

# Goodman Theatre

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Student Guide

# *Desire Under the Elms*

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# Exploring the Production

# Eugene O'Neill

## The Playwright

\*Text adapted from an article by Goodman Literary Manager Tanya Palmer

Born on October 16, 1888, in a Broadway hotel room, Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was the third son of James O'Neill, a well-known stage actor, and his wife Ella, the sheltered daughter of a Cleveland businessman. Their second child, Edmund, had died of measles as an infant and his death, along with the morphine addiction that Ella developed during O'Neill's birth, would come to inform much of the playwright's later work, particularly his masterpiece *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

His love for drama was born when he attended a production of *Hedda Gabler* by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. "That experience discovered an entire new world of drama for me," he later explained. "It gave me my first conception of a modern theater where truth might live."

O'Neill's youth was marked by a series of escapes and failures. He traveled the world from New York to Honduras to Buenos Aires. On these trips, amidst plenty of drinking and whoring, O'Neill managed to contract malaria twice before attempting suicide. While recovering at the Gaylord Farm Sanatorium, he discovered the plays of Swedish expressionist writer August Strindberg. It was this discovery, he said, that inspired him to become a playwright.

Eager to get away from the distractions of New York, O'Neill accompanied a radical journalist named Jack Reed to Provincetown, Massachusetts where he joined a group of artists and radicals who called themselves the Provincetown Players. O'Neill began to write and direct plays for the company, garnering much critical success. His first full-length play, *Beyond the Horizon*, transferred to Broadway, eventually winning the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1920, his first of four.

O'Neill won his next Pulitzer three years later with the premiere of *Anna Christie*, the story of a cynical, desperate ex-hooker from Minnesota. Other successful O'Neill plays from this time include *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape* (both plays that we are doing at the Goodman as part of our O'Neill exploration). Shortly thereafter, O'Neill's mother died at the age of 64. Her death sent O'Neill's brother Jamie into hysterics and he died six months later at the age of 45. These losses sent O'Neill into a deep depression during which he began working on *Desire Under the Elms*. The play, premiering on Broadway in 1924, made a huge impact on the theatre scene and was described by critic and O'Neill scholar Travis Bogard as "the first important tragedy to be written in America."

### The Pulitzer Prize

Established by Joseph Pulitzer, a Jewish-American journalist and newspaper publisher, the Pulitzer Prize is an American award regarded as the highest national honor in newspaper journalism, literary works and musical composition. There are 21 different categories honoring exceptional reporting, photography, cartooning, public service and creative writing. O'Neill's Pulitzers were in the category of Drama, which honors original plays that deal with American life. O'Neill has won more Pulitzers in drama than any other playwright. He is followed by Edward Albee (3 Pulitzers) and August Wilson (2 Pulitzers). The first Pulitzers were awarded on June 4, 1917. **Have any works that you admire won this prize? Do some research and share your findings!**



Eugene O'Neill. Image from Authors: The Portrait Photograph File of the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature. Courtesy of Photographic Services and Permissions, The New York Public Library.

O'Neill won his third Pulitzer Prize in 1928 with his five-and-a-half-hour epic *Strange Interlude*, and was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature eight years later. He didn't write another play until 1946, although it is these later plays for which he is most often remembered. *The Iceman Cometh*, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, and his harrowing exploration of his parents' embattled relationship, *A Long Day's Journey Into Night*, are the most produced of his works.

When O'Neill died in 1953 in a Boston hotel room, he had yet to see *Long Day's Journey Into Night* realized onstage. So deeply personal was the work that O'Neill left instructions for the play to be withheld from publication and production for 25 years after his death. But his wife eventually gave permission, and the play became a bestseller, winning O'Neill his fourth Pulitzer Prize and a lasting legacy as perhaps the finest American playwright.

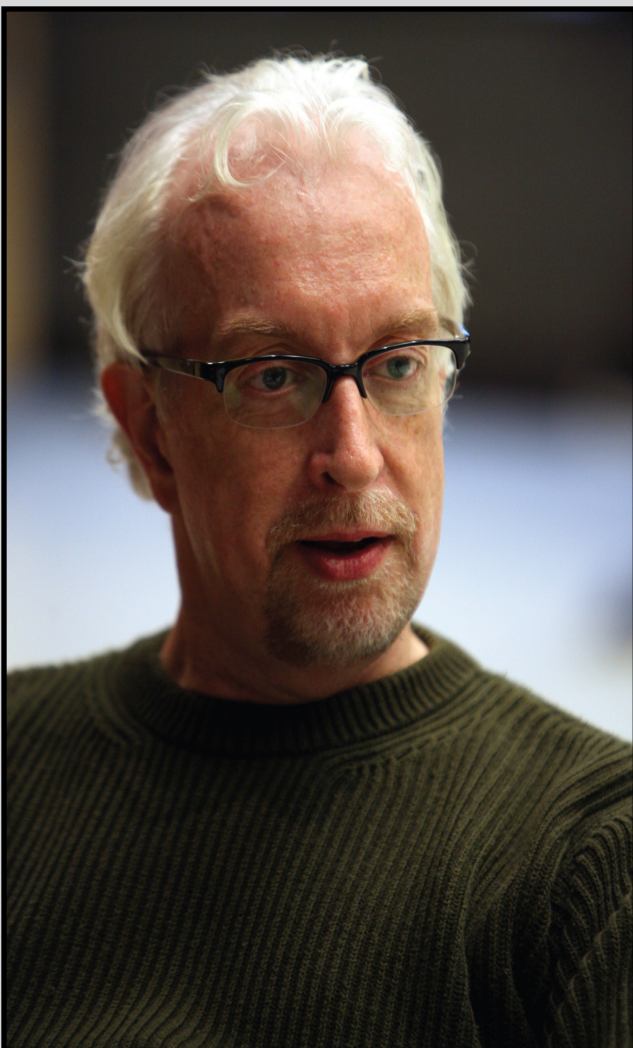
# Robert Falls

## The Director

Robert Falls has been the artistic director of Goodman Theatre for 22 years. An advocate of racial and cultural diversity in the theatre, Falls led Goodman to be the first theatre in the country to produce all 10 of August Wilson's plays, as well as overseeing the genesis of Goodman's Latino Theatre Festival during the 2002-2003 season. Wanting to take on shows that were "risky and edgy" for his 20th anniversary in 2006, Falls directed a contemporary version of *King Lear* that incorporated brutal, graphic imagery in what the Chicago Tribune called "a post-apocalyptic Eastern European world of guns, vodka, petty fiefdoms and crushing sexual cruelty." The show's opening lines were delivered by men at urinals, and Lear divided his kingdom by cutting a cake at a lavish, drunken party in his honor. And that was just the beginning.

Falls' other directing credits at the Goodman Theatre include Edward Albee's *The Goat or, Who is Sylvia?*, Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (which went on to transfer to Broadway and receive several Tony Awards) and Horton Foote's *The Young Man from Atlanta* (another Broadway transfer), as well as numerous world premieres by new playwrights.

Outside Chicago, Falls' credits include August Wilson's *Talk Radio* at New York's Longacre Theatre, O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, Eric Bogosian's *subURbia* at Lincoln Center Theater in New York (for which he won an Obie Award). His acclaimed London revival of *Death of a Salesman*, starring Brian Dennehy, completed its long run in 2005, and his production of Elton John and Tim Rice's *Aida* for Walt Disney Theatricals played in Germany, Japan and South Korea after opening on Broadway in 2004. Both productions won numerous Tony Awards. Falls directed the Broadway debut of *Shining City* in the spring of 2006, and has mounted productions for the Guthrie Theatre, Metropolitan Opera and Grande Théâtre de Genève.



Robert Falls. Photo by Michael Brosilow. Courtesy of Goodman Theatre.

### Robert Falls and Eugene O'Neill: A Brief History

Robert Falls has long expressed a deep love and interest in the works of Eugene O'Neill. Some other O'Neill plays Falls has directed while at the Goodman include:

#### ***The Iceman Cometh* (1990)**

A story of the low-life patrons who frequent Harry Hope's downmarket saloon and boarding house, their many pipe dreams and the traveling salesman who systematically shatters them in an attempt to help. Falls' production subsequently went to the Abbey Theatre in Dublin.

#### ***A Touch of the Poet* (1996)**

Set in the dining room of Melody's Tavern in a village a few miles from Boston, the play centers on Major Cornelius "Con" Melody, a braggart, social climber and victim of the American class system in 1828 Massachusetts.

#### ***Long Day's Journey Into Night* (2002)**

O'Neill's masterpiece, a story of addiction and familial disfunction modeled after his own troubled family. Falls' production was also produced on Broadway.

#### ***Hughie* (2004)**

Essentially a long monologue, *Hughie* is a one-act play lamenting a man's bad luck. Falls' production transferred to the Stratford Festival in Canada and Long Wharf Theatre in New York.

"To me, Eugene O'Neill is the American Shakespeare...single-handedly invent[ing] the serious American drama."

**-Robert Falls**

# The Ensemble

## The Performers

Actors of considerable clout have never been strangers to the Goodman stage. *Desire Under the Elms* has a remarkable cast that includes some film and television actors you may recognize:

**Brian Dennehy**, playing the role of patriarch Ephraim Cabot, comes back to the Goodman for his seventh appearance since 1987. A frequent collaborator with Robert Falls, Dennehy has appeared in every O'Neill production Falls has directed at the Goodman. These roles include the charismatic Hickey in *The Iceman Cometh*, the hustler Erie Smith in *Hughie*, and the powerhouse father of the Tyrone clan in *Long Day's Journey into Night* among others. Dennehy has won two Tony Awards for his work in the theatre. Film and television credits include roles in *Tommy Boy*, *Cocoon*, *Ratatouille*, *Just Shoot Me* and *30 Rock*. Dennehy was just named an Artistic Associate at the Goodman.

**Carla Gugino**, an accomplished film and television actress, is playing the role of Abbie Putnam, Ephraim's new wife. Gugino has been seen in such movies as *Sin City*, *Spy Kids*, *A Night at the Museum* and *American Gangster*, and has had recurring roles on *Entourage*, *Spin City* and *Karen Sisco*. She is no stranger to the stage, recently appearing in Roundabout Theatre Company's production of Arthur Miller's *After the Fall* opposite *Six Feet Under*'s Peter Krause, and later off-Broadway in Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer*. Keep an eye out for her as Sally Jupiter in the upcoming *Watchmen* movie.

While known to some as the brother of actor/director Liev Schreiber, **Pablo Schreiber** has had a very successful career in his own right. In 2006, he was nominated for a Tony Award for his role in Clifford Odets' working-class drama *Awake and Sing*, and he's been seen in such movies as *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Lords of Dogtown*. Schreiber was also a recurring character on HBO's second season of *The Wire*, playing port worker Nick Sobotka.



Robert Falls and Brian Dennehy in rehearsals for *Desire Under the Elms*. Photo by Michael Brosilow. Courtesy of Goodman Theatre.



Above: Carla Gugino and Brian Dennehy in rehearsal for *Desire Under the Elms*. Right: Carla Gugino and Pablo Schreiber in rehearsal for *Desire Under the Elms*. Photos by Michael Brosilow. Courtesy of Goodman Theatre.

# A Global Exploration

## Eugene O'Neill in the 21st Century

For Goodman Theatre's 2009 exploration of Eugene O'Neill, a handful of the world's leading theater companies bring to the Goodman their highly contemporary interpretations of O'Neill's dramas to plumb the depths of this important playwright. For the past year, Goodman Artistic Director Robert Falls has traveled the globe to get a sense of the way O'Neill is being interpreted around the world and to form relationships with selected directors and theatre companies. This is just the first step in the Goodman's new international initiative, which is intended both to bring international companies and artists to the Goodman and to take the Goodman's productions to other countries. The O'Neill Exploration hopes to attract foreign artists and theatre companies, as well as important O'Neill artists, producers and scholars in the U.S to help foster the international collaboration that will hopefully become an integral part of the Goodman's programming in the future. Take a look below for a preview of the festivities!

### *The Emperor Jones*, presented by The Wooster Group (New York)

For more than 30 years, the New York-based Wooster Group has thrilled audiences throughout the world with their radical multimedia productions. The Group has created more than 40 works for theater, dance and media constructed as assemblages of juxtaposed elements: radical staging of both modern and classical texts, found materials, film and video, dance and movement, multi-track scoring and an architectonic (i.e resembling architecture) approach to theater design.

The Wooster Group has played a pivotal role in bringing technologically sophisticated and evocative uses of sound, film and video into the realm of contemporary theater, and in the process has nationally and internationally influenced a generation of theater artists. The veteran troupe has a worldwide reputation for their original multimedia productions as well as their bold interpretations of classic texts. They have toured widely in the United States and Europe, as well as Asia, Australia, Canada and South America.

Their production of O'Neill's rarely produced *The Emperor Jones* has received critical acclaim throughout the United States and Europe since its premiere in 1993. Directed by Elizabeth LeCompte, this provocative 60-minute interpretation of O'Neill's story of a delusional self-appointed emperor of a West Indian island features Kate Valk in a bold performance of the title role.



Kate Valk in Wooster Group's production of *The Emperor Jones*. Photo by Michael Brosilow. Courtesy of Goodman Theatre.

*The New York Times* theater critic, Charles Isherwood, writes this about Valk's controversial turn in the play:

...the petite, Caucasian, obviously female Ms. Valk is playing the title role...and she is playing it in blackface. This choice might seem, on the surface, to be a culturally insensitive stunt designed to stir controversy, but... in this case it could be argued that the decision to cast a white woman in a role written for a black man is uniquely sensitive...We remain, at all times, powerfully aware that we are witnessing an actress fashioning with superb precision, a simulacrum of a stereotype. And this heightened awareness of Ms. Valk's performance as an artificial construct shapes our perception of her character as a man spouting words and attitudes that destiny has forced him to emit. We see Brutus Jones himself as an actor helplessly playing a role written by the savage errors of American history.

**Even though you may not have seen or read *The Emperor Jones*, what is your gut reaction to the above image? Does it make you uncomfortable? Why or why not?**

**What do you think Charles Isherwood is trying to say in this quote? Reread it and jot down a few notes. As a class, discuss what parts of his quote stood out most to you. Do you agree or disagree with his analysis? Do you feel you would have to see the production before you could make a judgment?**



# *The Hairy Ape*

produced in association with  
The Hypocrites (Chicago)

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Founded by director Sean Graney in 1997, The Hypocrites Theatre Company has spent the last decade challenging the theatrical norms of Chicago. Inspired by various 20th-century styles, The Hypocrites seek to break the emotional distance between artist and audience, inviting the spectators to become actively involved in the performance while questioning themselves and the world around them. The company initially staged classics of the absurdist and expressionist traditions, and though such avant-garde works are not generally met with large audiences, the quality and integrity of the company's work quickly solidified The Hypocrites' place among the most adventurous of Chicago's off-Loop theaters.

In a premiere commissioned by the Goodman, The Hypocrites will transform the Owen Theater into an ocean liner for their mesmerizing production of *The Hairy Ape*. The actors will perform from the floor and balconies, while the audience will be seated onstage to watch this astonishing and unpredictable story unfold. When Yank, a laborer on an ocean liner, is rejected by the bourgeois of Fifth Avenue as well as his fellow working men, he decides he would rather find solace in the crushing embrace of a gorilla than live alone.



A press photo for *The Hairy Ape*. Photo by Michael Brosilow. Courtesy of Goodman Theatre.

"I think theater is the ideal clinic for exploring all aspects of humanity, not just the ones you can see."

**-Sean Graney, director of *The Hairy Ape***

# *Strange Interlude*

produced in association with  
The Neo-Futurists (Chicago)

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Founded by Greg Allen, The Neo-Futurists is a collective of artists: each of whom is part of the writing, directing and performing of their work. Their unique, experimental style is inspired by the dynamism of the Italian futurists; the dadaist joy of randomness; the surrealist thrill of the unconscious; and the social consciousness and redefining of audience-performer relationships that marked the theatrical experiments of the 1960's. The company's signature production, *Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind*, which opened in 1988, is written and performed by an eight-member ensemble. Billed as "an ever-changing attempt to perform 30 plays in sixty minutes," *Too Much Light...* is performed every week in their North Side home, the Neo-Futurarium.

At the Goodman, the Neo-Futurists will premiere O'Neill's rarely performed, unusual masterpiece, *Strange Interlude*. The Neo-Futurists are renowned for including the audience in their award-winning productions, and use voiceovers, video projection and other multimedia elements to experiment with different levels of reality on stage. With a running time of approximately five hours, and a dinner-break intermission, *Strange Interlude* follows the complex story of Nina Leeds and her three lovers over the course of 25 years.

"With *Strange Interlude*, I will expose the theatrical illusions that are usually part of the contemporary theater and by doing so unite the audience with the stage. We will all be experiencing this show together and creating it together."

**-Greg Allen, director of *Strange Interlude***



A press photo for *Strange Interlude*. Photo by Michael Brosilow. Courtesy of Goodman Theatre.

## *Homens ao Mar (Sea Plays)*

presented by Companhia Triptal (São Paulo)

Coming from São Paulo, Brazil, Companhia Triptal was formed in 1990 with the mission of creating innovative productions for children. Their first project, *Maria Clara Clareou*, staged seven texts of Maria Clara Machado, a popular writer of plays for young people. For the past decade, the company has staged more adult productions, with a special interest in the early “Sea Plays” of Eugene O’Neill. Crafted in a variety of nontraditional spaces, Triptal’s rendering of these works has brought the company considerable success in their home country.

Companhia Triptal’s productions of O’Neill’s “Sea Plays” were originally performed in a warehouse in Brazil. The company converts the Owen into an abstracted stage for these three extraordinary plays; *Cardiff* allows the audience to follow the actors throughout the theater space. Based on O’Neill’s experiences in the merchant marines and his lifelong obsession with the sea, the “Sea Plays” are booming, exultant explorations of the sailor’s harrowing life at sea.



A press photo for Homens ao Mar (Sea Plays). Photo by Michael Brosilow. Courtesy of Goodman Theatre.

*“Just as O’Neill brings sailors with different backgrounds together to analyze the essence of a human being, I think that it is fundamental for different cultures to understand that acting is universal, and a play can be a microcosm of humanity.”*

**-André Garolli, director of Homens ao Mar (Sea Plays)**

## *Rouw Siert Electra (Mourning Becomes Electra)*

presented by Toneelgroep (Amsterdam)

The innovative and provocative productions of Toneelgroep have captivated audiences in New York, Boston and across Europe—and in their home city of Amsterdam. As the Netherland’s largest repertory company, Toneelgroep occupies a prominent place in the center of the country’s thriving cultural community. Led since 2001 by Artistic Director Ivo van Hove, Toneelgroep specializes in unique and compelling reinterpretations of classic texts.

Toneelgroep is a truly international company that operates under the belief that the rapid growth of globalization blurs the boundaries between countries and cultures. They welcome the influence of artists and art forms from abroad and their conviction that the contemporary theater should reflect a variety of global points of view has resulted in international and cross-cultural collaborations with prominent companies around the world. Van Hove’s multimedia-based productions have been featured in such diverse cultural capitals as Cairo, Paris, Rome and Vienna. This is their first appearance in Chicago.

Called “refreshingly daring” by the *New York Times*, their production of O’Neill’s play is based on Aeschylus’ Oresteian trilogy. Desperate to escape her unhappy marriage, Christine Mannon takes a lover and murders her husband, only to become the target of her children’s quest to avenge their father’s death. Using a unique fusion of video, television and live performance, Toneelgroep puts a new spin on one of O’Neill’s most famous plays.

*“...the oeuvre of O’Neill is characterized by a great amount of necessity, the need, even while writing, to fathom why you are in this world, how you see this life and which oppositions you are confronted with. These are big themes close to my heart.”*

**-Ivo van Hove, director of Rouw Siert Electra (Mourning Becomes Electra)**



A scene from the Toneelgroep’s Rouw Siert Electra (Mourning Becomes Electra). Photo by Michael Brosilow. Courtesy of Goodman Theatre.



# Exploring the Text

# Let's define Tragedy

*Desire Under the Elms* has been called “the first great American tragedy” by several critics, but what is *tragedy* exactly? The Greek philosopher Aristotle defined tragedy as “**an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.**”

Now that wasn't all Aristotle had to say about tragedy. He went on to state that tragedy consisted of **six elements** that determined its quality. In order of importance, they are: **plot, character, thought, diction, music and spectacle.**

**Plot** concerns the story of the play. Aristotle thought plot was the most important element. Plots, he said, should be “complete,” having a beginning, middle and end.

A tragic **character**, Aristotle said, should be “true to life” and his fall “should come about as the result, not of vice, but of some great error or frailty in character.”

By **thought** Aristotle meant the message “where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated.”

**Diction** and **music**, while separate elements, have much in common. Both have to do with what is being spoken (or sung), but diction focuses on the words themselves while music focuses on the way these words are spoken. Diction is “the expression of the meaning in words,” and with music the sound, rhythm and melody of the speeches should always contribute to the plot, characters and themes.

The last element is **spectacle**, which refers to the stage set-up and special effects. Aristotle considered this least important because it has least to do with literature. “The production of spectacular effects,” he said, “depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.”



Brian Dennehy in the Goodman's production of O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*. Photo by Michael Brosilow. Courtesy of Goodman Theatre.

## Activity: Understanding Aristotle

Aristotle's definition of tragedy is filled with some heavy words that require dissection. First, try breaking down the definition down into four parts, and then figure out as a class the meaning of **catharsis**. Once the class understands this, break into four groups to analyze each of the four sections of the above definition. **Do your best to figure out what Aristotle meant by your section, then tell the class how it applies to *Desire Under the Elms* using specific examples.**

Moving on, the strength of these six elements would, by Aristotle's definition, create a great work of literature. **Now it's time for you to determine how *Desire Under the Elms* works with these six elements. In your same groups, answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper:**

1. Simply stated, what is the story? Does it have a clear beginning, middle and end?
2. Who are the main characters? Are they “true-to-life”? How so? More importantly, who is the “tragic hero” (the figure at the center of the tragedy) in this play, and what brings about his or her “fall”?
3. What is the theme or message of this play? Provide specific lines or examples that support this.
4. Find a passage or monologue from the play and determine the meaning behind the words. What is the character really trying to say?
5. Find the music in the words. Taking a look at how the characters speak, do you find any rhythm or cadence in their speech? How does that develop their characters?
6. How would you envision the spectacle? If you were in charge of designing the set, what would you do?

Visit our **Knowledge Nucleus** online for a more in-depth look at Greek tragedy and Aristotle's six elements.



# T

# ragedy and the Common Man



For the complete text of this essay, visit our **Knowledge Nucleus** online.

For a long time, tragedies were populated with kings, queens and other figures of royalty. There was very little emphasis put on the lower classes until 1731, when a playwright named George Lillo wrote what he called a “domestic tragedy.” In these tragedies, Lillo wanted to focus on everyday people, on stories that took place in households instead of kingdoms. While this changed the course of tragedy, the genre began to appear less and less often as the years went by. In 1949, Arthur Miller, author of plays such as *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible*, wrote an essay about the current state of tragedy called “Tragedy and the Common Man.”

Read some notable sections of this essay below, then answer the questions that follow as a class.

...I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were. On the face of it this ought to be obvious in the light of modern psychiatry, which bases its analysis upon classic formulations, such as the Oedipus and Orestes complexes, for instance, which were enacted by royal beings, **but which apply to everyone in similar emotional situations...**

...As a general rule, to which there may be exceptions unknown to me, I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when **we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing--his sense of personal dignity.** From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of **the individual attempting to gain his “rightful” position in his society...** Tragedy, then, is the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly...

...The quality in such plays that does shake us, however, derives from the underlying fear of being displaced, **the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world.** Among us today this fear is as strong, and perhaps stronger, than it ever was. **In fact, it is the common man who knows this fear best...**

...No tragedy can therefore come about when its author fears to question absolutely everything, when he regards any institution, habit, or custom as being either everlasting, immutable or inevitable. **In the tragic view the need of man to wholly realize himself is the only fixed star,** and whatever it is that hedges his nature and lowers it is ripe for attack and examination...

**...The commonest of men may take on [a royal] stature to the extent of his willingness to throw all he has into the contest,** the battle to secure his rightful place in his world...

...the tragic hero is intent upon claiming his whole due as a personality, and if this struggle must be total and without reservation, then it automatically demonstrates **the indestructible will of man to achieve his humanity.**



A scene from Robert Falls' production of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Photo by Michael Brosilow. Courtesy of Goodman Theatre.

## Questions for discussion:

1. Do you think *Desire Under the Elms* qualifies as a “tragedy of the common man”? Why or why not?
2. Think about who you nominated as the “tragic hero” of this story on the previous page. If s/he is trying to gain his or her “rightful” place” in society, then what is that place?
3. Now that you’ve pinpointed what that place is, how is s/he going about trying to gain it?
4. How does the “stature” of that character change throughout the course of the play?
5. By the end of the play, has the tragic hero achieved his or her “whole due as a personality”? How so? When do we see this in the play?

# It's all Greek to me...

## Apollonian vs. Dionysian Characters

In Greek mythology, Apollo and Dionysus are both sons of Zeus. Apollo is the god of the Sun, lightness, music and poetry, while Dionysus is the god of wine, ecstasy and intoxication. In his book *The Birth of Tragedy*, 19th-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche used the contrast between the gods to symbolize principles of individualism versus wholeness, light versus darkness and civilization versus primal nature.

To put it simply, to be **Apollonian** was to exist in a dream state consisting of order, perfection and beauty. The Apollonian wants to create. The **Dionysian**, on the other hand, revels in chaos, intoxication, pleasure and pain. The Dionysian wants to destroy.

In the context of tragedy, Nietzsche explains that the tragic hero struggles to make order (in the Apollonian sense) of his unjust (chaotic) Fate, though he dies unfulfilled in the end. Answers and action often come while in the Dionysian state, when one is able to act out their deepest passions. But unfortunately, that state can never survive for long.

**How are the Apollonian and Dionysian manifested in *Desire Under the Elms*? Which characters represent the Apollonian? The Dionysian? How do they change throughout?**

**How do these concepts apply to your own life? Do you identify more with the Apollonian or the Dionysian? Why?**



Friedrich Nietzsche Image from Cigarette Cards: ABCs. Courtesy of Photographic Services and Permissions, The New York Public Library.

## Greek Influences

Since tragedy has its roots in Greece, it can be helpful to explore modern tragedy through the lens of Greek works. *Desire Under the Elms*, for example, harkens back to several mythic figures from Greek tragedy:

**Oedipus** is the story of the mythical king of Thebes (a city in Greece) who fulfilled a prophecy that said he would kill his father and marry his mother, and thus brought disaster on his city and family. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud went on to write about the “Oedipus Complex,” a condition where a child feels sexual desire for the parent of the opposite sex and desires the death of the parent of the same sex. **What parallels do you see between the story of Oedipus and the characters in *Desire Under the Elms*? Do you think Eben has an Oedipus Complex? Why or why not?**

**Phaedra**, a tale which has been adapted many times over the years, is the story of a queen who is forced by the gods to fall in love with her husband’s son from another marriage. In the play, the king’s son, Hippolytus, rejects her advances, prompting Phaedra to tell her husband that he raped her. The King casts a curse upon Hippolytus causing his death. Phaedra, in her grief, kills herself soon after. **Again, what parallels do you see between the Phaedra myth and O’Neill’s play? More importantly, what differences do you see?**



Oedipus and his daughter, Antigone. Image from *The chefs-d'oeuvre d'art of the International exhibition, 1878*. Courtesy of Photographic Services and Permissions, The New York Public Library.

The story of **Medea** centers around the wife of Jason (of Jason and the Argonauts fame) who seeks revenge against him after he leaves her for a younger princess. Medea poisons the princess and her father, murders the two sons she had with Jason, and then leaves him alive to suffer. Medea is often portrayed as a witch or sorceress, calling upon the gods to help exact her revenge. She is almost never perceived as insane. **One of the reasons Medea is so powerful is the way the authors make you emphathize with such a murderous woman; do you find yourself emphathizing with Abbie? Why or why not?**

As you’ve probably noticed, the gods and fate play a very important role in these Greek myths. **Is the same thing true in *Desire Under the Elms*? Are there larger forces at work, guiding these characters to their ends? How is God portrayed in this play? Find some of Ephraim’s passages where he discusses God; what does that say about fate in this play? Furthermore, how do you feel about fate in your life? Do you believe in it? Or do you believe we carve our own paths?**

# Language...ay-eh?

## Learning to speak O'Neill

“But I give in t' weakness once. 'Twas arter I'd been here two year. I got weak--despairful--they was so many stones. They was a party leavin', givin' up, goin' West. I jined 'em. We tracked on n' on. We come t' broad medders, plains, whar the soil was black an' rich as gold. Nary a stone. Easy. Ye'd on'y to plow an' sow an' then set an' smoke yer pipe an' watch thin's grow. I could o' been a rich man--but something in me fought me--the voice o' God sayin': "this hain't wuth nothin' t' Me. Git back t' hum!" I got afeerd o' that voice an' I lit out back t' hum here, leavin' my claim an' crops t' whoever'd mind t' take 'em. Ay-eh. I actoolly give up what was rightful mine! God's hard, not easy! God's in the stones!”

-Ephraim Cabot, *Desire Under the Elms*, page 29



Mid-nineteenth century farmers. Image from Authors: The Portrait Photograph File of the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature. Courtesy of Photographic Services and Permissions, The New York Public Library.

### Activity: Deconstructing a Monologue

In the quote below, DeAnna M. Toten Beard describes the staging of O'Neill's plays. **How do you think her comment applies to O'Neill's language? How do we see this in the above passage from *Desire Under the Elms*?**

As a class, take some time to deconstruct the above monologue. **Write it out in "proper" English, changing all of O'Neill's colloquialisms (slang or informal language) to the words as we know them.** Read the two different versions out loud. Which one do you like more? Why? What does O'Neill's language add to the speech?

**Now rewrite the passage again, but this time write it the way you want to write it.** What if you were telling this story to someone? Be sure to convey the same information, but don't feel you've got to keep the monologue as it is. Manipulate the words in the same way O'Neill did to make them sound more "true-to-speech." Use your own slang and turns-of-phrase (without cussing!) and most importantly, have fun! **Once you've done this, read your monologue for the class. How did the class respond? Does the monologue seem to make more sense as you've worded it?**

"This dynamic fusing of the mechanical and the musical, the rugged and poetic..."

-DeAnna M. Toten Beard, Theatrical scholar at Baylor University, describing the staging of O'Neill's plays in her article, "O'Neill: The Experimenter."

# Activity: Capturing a Voice



When you go home today, listen to a podcast, find an online interview or even play your answering machine - just make sure to find a voice. Now find a two-minute block where this voice is telling a story or answering a question. It would be best to find something you could rewind and listen to a couple of times.

While your listening to your subject tell his/her story, write it below, *exactly* the way it is said. Include pauses with ellipses (...), as well as whatever other non-word sounds s/he makes (eh, um, ah, etc.) while telling the story. If you miss a word or two, that's all right, keep going. The goal is to record as much of your subject's *natural* speech as possible.

- What did you find surprising about the language after writing it out? Was it more difficult than you thought it would be?
- What do you feel your words would look like on paper? Do you use a lot of non-word sounds in your speech or would you consider yourself fairly articulate?
- What sort of process do you think O'Neill used to write *Desire Under the Elms*? Is his language directly derived from real people, or do you think he created it himself?



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# The Stones of Symbolism

Playwright often infuse their stories and characters with symbols, seemingly straightforward elements of the setting or action, that can then stand for larger themes. A bird can symbolize freedom (as in *The Seagull*), or a storm can symbolize madness (as in *King Lear*); most symbols are more complicated than first meets the eye and carry layers of meaning. In theater, a playwright has a chance to use symbolism both literarily and visually. Dialogue is often full of symbolic imagery, as is explored in the activity below. This also goes for the *setting* of a play, which can have just as much symbolism as the action. Settings, set pieces, and props can all have meanings that go beyond their basic functions.

*Desire Under the Elms* takes place on a farm that was once a field of stones, and there is much talk throughout the play about those stones and the building of the farm's stone wall. Take a look at the photo on the right:

**What does it mean that the house is suspended above the stage floor?**  
**What do the rocks and stones mean?**  
**What kind of a sense of the play do you get from looking at this photo alone?**  
**How much of this setting was dictated by O'Neill in the script? How is it different from his description?**  
**Why do you think the set designer made those choices?**



Set design for *Desire Under the Elms* by Walt Spangler. Photo by Walt Spangler. Courtesy of Goodman Theatre.

## Activity: Symbols and Stones

Now let's take a look at the stones, which you'll see are emphasized in the Goodman's set design for *Desire Under the Elms*. Below are several quotes from the play concerning the stones.

**By yourself or in groups, analyze each quote and determine what the stones could be symbolizing to that character. Ultimately, what might their overarching purpose be?**

“Here—it's stones atop o' the ground—stones atop o' stones—makin' stone walls—year atop o' year—him 'n' yew 'n' me 'n' then Eben—makin' stone walls fur him to fence us in!”

-Peter, *Desire Under the Elms*, page 2

“An' makin' walls—stone atop o' stone—makin' walls till yer heart's a stone ye heft up out o' the way o' growth onto a stone wall t' wall in yer heart!”

-Eben, *Desire Under the Elms*, page 6

“God's hard, not easy! God's in the stones! Build my church on a rock—out o' stones an I'll be in them! That's what he meant t' Peter! Stones. I picked 'em up an' piled 'em into walls. Ye kin read the years of my life in them walls, every day a hefted stone, climbin' over the hills up and down, fencin' in the fields that was mine, what I'd made thin's grow out o' nothin—like the will o' God, like the servant o' His hand. It wa'n't easy. It was hard an' He made me hard fur it.”

-Ephraim, *Desire Under the Elms*, page 29

Visit our **Knowledge Nucleus** online for an article on symbolism in *Desire Under the Elms*.





# Exploring the Context

# American Folk Drama

## Carriers of culture



When poet William Butler Yeats said, “It is the soil where all great art is rooted,” he wasn’t referring to dirt. He meant the Earth and what it has lived through, seen and experienced. All of the weight of history is contained in the soil, ready for someone to tend to it, to bring it to life again. The word “folk” can be a tricky term, but Yeats was certainly thinking about it when he spoke the above quote. **Folk, in whatever usage, refers to “the carriers of culture,” the social mores, customs and behavior of common people in common situations.**

Therefore, American folk drama refers to work that deals consciously with the author’s surroundings, the ways of simple people who exist outside of the present-day, complex social order. The American folk drama examines their legends, superstitions and customs. It embraces their speech and vernacular (i.e slang) as opposed to making it “proper.” These plays usually concern the Earth and nature

in some way, the simple joys we can gain from what exists around us everyday. This makes for a dramatic conflict that concerns man’s struggle for existence and his enjoyment of the world around him.

Some say the father of American folk drama is an Irishman. In the early part of the 20th century, J.M. Synge captured the poetic language and traditions of rural Ireland in his plays, most notably in his one-act, *Riders to the Sea*. Synge’s work was a major influence on many young American writers who, after seeing the dramatic success of an honest portrayal of rural characters, began to pinpoint what was special and specific about their families, where they grew up and the surrounding society. This influence led to folk dramas by some of America’s most important playwrights, including Maxwell Anderson, Elmer Rice and, of course, Eugene O’Neill.

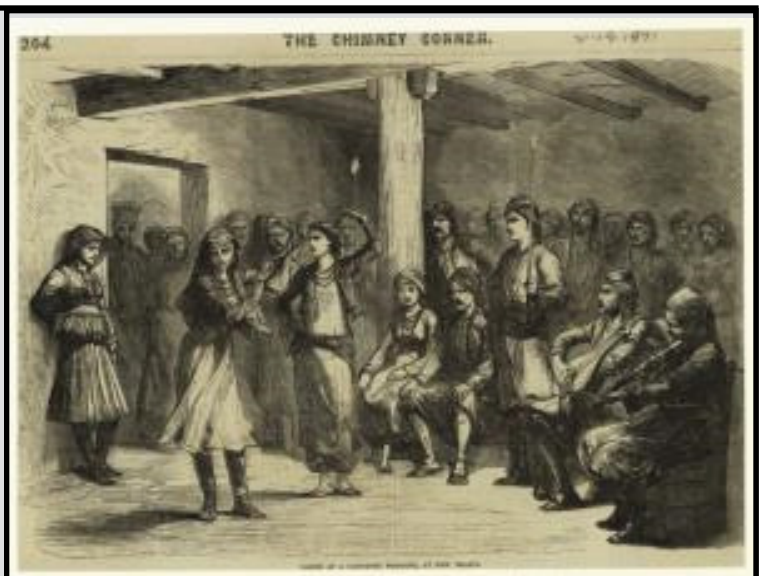
**Would you classify *Desire Under the Elms* as an American folk drama? Taking a look at the criteria in the second paragraph, in what ways does *Desire Under the Elms* qualify? In what ways is it different? Does the conflict of the typical American Folk Drama hero sound like Ephraim, Abbie or Eben? Support your answer with examples.**

### Activity: Finding the Folk in your life

While American folk drama was traditionally about rural lives, that doesn’t mean you can’t dig up the soil of your own life.

Taking a look at your own life, family and society, answer the following questions:

- Growing up, what were some of your stories, superstitions and customs? How did you respond to them? Are they still a part of your life now?
- Were there any specific phrases and speech patterns that were a staple of someone in your family or society that you’ve never heard anyone else use? What did they mean?
- Where did you and your family grow up? Take a moment to describe it, but don’t speak in general terms. Instead, be **specific**. Focus on the small things you remember that made it special.



A folk dance. Image from The Picture Collection of the New York Public Library. Courtesy of Photographic Services and Permissions, The New York Public Library.

# Farm Life in the 1800's

In the early part of the 19th century, most New England farmers were self-sufficient, *living* off of the land instead of *making a living* off of it. Everything from clothing to food to furniture was produced on their farms for their own benefit. With the development of several New England manufacturers and the rise of factory villages and towns, farmers suddenly had a market in which to make a profit. While this market proved to be lucrative, it was difficult for many farmers to make the transition from farming for a living to farming for money.

This “industrial revolution” of New England raised the standard of living for the farmers of the early 1800's. At the beginning of the century, many families were “clad in homespun cloth from wool sheared from [their] own sheep, spun, dyed and woven in [their] own home by the women of [their] household[s]” (P.W Bidwell, 1921) With the rise of industry, farmers were soon buying what they once produced themselves.

Horace Bushnell, an American Congregational clergyman and theologian of the time, described the shift by saying that this “transition from mother- and-daughter power to water- and-steam power is a great one, greater by far than many have as yet begun to conceive—one that is to carry with it a complete revolution of domestic life and social manners.” Bushnell's words rang true as many long-established habits and traditions began to fade away.

Where farming was once about hard work and saving, becoming a good businessman was now just as important. With new industry came new competition and farmers were constantly at war with their neighbors as well as out-of-state farms and factories that shipped their materials over for a cheaper price. Some lamented this shift, saying the “internal resources” of the farmer had “dried up,” and that the breakdown of domestic labor had a negative effect on the family.



Many women were left without work to do on the farm, prompting them to move to pursue work in factories or schools. Also, it wasn't very fashionable to work on a farm; with the youth describing their father's work as “a fixed, dull round of listless toil” (Bidwell). This led much of the younger generation to pursue jobs in the surrounding urban communities, with no one to carry on the farms.

Sadly, the legacy left by the farmers of the 1800's is not a pleasant one. Many reports describe the agriculture of the time as “common, irregular, rag-weed farming,” condemning the “shiftless and slovenly manner in which the business of the farm [was] conducted” (Bidwell).

**What characteristics of the 1800's farm life are present in *Desire Under the Elms*? What kind of farm do you think Ephraim runs? Also, what type of farmer is Ephraim? Back up your answers with specific examples from the play.**



A typical farm of the era. Image from Authors: The Portrait Photograph File of the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature. Courtesy of Photographic Services and Permissions, The New York Public Library.

# The Importance of Land

To a farmer, land is everything. It's the source of your livelihood, your income and your happiness. You spend your days there, tending to it to make it more fertile, richer and more beautiful. O'Neill realized the importance of the land and made it an integral part of *Desire Under the Elms*. Every character in the play feels that they are the rightful heir to the farm and the land, but their reasons are different. **Take some time to go through the script and find a line of dialogue for each character that you feel sums up their feelings on the land or the farm and what it means to them.** As a class, compare your results.

**Ephraim**

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**Abbie**

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**Eben**

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**Peter**

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**Simeon**

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**Do any of these quotes resonate with you personally? Is there a piece of "land" (perhaps your room, your house or even your block) that you feel this passionately about? Why does it mean so much to you? In *Desire Under the Elms*, who do you feel has true ownership over the land? Why?**



# From hand to plow

## The evolution of farming

In the 16th-18th centuries, farming was quite primitive. Plowing, the initial cultivation of soil in preparation for sowing seed or planting, was done with crude wooden fixtures pulled by horse or oxen. All sowing of seed was done by hand. Bladed hand tools such as sickles and hoes were used to cultivate the ground and chop the hay and grain. A farmer's life is still not easy, but farm equipment has grown by leaps and bounds since the good ol' days.

**1701:** Jethro Tull invents the seed drill, which not only eliminates the need for planting seeds by hand, but also increases the likelihood that a seed will grow. Tull was part of a group of farmers who founded the Norfolk system, an early attempt to apply science to farming.



*Cyrus McCormick. Image from Historical and Public Figures: A General Portrait File to the 1920s. Courtesy of Photographic Services and Permissions, The New York Public Library.*

**1831:** Cyrus McCormick of Virginia liberates farm workers from hours of back-breaking labor by introducing the newly invented mechanical reaper in July 1831. This machine, which could do the grain-harvesting work of five men, was one of the first steps in the transition from hand labor to mechanized farming.

**1837:** While the idea had been around for a while, John Deere designs the first cast steel plow. These plows greatly improved farming with their steel share that could cut through sticky soil without clogging.

**1850:** It takes about 75-90 labor-hours to produce 100 bushels of wheat (five acres) with steel plow, harrow and hand planting. This is a great improvement from 1830.



Visit our **Knowledge Nucleus** online for more information on the science and evolution of farm equipment.

**1793:** The cotton gin, invented by Eli Whitney, revolutionizes the cotton industry by automating the process of separating cotton from its seeds. What once took hundreds of hours of man power could now be done with one machine.



*A farmer using an advanced version of Whitney's cotton gin in 1939. Image from the Africana & Black History collection. Courtesy of Photographic Services and Permissions, The New York Public Library.*

**1835:** About 250-300 labor-hours are required to produce 100 bushels (five acres) of wheat with walking plow, brush harrow, hand broadcast of seed, sickle and flail.

**1842:** The grain elevator, a building for storage and shipment of grain, is invented by Joseph Dart. Prior to the advent of the grain elevator, grain was handled in bags rather than in bulk.

**1868:** The first steam-powered tractor is introduced. This tractor, and the many different kinds that came after, replaced horse and oxen as the main source of power for farm work.



*A steam tractor. Image from the "The Pageant of America" Photograph Archive. Courtesy of Photographic Services and Permissions, The New York Public Library.*



**1890:** Forty to 50 labor-hours required to produce 100 bushels (5 acres) of wheat with gang plow, seeder, harrow, binder, thresher, wagons and horses.

**1930:** Fifteen to 20 labor-hours required to produce 100 bushels (five acres) of wheat with 3-bottom gang plow, tractor, 10-foot tandem disk, harrow, 12-foot combine and trucks.

**1954:** Number of tractors on farms exceeds the number of horses and mules for the first time.



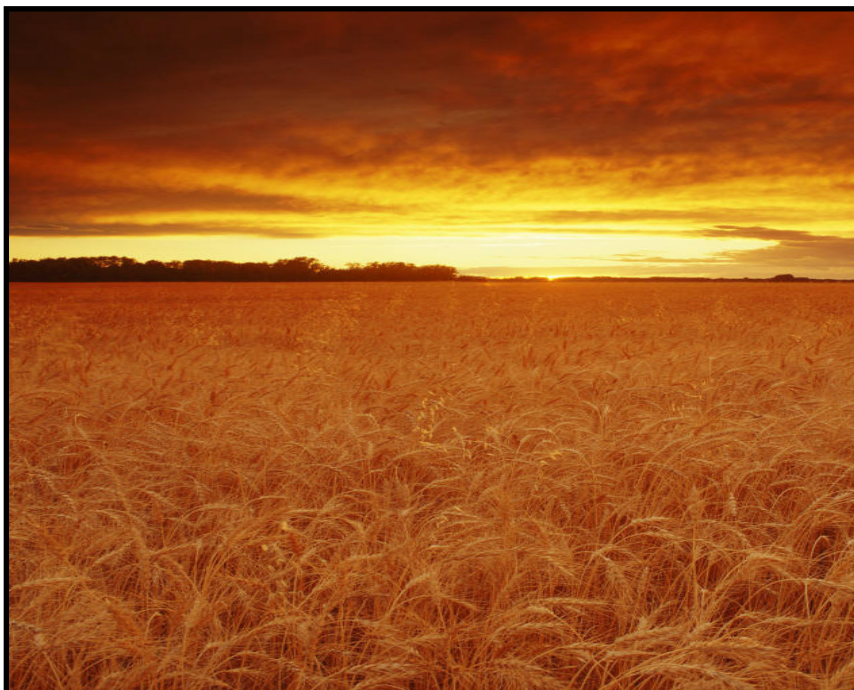
*Farmers using horse-drawn tractors. Image from "The Pageant of America" Photograph Archive. Courtesy of Photographic Services and Permissions, The New York Public Library.*

**1975:** Three and 3/4 labor-hours required to produce 100 bushels of wheat with tractor, 30-foot sweep disk, 27-foot drill, 22-foot self-propelled combine and trucks. One hundred bushels may now be harvested within three acres instead of five.

**The future:** Many are rallying towards conservation of resources and the environment.

This has led to the development of many responses to the conventional agriculture approach, including organic agriculture, ecological or biological agriculture, integrated farming and holistic management. This could mean, in some places, that farming could get *less* mechanized.

**Today:** Almost all farming is mechanized, and lately there's been a much larger focus on the use of pesticides, fertilizers and plant breeding (where scientists change the genetics of plants). Farming gets more and more scientific every day.



**Questions for discussion:**

- **Do you have any experience working on a farm? What sort of equipment did you use?**
- **How does the evolution of farming equipment match other developments in our society?**
- **Do you think Ephraim would embrace the use of modern farm equipment? Why or why not?**
- **Take a moment to define the following:**
  - **Organic Agriculture**
  - **Integrated farming**
  - **Holistic management**
- **At this rate, how do you think farming will evolve over the next 100 years?**

# The California Gold Rush

## A new American Dream

*“California presented to people a new model for the American dream—one where the emphasis was on the ability to take risks, the willingness to gamble on the future.”*

**- Historian H.W. Brands**

On January 24, 1848, in Sutter Mills, California, James W. Marshall, a foreman working for Sacramento pioneer John Sutter, found pieces of a shiny metal in the lumber mill he was building. After testing the metal with Sutter, the two realized it was gold. Out of fear of their agricultural plans being ruined they attempted to keep the discovery under wraps.

However, rumors spread as they always do and in March of 1848, San Francisco newspaper publisher and merchant Samuel Brannan confirmed them, running through the streets with a vial of gold, screaming, “Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!”

The first prospectors to arrive were those who lived in and around California. There was a large influx of people from Oregon, followed by ships of immigrants from Hawaii, Mexico, Peru and as far away as Chile. Many of these early settlers found easy access to large amounts of gold and would sometimes take in thousands of dollars a day. It wasn't until August of 1848 that a newspaper, *The New York Herald*, reported a gold rush. In December, President James Polk confirmed the discovery of gold in an address to Congress, and by 1849, waves of immigrants (called Forty-Niners, because of the year) were making the trip to California, desperate to make their fortune. Sutter's fears were confirmed as his workers abandoned him in search of gold and squatters invaded his land and stole his crops and cattle.

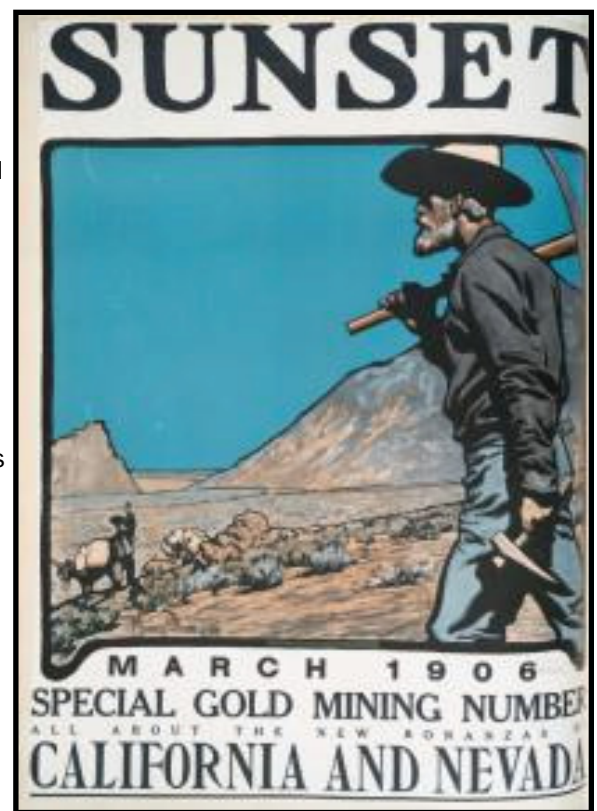
The trip was not an easy one for these Forty-Niners. In 1849, there was no easy way to get to California from the East. For this reason, many of the Forty-Niners traveled by sea. From the East Coast, this trip could take between five to eight months, a total of 18,000 nautical miles. Others, eager to get to California as soon as possible, traveled by land. Most took the California Trail, which began in Missouri and stretched over 5,000 miles. It's estimated that over 250,000 potential gold-seekers used the trail between the 1840's and 1860's. Sickness befell many on the ships and on the trail, with typhoid fever and cholera putting an end to their journeys.

Before the rush, San Francisco was a small settlement, but by 1850 the population had increased from 1,000 to 25,000. The massive overpopulation forced many people to set up homes in tents, wood shanties or deck cabins removed from abandoned ships. The large influx of people also made it difficult to make a profit from goldmining. One was much more likely to turn a profit by starting a business, such as a boardinghouse or a laundry.

While the gold rush had negative effects, such as the genocide of Native Americans and damage to the environment, the rush went far in establishing California's statehood in 1850. The Gold Rush also funded the western leg of the First Transcontinental Railroad, making for a safe and easy passageway between the eastern and western United States.

**Besides fortune, what do you think the Gold Rush represented to those who made the trip? In *Desire Under the Elms*, what are Peter and Simeon truly after?**

**What parallels do you see between the Forty-Niners and contemporary groups of people who strike out to find a better life despite numerous hardships? Are there similarities in their experiences? In their motives?**



A poster advertising gold mining in the early part of the 20th century. Image from Turn of the Century Posters. Courtesy of Photographic Services and Permissions, The New York Public Library.





# Exploring the Social Issues

# Controversy!

## *Desire* under attack

\*Text adapted from an article by Goodman Associate Producer Steve Scott

The premiere of Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* by the Provincetown Players on November 11, 1924, was greeted less than enthusiastically by a majority of the New York press. Critic Percy Hammond wrote, "Mr. O'Neill's dramas always make me glad that I am not one of the characters involved," while *The New York American's* Alan Dale carped, "The theatrical miasma arising from...*Desire Under the Elms* made even the subway station directly beneath the cantankerous, cancerous proceedings in the playhouse seem delicious." Critic Heywood Brown wrote dismissively, "It would have been possible last night to count 'one, two, three' as this new tale of vengeance clicked into certain old and well worn grooves." Joseph Wood Krutch was more appreciative; in his review in *The Nation* he referred to the author as "a brother of tempests," concluding that O'Neill's greatness lay "not in any controlling intellectual idea and certainly not in a 'message,' but merely in the fact that each play is an experience of extraordinary intensity."

Despite the mixed critical reception, *Desire* moved uptown to Broadway after its initial two-month run. There the play and its author soon found themselves in the center of heated controversy; its frank (for the day) depictions of lust, venality, incest and infanticide caused Manhattan District Attorney Joab H. Banton to call for the production's immediate closing. After more than a week of upheaval, during which time Banton threatened to take the case to a grand jury, a citizen's panel was assembled to pass judgment on the production. They recommended that the play remain in production without any change. The notoriety of the case made *Desire Under the Elms* into a bona fide hit, although O'Neill complained to an interviewer, "We got a large audience, but of the wrong kind of people. They came for the dirt and found it in everything. It ruined the actors because they never knew how a line was going to be taken."

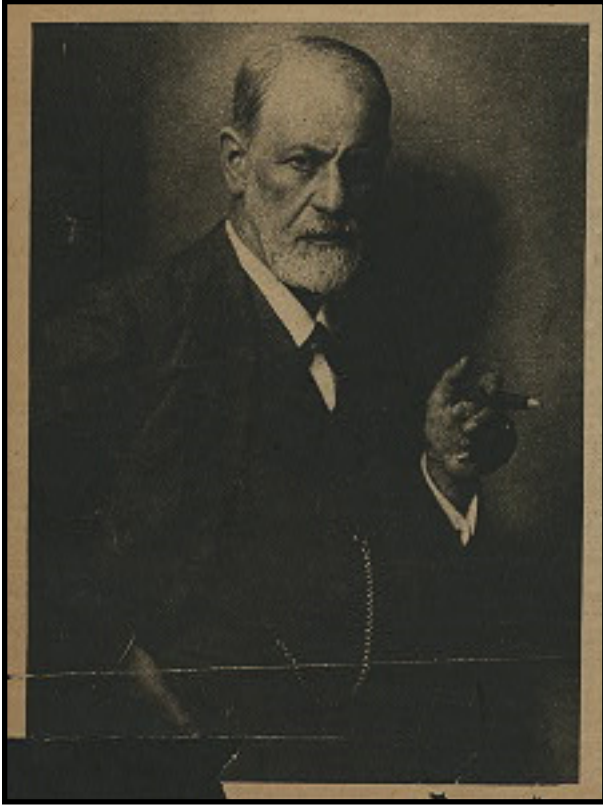
*Desire* is certainly not the only play that's been mired in controversy. In the mid-90's, a young British playwright named Sarah Kane premiered *Blasted*, an unrelenting play featuring plenty of violence, sexual assault and cannibalism. The play was derided by many critics as gratuitous and filthy, but the controversy seemed only to enhance the play's appeal. *Blasted* paved the way for a more raw, visceral theatre and more than ten years later, it is still performed regularly to rave reviews. Here at the Goodman, in January of 2009, The Wooster Group remounted their production of *The Emperor Jones*, which employs elements of Kabuki theater as well as a multimedia approach to storytelling (see pg 8 for more). Many in the Chicago community were upset by the use of blackface, and some even called for a boycott of the production. *The Emperor Jones* was sold out every night, and the critical reaction was mixed. The Wooster Group's production continues to tour and to play packed houses around the world.

**Were you disturbed by any of the material in *Desire Under the Elms*? Is it still controversial today? Why or why not? What do you think shocks people today? Are you and your friends concerned with issues of morality? What do you think this says about our current society?**



Photo of a 1933 production of *Desire Under the Elms* by Dramatiska teatern (Stockholm, Sweden). Photo by Almberg & Preinitz, courtesy of Yale University of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library.

# Freud and the Oedipus Complex



Sigmund Freud. Image from Historical and Public Figures: A General Portrait File to the 1920s. Courtesy of Photographic Services and Permissions, The New York Public Library.

Sigmund Freud, known as the father of psychoanalysis, was born in what is now the Czech Republic in 1856. He was the oldest of six siblings and his mother's favorite; she pushed for him to receive the best education possible. When Freud was a young child, his family moved to Vienna to avoid the anti-Semitic atmosphere brewing in his hometown.

When he was 30, Freud married his wife, Martha; together they raised six children. Freud spent most of his life studying, working and writing in Vienna, which was a hotbed of cultural and intellectual activity at the time. However, he and his family were forced to flee to England at the beginning of World War II. He died in London in 1939 at the age of 83.

Focusing on the inner workings of the human mind, Freud helped to usher in a new era of curiosity and conviction. His work asked questions that had never been considered and convinced people that these questions had definite, attainable answers.

He was a pioneer in the field of mental health, and many of his ideas sparked heated debate. Some still do. He is most famous for his claims that human behavior is driven entirely by sex and violence. Freud asserted that all men instinctively feel—to varying degrees—violent impulses toward their fathers and sexual impulses towards their mothers.

For over 100 years, many have dismissed Freud's ideas as immoral and undeserving of attention. For the first decade of his career, Freud was a *pariah* (an outcast) and the butt of polite society's jokes.

**Do you think there is merit to Freud's ideas about human behavior? How might Freud's ideas be relevant to *Desire Under the Elms*?**

## Oedipus Complex

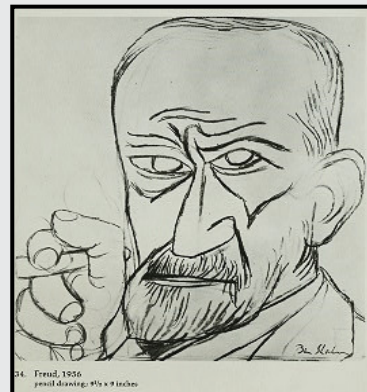
Take a look at the quote to the right. Of all Freud's ideas, this is perhaps the most difficult to consider objectively (without our own emotions coloring our view). It's easy to see why people have strong reactions to Freud's idea that human nature includes incestuous desires, but think about what else Freud is saying. The Oedipus Complex suggests that our unconscious minds are shaped during childhood by impulses that we did not control and experiences we probably don't even remember.

Explore your own idea of romantic partnership. In what way, if any, is that shaped by the relationship between your parents or guardians? Are there qualities you admire in them that you might seek in a partner? Are there qualities you admire in either one that you might want to avoid? What other relationship models (movies, songs, books) might influence the way we think about our relationship expectations?

What other aspects of your identity are shaped by your childhood? Do you have any fears that you can link to a scary experience from your past? Is there a color or a smell that triggers feelings of happiness or security? At their most basic, least scandalous level, Freud's theories give us a new way to understand ourselves.

*"...the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon [Oedipus]. It is the fate of all of us perhaps, gentlemen, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father."*

-Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*



A drawing of Freud. Image from Historical and Public Figures: A General Portrait File to the 1920s. Courtesy of Photographic Services and Permissions, The New York Public Library.



Visit our Knowledge Nucleus online for the full text of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

# Activity: Appropriating Myth

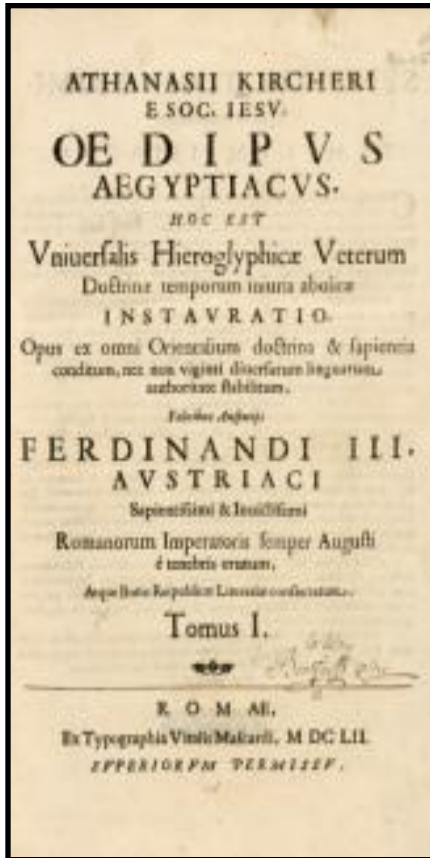


Image from Humanities and Social Sciences Library / Asian and Middle Eastern Division. Courtesy of Photographic Services and Permissions, The New York Public Library.

It seems the Greeks had their fingers on the pulse of many social issues that are still prevalent today. For this reason, their ideas are often *appropriated* (or taken possession of) by others to help round out their own ideas. Both Freud and O'Neill appropriated elements of Sophocles' story of Oedipus, and several others have made use of other Greek myths.

Take a look at some of the Greek characters on page 13 (or do some research and find another), and after choosing the one you find most interesting, answer these questions:

- Why did you choose this character? What social issues or themes does this character's story embody that you think are still important today?
- If you were going to appropriate this myth for your own purposes, what would you do with it? Would you use it to help make a point about human behavior? To create your own fictional story about the same themes?
- What form does your appropriation take? Are you writing an essay to prove a point? A play to tell a story? How are the themes and issues in the myth reflected in your appropriation? How would they have been reflected differently had you chosen to write a song or create an artwork?



Image from Humanities and Social Sciences Library / Asian and Middle Eastern Division. Courtesy of Photographic Services and Permissions, The New York Public Library.

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# Sin: Right and Wrong

Sin is defined by the Miriam Webster Dictionary as, “an offense against religious or moral law.”

**Do you believe in sin? Do you agree or disagree with the dictionary’s definition of sin? Why? Why not?**

While moral law can be very difficult to define and codify, there are sources for religious law. The world’s three largest monotheistic traditions trace much of their religious law back to the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. In the New International Version translation of the Bible, the Ten Commandments are:

“ You shall have no other gods before me.  
You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below ...  
You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God...  
Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy ...  
Honor your father and your mother ...  
You shall not murder.  
You shall not commit adultery.  
You shall not steal.  
You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.  
You shall not covet ... anything that belongs to your neighbor. ” - Exodus 20: 2-17

**Why do you think the Ten Commandments have survived as a well-known formulation of religious law? Are they still relevant?**

In the Roman Catholic tradition, there are degrees of sin, the worst being the Seven Deadly Sins (also known as the cardinal sins or capital vices). The Seven Deadly Sins were established by Pope Gregory I in 590 CE. They are:

- Lust** - excess of sexual desire
- Gluttony** - over-indulgence and waste
- Greed** - obsession with material wealth
- Sloth** - laziness and apathy
- Wrath** - uncontrolled anger
- Envy** - desire for another’s belongings
- Pride** - vanity, the need to be better than others



Moses receiving the Laws. Image from Authors: Medieval and Renaissance Illuminated Manuscripts from Western Europe. Courtesy of Photographic Services and Permissions, The New York Public Library.

Visit our **Knowledge Nucleus** online to read “Seven New Deadly Sins: Are you Guilty?” an article on Pope Benedict XVI’s revision of the list of Deadly Sins for a new century.



Each of the Seven Deadly Sins is then coupled with a virtue to strive for. For lust, there is chastity. For gluttony, temperance. For greed, charity. For sloth, diligence. For wrath, patience. For envy, kindness. And for pride, humility.

**Why do you think Pope Gregory I chose these particular seven sins to become the Deadly Sins? Do you think that this list contains the most dangerous pitfalls for a person? Do you think that the corresponding seven virtues are worth aspiring to?**

# Ethics and Sin in *Desire*

Eben: Fergive me.

Abbie: Eben!

Eben: I love ye! Fergive me!

Abbie: I'd fergive ye all the sins in hell fur sayin' that!

- *Desire Under the Elms*

**Is sin every okay?**

**Are there times when acting in what could be considered a sinful manner is justified?**

**Can something that seems wrong ever be right?**

**Are there sins that are forgivable? Are there sins that are not?**

**Where do you see sin in *Desire Under the Elms*? Who sins? What is the sin? Is it justified? Can you understand why the characters acted the way they did?**

**Is it the impulse to do something sinful or the act of doing something sinful that is the sin? Is wanting to sin itself a sin?**

**What about questions of degree? Is stepping on an ant the same as suffocating a baby with a pillow? Why or why not?**



Photo of a 1933 production of *Desire Under the Elms* by Dramatiska teatern (Stockholm, Sweden). Photo by Almberg & Preinitz, courtesy



Above: Carla Gugino and Pablo Schreiber in rehearsal for *Desire Under the Elms*. Photos by Michael Brosilow. Courtesy of Goodman Theatre.

"I didn't want t' do it. I hated myself fur doin' it. I loved him. He was so purty--dead spit 'n' image o' yew. But I loved yew more--an' yew was goin' away far off whar I'd never see ye agen, never kiss ye, never feel ye pressed agin me agen--an' ye said ye hated me fur havin' him--ye asid ye hated him an' wished he was dead--ye said if it hadn't been fur him comin' it'd be the same's afore between us."

- **Abbie Putnam**  
*Desire Under the Elms*

# Where do I sit?

Now that we are ticketing each student matinee, **it is important where you sit.** Although in the past you could sit in any seat open in the theater, as long as you stayed in your school group, now **all seats are ASSIGNED.** The ticket your teacher gives you indicates exactly what seat is yours.

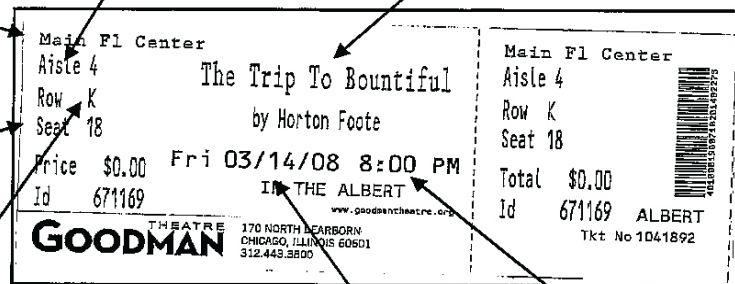
Below is a seating chart-- a map of all the seats in the Albert Theater -- and an explanation of how to read your ticket. **If you have any problems, ask an usher for help.** They're here for you!

This will guide you to the lobby door closest to your seat — aisle numbers are on plaques that hang above the doors to the theater

Play you are seeing and its author

The section of the theatre you will be sitting in: Main Floor or Mezzanine

This is your seat number, located on the edge of the bottom seat cushion

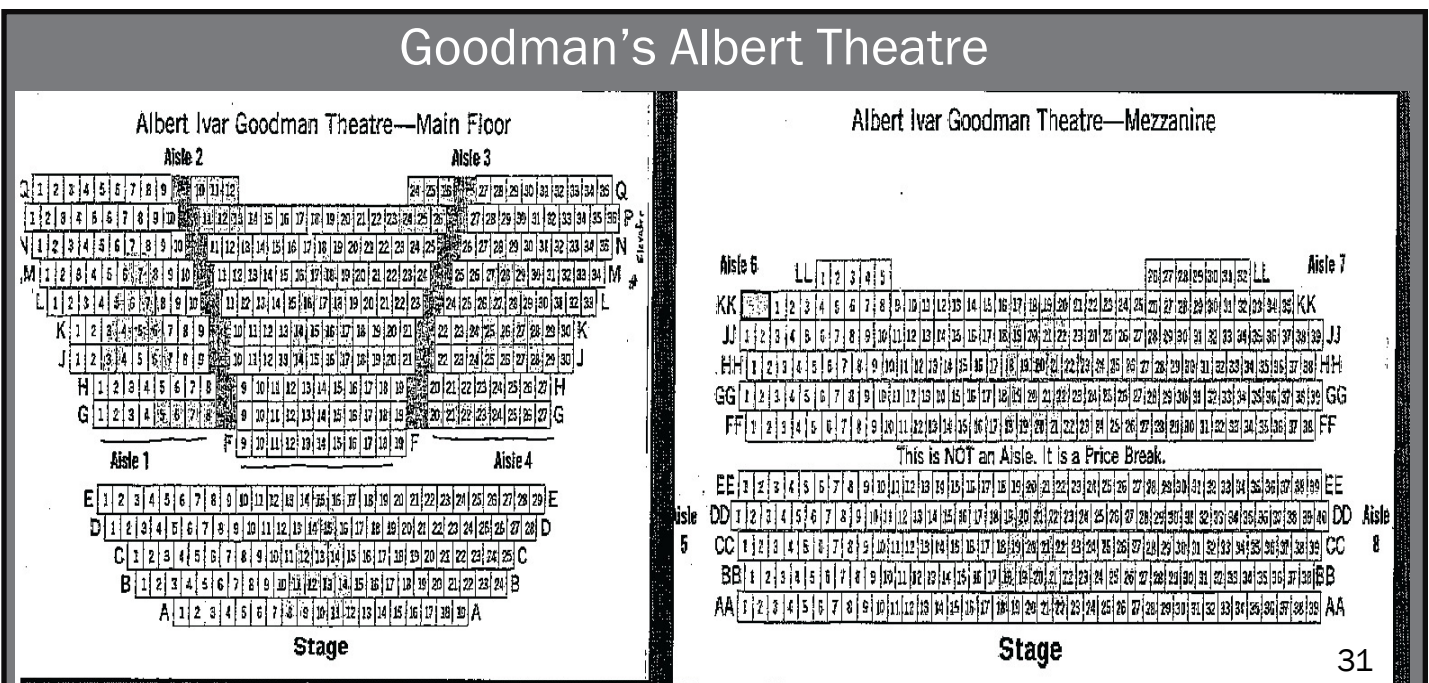


The row where your seat is located, noted in a letter on the side of the end seat of each row

Day and date of performance

Curtain time

## Goodman's Albert Theatre



# Writing Your Response Letter

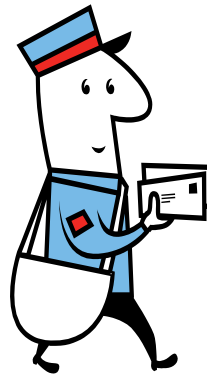
After you have seen the show and discussed your responses in the classroom, it's time to let us know what you thought! Your response letter plays an important role at Goodman Theatre. All of the letters we receive are forwarded to our artists, and you may get a response!

Pick one of the artists involved with *Desire Under the Elms* whose work was particularly memorable to you—an actor, designer or the director—and write that artist a letter describing your *experience at the show* and your *feedback about his or her work*. Be honest and ask any questions that are on your mind.

Send us your letter within one month of seeing the show, and we'll forward it on to that artist!

## Important information to include:

- Your name, age and school
- Your mailing address (where a response may be sent)



*Including these things will make it easier for our artists to respond!*

Send your letters to:

**Education and Community Programs  
Goodman Theatre  
170 North Dearborn Street  
Chicago, IL 60601**

## Here are two great student letters we received in response to some of our production of *A Christmas Carol* :

Dear Ms. Buckley (Director),

I want to start off by saying that I found this production of *A Christmas Carol* to be very enjoyable. I say this because in my mind, "enjoyable" was the ultimate goal for this play. Everyone in the audience knows the plot and the characters, but they still pay to see the show because people are buying into the Christmas spirit.

The whole play cohesively brought out the Christmas spirit, enough to bring a young child seated towards the front to yell out "Merry Christmas!" right after the show ended. The decision to have the ghost of Christmas past fly on stage brought out a rush of Peter Pan imagery that touches on the fantastical idea of a never ending childhood and a belief in the impossible, both of which feed in the Christmas machine. Also, the use of trap doors and flying, both relatively low tech special effects in comparison to fill today, allow the audience to very consciously let go of reality and accept the world of the play.

After seeing the play, I discussed it with a friend in the context of our religion. Both of us are Jewish, and both of us walked away feeling a little more distant from the play than our Christian classmates. *A Christmas Carol*, along with the entire Christmas spirit is a strong part of American culture, not Christian culture, but as a Jew, I think I approach that part of our culture a little more guarded than others. Did you ever think about the religious implications of the play, or if you would inadvertently ward off potential viewers? I did not feel like the play was not speaking to my morals, the moral implications apply to all of humanity, but I was cautious of being sucked into the Christmas spirit for fear of tainting my Jewish identity.

Sincerely,  
A student from Chicago Public Schools

Dear Mr. William Brown,

I will start by congratulating you on the marvelous performance you and your peers put on, on December 13, 2005. I must say that your character brought emotion and spirit to the play. As a selfish man, I felt hatred and pity for you. As a caring man, I felt inspiration and appreciation for you. That is what a great actor should be able to bring to the audience.

You played your part so realistically, that at times, I forgot it was a play. For example, when Marley appeared by your bed as a ghost, you seemed really scared as if you did not know it would happen and the sound scared me. The sound and special effects also helped you bring your character alive. This play had a lot of special effects which I enjoyed very much.

Also, your character took and brought the joy of Christmas very dramatically. You disliked Christmas so much that you made me feel like it wasn't important and people go bankrupt each year just because of Christmas. However, when you changed your view of Christmas, I realized Christmas should be truly cherished and the purpose for the holiday is to unite and appreciate what you have.

Thank you once again for this wonderful experience and I will remember it every Christmas to come. I will carry on the message and hope many other people realize the importance of Christmas as well.

Merry Christmas (Mr. Scrooge),  
Beatriz Hulzar  
Chicago Discovery Academy