his bow.)* And what have you got in that big tin box of yours? Law papers?

Scratch. Oh—curiosities for the most part. I’m a collector, too.

Fiddler. Don’t hold much with Boston curiosities, myself. And you know about fiddling, too, do you? Know all about it?

Scratch. Oh—*(a deprecatory shrug)*

Fiddler. Don’t shrug your shoulders at me—I ain’t no Frenchman. Telling me I needed more rosin!

Mary *(trying to stop the quarrel.)* Isaac—please—

Fiddler. Sorry, Mary—Mrs. Stone. But I been playing the fiddle at Cross Corners weddings for twenty-five years. And now here comes a stranger from Boston and tells me I need more rosin!

Scratch. But, my good friend—

Fiddler. Rosin indeed! Here—play it yourself then and see what you can make of it! *(He thrusts the fiddle at Scratch. The latter stiffens, slowly lays his black collecting box on the table, and takes the fiddle.)*

Scratch *(with feigned embarrassment.)* But really, I— *(He bows toward Jabez.)* Shall I—Mr. Senator? *(Jabez makes a helpless gesture of assent.)*

Mary *(to Jabez.)* Mr. Stone—Mr. Stone—are you Ill.

Jabez. No—no—but I feel—it’s hot—

Webster *(chuckling.)* Don’t you fret, Mrs. Stone, I’ve got the right medicine for him. *(He pulls a flask from his pocket.)* Ten-year-old Medford, Stone—I buy it by the keg down at Marshfield. Here—*(He tries to give some of the rum to Jabez.)*

Jabez. No—*(he turns)—Mary—Mr. Webster—*(But he cannot explain. With a burst.)* Oh, let him play—let him play! Don’t you see he’s bound to? Don’t you see there’s nothing we can do?

*(A rustle of discomfort among the guests. Scratch draws the bow across the fiddle in a horrible discord.)*

Fiddler *(triumphantly.)* I told you so, stranger. The devil’s in that fiddle!

Scratch. I’m afraid it needs special tuning. *(Draws the bow in a second discord)* There—that’s better *(grinning.)* And now for this happy—this very happy occasion—in tribute to the bride and groom—I’ll play something appropriate—a song of young love—

Mary. Oh, Jabez—Mr. Webster—stop him! Do you see his hands? He’s playing with gloves on his hands.
He thrusts up his fists, slow and fumblingly, as though he were仅有

But really, stranger—shall I tell you what I heard?

Mrs. Stone. (He pulls a face.) Oh, let him go. I suppose he's bound to be a horrible wretch.

Scratch. (Draws his sword.) There—that's the way to make the church happy again. I contribute to the support of it.

Webster. Stop him! Do not allow him to cross the stage. He is an abomination.

Scratch. (accompanying himself fantastically.)

Young William was a thriving boy. (Listen to my doleful tale.)
Young Mary Clark was all his joy. (Listen to my doleful tale.)

He swore he'd love her all his life. She swore she'd be his loving wife. But William found a gambler's den And drank with livery-stable men.

He played the cards, he played the dice He would not listen to advice.

And when in church he tried to pray, The devil took the words away.

(Scratch, still playing, starts to march across the stage.)

The devil got him by the toe And so, alas, he had to go.

"Young Mary Clark, young Mary Clark, I now must go into the dark."
(These last two verses have been directed at Jabez. Scratch continues, now turning on Mary.)

Young Mary lay upon her bed. "Alas my Will-i-am is dead."

He came to her a bleeding ghost—
(He rushes at Mary but Webster stands between them.)

Webster. Stop! Stop! You miserable wretch—can't you see that you're frightening Mrs. Stone? (He wrenches the fiddle out of Scratch's hands and tosses it aside.) And now, sir—out of this house!
Scratch (facing him). You're a bold man, Mr. Webster. Too bold for your own good, perhaps. And anyhow, it wasn't my fiddle. It belonged to—(He wheels and sees the Fiddler tampering with the collecting box that has been left on the table.) Idiot! What are you doing with my collecting box? (He rushes for the Fiddler and chases him round the table, but the Fiddler is just one jump ahead.)

Fiddler. Boston lawyer, eh? Well, I don't think so. I think you've got something in that box of yours you're afraid to show. And, by jingo—(He throws open the lid of the box. The lights wink and there is a clap of thunder. All eyes stare upward. Something has flown out of the box. But what? Fiddler, with relief.) Why, 'tain't nothing but a moth.

Mary. A white moth—a flying thing.

Webster. A common moth—telea polyphemus—

The Crowd. A moth—just a moth—a moth—

Fiddler (terrified). But it ain't. It ain't no common moth! I seen it! And it's got a death's-head on it! (He strikes at the invisible object with his bow to drive it away.)

Voice of the Moth. Help me, neighbors! Help me!

Webster. What's that? It wails like a lost soul.

Mary. A lost soul.


Voice of the Moth. Help me, neighbors!

Fiddler. It sounds like Miser Stevens.

Jabez. Miser Stevens!

The Crowd. The Miser—Miser Stevens—a lost soul—lost.

Fiddler (frantically). It sounds like Miser Stevens—and you had him in your box. But it can't be. He ain't dead.

Jabez. He ain't dead—I tell you he ain't dead! He was just as spry and mean as a woodchuck Tuesday.

The Crowd. Miser Stevens—soul of Miser Stevens—but he ain't dead.

Scratch (dominating them). Listen!

(A bell off stage begins to toll a knell, slowly, solemnly.)

Mary. The bell—the church bell—the bell that rang at my wedding.

Webster. The church bell—the passing bell.

Jabez. The funeral bell.

The Crowd. The bell—the passing bell—Miser Stevens—dead.

Voice of the Moth. Help me, neighbors, help me! I sold my soul to the devil. But I'm not the first or the last. Help me. Help Jabez Stone!

Scratch. Ah, would you! (He catches the moth in his red bandanna, stuffs it back into his collecting box, and shuts the lid with a snap.)

Voice of the Moth (fading). Lost—lost forever, forever. Lost, like Jabez Stone.

(The Crowd turns on Jabez. They read his secret in his face.)