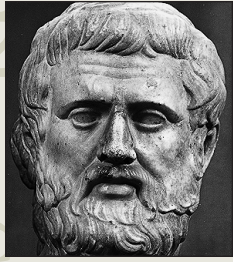


# | Appendix A

## Synopses of Plays

appendix a



Sophocles  
(Musées Nationaux, Paris)

# Play Synopsis

## KING OEDIPUS (c. 430 B.C.E.)

Sophocles (496–406 B.C.E.)

### Chief Characters

Oedipus, *king of Thebes*  
Jocasta, *wife of Oedipus*  
Creon, *brother-in-law of Oedipus*  
Teiresias, *a blind seer*  
Shepherd, Priest, Chorus

### Setting

The entire play takes place in front of the palace at Thebes in Greece.

### Background

When Oedipus was born, an oracle told his parents, the king and queen of Thebes, that their son would kill his father and marry his mother. Fearing this prophecy, the king and queen gave Oedipus to a shepherd to be killed. But the shepherd pitied the child and instead of killing him sent him to Corinth, where he was adopted by the Corinthian king and queen. Oedipus grew up, learned of the oracle's prediction, and thinking that the king and queen of Corinth were his real parents, fled from Corinth. On the journey toward Thebes, at a place where three roads met, Oedipus argued with a man and killed him—not knowing that the man was his natural father, Laius. When Oedipus arrived in Thebes, the city was plagued by a sphinx who killed anyone who could not answer her riddle. Oedipus answered the riddle correctly and the sphinx died. Oedipus then became king and married Jocasta, not realizing she was his mother. Years later, the city was struck by another plague; this is the point at which the play begins.

### Prologue

Oedipus learns about the plague that has struck the land and learns from his brother-in-law, Creon, that an oracle says the plague will not end until the murderer of the former king is found and punished.

**Parados:** The chorus of elderly men prays that the plague will end.

### First Episode

Oedipus says that he will find and punish whoever is guilty. The blind prophet Teiresias arrives and says he knows nothing of past events; but when Oedipus accuses Teiresias of conspiring with Creon against him, Teiresias hints that Oedipus himself may be the guilty one. Oedipus becomes angry.

**Choral Ode:** The chorus asks who the murderer can be and expresses doubt that it can be Oedipus.

### Second Episode

Creon defends himself against an angry Oedipus, who accuses him of conspiring with Teiresias. Jocasta, the wife of Oedipus, enters to tell her husband to ignore the oracle; it had predicted that her first husband, the former king referred to in the oracle, would be killed by his son, she says, but according to all reports he was killed by thieves at a crossroads. Oedipus remembers that he had killed a man at a crossroads and begins to fear that he is the murderer, but Jocasta urges him to ignore such fears. Oedipus sends for a witness to the murder at the crossroads.

**Choral Ode:** The chorus begins to have doubts about the innocence of Oedipus and says that reverence for the gods is best: prosperity leads to pride and will be punished.

### Third Episode

A messenger arrives from Corinth stating that the king there is dead. Queen Jocasta is jubilant at first because this means that the oracle cannot be trusted: it had said that Oedipus would kill his

father, the king of Corinth; this news means that the father died of natural causes. The messenger then reveals that Oedipus is not the real son of the king of Corinth. Fearing the worst, Jocasta tries to persuade Oedipus to call off his search for the murderer. When he will not, she rushes into the palace.

**Choral Ode:** The chorus prays to the gods to help Oedipus find out the truth about his birth.

### Fourth Episode

Oedipus sends for a shepherd who knows the full story of his origins. He forces the shepherd to reveal the truth. When he learns it, Oedipus himself rushes into the palace.

**Choral Ode:** The chorus recounts the story that has just happened concerning the fall of the great king, Oedipus, and expresses sorrow over the tragedy.

### Exodus

A messenger from the palace describes how Jocasta has killed herself and Oedipus has put out his own eyes. The blind Oedipus reappears to recite his sad story. He courageously accepts his fate of self-imposed exile and leaves. The chorus warns that man should take nothing for granted and then exits.

### Questions to Consider

- From reading *King Oedipus*, what conclusions can we draw about Greek society in Athens in the fifth century B.C.E.?
- Can you find symmetry and balance in the play? In the characters? In the action? In the dramatic structure?
- What makes the play a tragedy?



Molière  
(Bibliothèque Nationale  
de France, Paris)

# Play Synopsis

## TARTUFFE (1664)

Molière (1622–1673)

### Chief Characters

Tartuffe, *a hypocrite*

Mme. Pernelle, *Orgon's mother*

Orgon, *Elmire's husband*

Elmire, *Orgon's wife*

Damis, *Orgon's son*

Mariane, *Orgon's daughter, in love with Valère*

Valère, *in love with Marianne*

Cléante, *Orgon's brother-in-law*

Dorine, *Mariane's maid*

### Setting

Orgon's house in Paris in the 1600s.

### Background

Tartuffe, a hypocrite who pretends to be a holy man and dresses in a religious habit, is staying at Orgon's home. He has completely fooled Orgon by feigning a virtuous lifestyle.

**Act I:** When Orgon's mother, Mme. Pernelle, tells the family that they should be virtuous like Tartuffe, they try to persuade her that he is a fraud. The maid, Dorine, tells Orgon's brother-in-law Cléante that Tartuffe has bewitched Orgon, who shows more affection toward Tartuffe than toward his own family. Orgon opposes the wedding of his daughter Mariane to Valère, the young man she loves. This is distressing to her brother, Damis, because he wants to marry Valère's sister. When the maid Dorine tells Orgon that his wife was sick while he was away, Orgon, instead of pitying his wife, commiserates with Tartuffe, who is perfectly healthy. Cléante tells Orgon that he is being deceived by Tartuffe, but Orgon continues to believe in Tartuffe's virtue.

**Act II:** Orgon tells his daughter Mariane that she should marry Tartuffe. Mariane is outraged. When Dorine tries

to persuade Orgon that Tartuffe and Mariane are ill-suited, Orgon defends the hypocrite. After Orgon leaves, Dorine tries to persuade Mariane to stand up to her father, but Mariane is weak-willed. Mariane's fiancé Valère confronts her with a rumor that she is planning to marry Tartuffe. The two quarrel until Dorine gets them to make up.

**Act III:** Dorine tells Damis that his stepmother, Elmire—Orgon's wife—might persuade Tartuffe not to marry Mariane. As Damis hides in a closet, Tartuffe, alone with Elmire, tries to seduce her. Elmire says she will not tell Orgon of Tartuffe's advances if he agrees not to marry Mariane. Damis appears and tells Tartuffe that he will reveal all. When Damis tells Orgon of Tartuffe's adulterous offer, Tartuffe begs Orgon to drive him out. Orgon, however, disbelieves Damis. When Tartuffe says that he should leave the house, Orgon insists that he stay and, furthermore, he disinherits his children and makes Tartuffe his sole heir.

**Act IV:** Damis has left. Cléante accuses Tartuffe of exerting influence on Orgon in order to get Damis's inheritance. Dorine tries to enlist Cléante's aid in helping Mariane get out of marrying Tartuffe, but Orgon enters with a marriage contract. Elmire develops a plan to expose Tartuffe. She decides that Orgon should hide in the room while she is alone with Tartuffe. When Tartuffe enters, Elmire expresses her passion for him. Tartuffe wants "palpable assurance" of her favor, meaning that she must let him make love to her. Elmire expresses concern that her husband might be around, but Tartuffe says, "Why worry about that man?" Upon hearing this, Orgon jumps out from under the table

and confronts Tartuffe, who boldly replies that he now owns everything in the house. In desperation Orgon goes to find his strongbox.

**Act V:** Orgon tells Cléante that he had libelous papers in the strongbox and he fears they are now in Tartuffe's possession. M. Loyal, a bailiff, enters with an eviction notice ordering the family to leave. Orgon expects to be arrested because of the libelous papers, but when an officer and Tartuffe enter, Tartuffe is arrested instead. The prince of the realm has realized the sham, invalidated the deed, and pardoned Orgon. All ends happily as Orgon gives his blessing to the marriage of Valère and Mariane.

### Questions to Consider

- Discuss the genre and structure of *Tartuffe*.
- In *Tartuffe*, how might the audience's perception of the playwright's point of view be affected by the director's casting choices—for example, casting the role of Tartuffe with a younger rather than an older actor?
- What themes in *Tartuffe* are relevant to contemporary audiences?



Henrik Ibsen  
(Norwegian Information Center)

# Play Synopsis

## A DOLL'S HOUSE (1879)

Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906)

### Chief Characters

Torvald Helmer, *a lawyer*

Nora, *his wife*

Dr. Rank, Mrs. Linde

Nils Krogstad, *a bank clerk*

the Helmers' three small children

Anne-Marie, *the Helmer children's nurse*

Helene, *a maid*

Delivery boy

### Setting and Time

The Helmers' home; Christmastime, 1879.

### Background

Before the play opens, Nora Helmer, having been brought up as a carefree innocent in a sheltered household, forged a check, not knowing this was illegal. She did this to help her sick husband but did not want him to know about it. Meanwhile, she worked hard in order to pay back the debt. But Krogstad, a man working in her husband's bank, knows about the forgery. Also in the past, Krogstad had been involved with Mrs. Linde, a woman who has since left the small town in Norway where the play takes place.

**Act I:** Nora returns home from shopping for Christmas. She has bought a tree, toys for the children, and macaroons for herself. Torvald enters and banters with her, asking if his "sweet tooth" has visited a confectioner. Nora insists that she would never go against Torvald. The conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Torvald's acquaintance Dr. Rank. Mrs. Linde, an old friend of Nora's whom she hasn't seen for 10 years, also appears. Nora tells Mrs. Linde about Torvald's recent promotion to bank manager. Nora also confides to Mrs. Linde that 7 years ago, Torvald was very ill and his doctors said that unless he went to a warmer

climate he would die. Nora felt trapped because they could not afford the trip. Nora explains that she did the only thing possible and forged the signature of her father (now dead) to borrow the money from a man named Krogstad. To meet the payments on the loan, Nora took small jobs that she kept secret. During this conversation, Nora promises that she will persuade Torvald to give Mrs. Linde a position at the bank he now manages.

Torvald had planned to fire Krogstad, and the position he offers Mrs. Linde is that of Nora's moneylender. When Krogstad finds out that Torvald means to fire him, he visits Nora and threatens to ruin both her and her husband unless she persuades Torvald to allow him to stay on at the bank. Before he leaves, Krogstad reminds Nora of her forgery. After Krogstad leaves, Nora begs Torvald to let him keep his position at the bank, but Torvald adamantly refuses.

**Act II:** Receiving an official notice from Torvald that he has been relieved of his position at the bank, Krogstad writes a letter to Torvald, exposing all the details of Nora's forgery. Meanwhile, Torvald and Nora prepare for a costume ball for the following night. Realizing that Krogstad has delivered the letter, Nora begs Torvald and Dr. Rank to help her practice a dance for the ball, as a way to keep Torvald from going to the mailbox. Nora again confides in Mrs. Linde, who at one time was in love with Krogstad. Mrs. Linde promises to try to avert Krogstad's intentions. Nora also considers disclosing her situation to Dr. Rank. However, when Nora speaks with Dr. Rank, he makes it clear that he is in love with her, and this dissuades her.

**Act III:** Mrs. Linde promises to marry Krogstad, and so he rescinds his threat to

ruin the Helmers. Mrs. Linde, however, tells him not to retrieve the letter, as she is convinced that Nora's secret must be aired. Krogstad and Mrs. Linde rediscover their affection for one another. Krogstad leaves. Meanwhile, Nora and Torvald return from the dance and Nora, wearing a brightly colored Italian costume, is brought reluctantly into the room. Nora tries to delay Torvald's seeing the letter from Krogstad, but eventually Torvald goes to the letter box. Torvald reads the letter and berates Nora, calling her a hypocrite, a liar, and a criminal. Nora pleads with Torvald to listen to her, saying that she acted only to save his life, but her appeals fall on deaf ears. Another letter from Krogstad arrives, saying that he will not ruin either of the Helmers. With that, Torvald's attitude changes and he claims that he is saved. Nora, however, cannot forget Torvald's transformation and his failure to understand her. She informs Torvald that she is leaving him, explaining that she needs to find out what the world is like beyond the dollhouse in which she has been living. After her speech, Nora leaves the house, slamming the door behind her.

### Questions to Consider

- Discuss Nora Helmer's strengths and weaknesses. What is praiseworthy? What is less admirable?
- Why does Nora decide that she cannot confide in Dr. Rank? Do you agree with her reasoning?
- Even though Krogstad agreed to withdraw his threat to ruin the Helmers, Mrs. Linde did not want him to. Why? Was she correct?



Anton Chekhov  
(Corbis/Bettmann)

# Play Synopsis

## THE CHERRY ORCHARD (1904)

Anton Chekhov (1860–1904)

### Chief Characters

Lyubov Andreyevna, *owner of the estate*

Anya, her daughter, *age 17*

Varya, her adopted daughter, *age 24*

Gaev, *her brother*

Lopahin, *a merchant*

Trofimov, *a student*

Charlotta, *a governess*

Firs, *an old servant*

Yasha, *a young servant*

### Act I

The nursery in the country estate of Lyubov Andreyevna, who has returned to Russia from a self-imposed exile in Paris to seek peace in her girlhood home. With her are her brother Gaev, an ineffectual aristocrat; and her daughter, Anya, age 17, who had gone to Paris to make the return trip with her. Lyubov's estate, with its famous cherry orchard, is heavily mortgaged and about to be foreclosed, leaving the family virtually penniless. Lyubov, absent since the death of her husband 7 years before, laments her past. Among those who have come to greet her is Lopahin, a merchant who recalls her as a splendid, kindhearted woman. Lopahin's father had been a serf on the estate.

Varya, Lyubov's adopted daughter, is the housekeeper of the estate. Anya tells Varya that her mother cannot comprehend the change in their fortunes. Although they had only enough money for the trip from Paris, Lyubov brought her young valet Yasha with her, as well as Anya's governess Charlotta. The merchant, Lopahin, is supposed to marry Varya, but Varya tells Anya that Lopahin has still failed to propose to her.

### Act II

A meadow near an old chapel near the house. Lopahin tells Madam Lyubov that he will always be grateful to her for her

kindness to him when he was a boy. He tells her that she can avert the forced sale of the estate, if she will tear down the house and cherry orchard and develop the land for summer villas. He offers a loan to help, but Lyubov and Gaev cannot bear the thought of destroying the beautiful old orchard. Trofimov, a student, makes a speech, saying that the lazy intelligentsia of Russia should work; he himself, however, does not work.

Later, Lopahin persists in his attempts to get Lyubov to act to save the estate, but she talks of summoning an orchestra for a dance and laments the drabness of the peasants' lives. She discourages Gaev's plan to work in a bank. In other words, she does nothing to save the estate. Although the servants and family have only soup to eat, she gives a beggar a gold piece and asks for another loan from Lopahin.

### Act III

The drawing room of the house on an evening in August. Lyubov has engaged an orchestra for a dance, although it is the evening of the sale of the estate. Her daughter Varya comforts her with the assurance that Gaev has probably bought the estate with money to be sent by a wealthy great-aunt, but Lyubov knows that the sum is not enough. She tells Trofimov, the penniless student who has won Anya's heart, that he should experience more of life, perhaps even have a mistress. He stamps angrily out of the room. Gaev and Lopahin, the latter giddy with joy, return. Lyubov demands to know if the home is lost. Lopahin cries, "I have bought it! . . . Now the cherry orchard's mine! Mine! . . . I have bought the estate where my father and grandfather were slaves." Lyubov sits down, crushed and weeping.

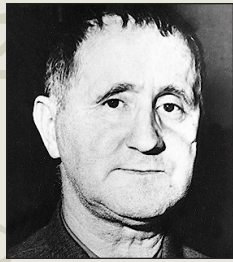
### Act IV

The same scene as Act I. The nursery is now stripped bare, and the time for leave-taking has come. Lyubov is going to Paris to live as long as possible on the money sent by the great-aunt. Gaev is to work in a bank; Varya is to be a housekeeper in a distant town; Anya is to remain in school while Trofimov, her betrothed, completes his studies in Moscow. An ax is heard in the distance, and Anya pleads for the workers chopping down the cherry trees to wait until Lyubov has gone. Lyubov speaks of two cares: the health of the old butler Firs, and Varya's future. She is assured that Firs has been sent to the hospital; and Lopahin promises to marry Varya, but left alone with Varya, he again fails to propose.

Lyubov and Gaev, the last to go, fall into each other's arms. Lyubov weeps: "Oh, my sweet, beautiful orchard! My life, my youth, my happiness, good-bye!" They leave, and Firs, who is quite ill, totters in; he has not been sent to the hospital but left behind. We hear an ax cutting down the cherry orchard—and the symbolic sound of a broken string.

### Questions to Consider

- Suggest performers from theatre, film, or television who might successfully play the roles of Lyubov Andreyevna, Anya, Lopahin, and Trofimov.
- What acting technique seems most appropriate for a production of *The Cherry Orchard*? Explain your choice.
- If you were an actress performing Anya, what type of research would you undertake, and what questions would you ask about your character?



Bertolt Brecht  
(Courtesy of German Information  
Center/IN Press)

# Play Synopsis

## MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN (1937–1941)

**Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956)**

### Chief Characters

Mother Courage  
Kattrin, *her mute daughter*  
Elif, *her elder son*  
Swiss Cheese, *her younger son*  
Cook  
Chaplain  
Yvette Pottier, *a prostitute*

### Setting

Various army camps in Sweden, Poland, Bavaria, and Germany.

### Background

Mother Courage follows army camps with her wagon and sells wares to soldiers. She has two sons and a daughter—each from a different father—who help pull the wagon.

**Scene 1:** Spring 1624, on a highway. Courage and her children enter, pulling the wagon. A Swedish officer persuades Elif, the son of Courage, to join the army.

**Scene 2:** The years 1625 and 1626; the kitchen of the Swedish commander, where the cook is arguing with Courage. The commander enters and praises Elif's bravery. When Courage hears Elif singing "The Song of the Wise Woman and the Soldier," she recognizes his voice and joins in.

**Scene 3:** Three years later. Courage, her two children, and soldiers from a Finnish regiment are prisoners. Courage's friend Yvette, a prostitute, sings about loving a soldier. When cannons are heard, Courage lends the Protestant Chaplain a cloak as a disguise. Swiss Cheese hides the cash box in the wagon, while Courage rubs ashes on Kattrin's face to make her less attractive to the soldiers. While Courage and the

Chaplain are gone, Swiss Cheese hides the cash box, but two soldiers capture him. When the soldiers return with Swiss Cheese, Courage denies knowing him. Courage finds that she can free her son if she will bribe the sergeant—but she haggles too long, and Swiss Cheese is executed.

**Scene 4:** Outside an officer's tent. A young soldier enters, raging against the captain who took his reward money. Mother Courage sings "The Song of the Great Capitulation," which persuades them both that there is no use complaining.

**Scene 5:** Two weeks later. The Chaplain tells Courage that he needs some linen to help the peasants bind up their wounds; when she refuses, he takes the linen by force. After Kattrin rescues a child, Courage tells her to give it back to the mother.

**Scene 6:** Bavaria, 1632—the funeral of the fallen commander. The men are getting drunk instead of going to the funeral. When Kattrin is wounded, Courage thinks it is lucky because it will make her less appealing to the soldiers.

**Scene 7:** A highway, with the Chaplain, Mother Courage, and Kattrin pulling the supply wagon. Courage sings a song about war as business.

**Scene 8:** A camp, 1632. Voices announce that peace is at hand. Courage is distraught because no one will buy the supplies she just bought. Elif is arrested for killing peasants. Courage rushes back in with the news that the war is on again. The Cook and Kattrin pull the wagon while Courage sings.

**Scene 9:** In front of a half-ruined parsonage, 1634. The Cook tells Courage that he wants to run away with her, but without Kattrin. Kattrin overhears and is about to leave when Courage stops her; Courage turns the Cook down.

**Scene 10:** 1635. Courage and Kattrin pull the wagon up to a farmhouse and hear someone singing about warmth, comfort, and safety—a sharp contrast with their situation.

**Scene 11:** January 1636. Soldiers gather up the peasants and pull Kattrin out of the wagon, asking the way to town. An old man climbs onto the roof and sees the soldiers preparing to attack the town. Kattrin gets a drum, climbs up on the roof and beats a warning to the town. Kattrin is killed, but her warning is successful.

**Scene 12:** Courage sits in front of the wagon by Kattrin's body, singing a lullaby. The peasants tell Courage that she must leave and that they will bury Kattrin. Courage harnesses up and alone pulls the wagon.

### Questions to Consider

- What is the dramatic structure of *Mother Courage*? How does it differ from the structure of *Fences*?
- Which characters in the play could be called stock characters?
- Is Mother Courage an extraordinary character? Explain your answer.



Tennessee Williams  
(Theatre Collection/Museum  
of the City of New York)

# Play Synopsis

## A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE (1947)

Tennessee Williams (1911–1983)

### Chief Characters

Blanche DuBois, *30 years old*

Stella Kowalski, *her sister, 25 years old*

Stanley Kowalski, *Stella's husband,*  
*28 years old*

Harold Mitchell (Mitch), *Stanley's friend*  
Eunice Hubbell, *upstairs neighbor*

### Setting

A two-story apartment building in New Orleans. The section is poor but has a raffish charm.

**Scene 1:** Blanche DuBois arrives from Laurel, Mississippi, at the apartment of her sister Stella and Stella's husband Stanley. Blanche is destitute and has lost her home. Despite this, she expresses disapproval of Stella's "earthy" living conditions.

**Scene 2:** The next evening. Before Stanley's friends arrive for a poker game, Stella has taken Blanche out for dinner because Blanche's "sensibilities" would be upset by the men's crudeness. Stanley accuses Blanche of swindling them by selling the family estate, without giving Stella her share.

**Scene 3:** The poker night. The women come home late; Blanche flirts with Mitch, one of the men, while Stella dances to music on the radio. Stanley, now drunk, gets angry, throws the radio out the window, and attacks Stella. The men subdue him while Blanche takes Stella, who is pregnant, to Eunice's apartment upstairs. Stanley yells for Stella to come home, and she obeys; Mitch sits with the distraught Blanche on the front steps.

**Scene 4:** The next morning. Blanche is upset, but Stella is happy. Blanche tells

Stella she should leave Stanley, whom she calls an "ape," but Stella tells her that she loves him. Stanley, who had overheard Blanche, sneaks out and reenters loudly, pretending that he hasn't heard.

**Scene 5:** Blanche, highly nervous, begins drinking. Stanley asks her if she ever knew a man from a disreputable hotel in Laurel. She denies it, somewhat unconvincingly. She finds relief in the idea of a forthcoming date with Mitch and admits to Stella that she is attracted to him.

**Scene 6:** 2 A.M. that night. Mitch and Blanche come home from their date, go inside, have a drink, and seem to get along well. Blanche confides to him that her first husband was a homosexual who killed himself.

**Scene 7:** A late afternoon in mid-September. Stella is preparing for Blanche's birthday party while Blanche is taking a prolonged bath. Stanley tells Stella that he has heard bad stories about Blanche's former life. Stanley has told Mitch these stories and Mitch won't be coming to the party. When Blanche comes out of the bathroom, she realizes that something is wrong.

**Scene 8:** Forty-five minutes later. Mitch has not appeared and Blanche is miserable. Stanley belligerently presents Blanche with his "present"—a one-way bus ticket back to Laurel. Blanche becomes hysterical and runs into the bathroom; Stella confronts Stanley, becoming so agitated that she goes into labor and is rushed to the hospital.

**Scene 9:** Later that evening. Blanche is home alone when Mitch arrives, drunk.

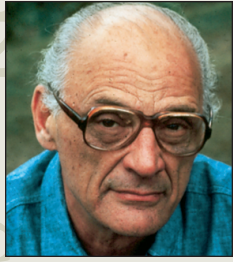
Mitch rips the paper lantern off the lightbulb and turns it on. When he looks closely at her, she cries out and covers her face. He makes a play for Blanche, but she breaks away and he runs out.

**Scene 10:** A few hours later. Blanche, who has been drinking, is alone. Stanley returns from the hospital; he has been drinking too. She tells him that a millionaire has invited her to go away. She also makes up a story about Mitch's coming to beg her forgiveness. Stanley knows it is a lie. He puts on the silk pajamas that he "wore on his wedding night." He brutally carries Blanche offstage, where he rapes her.

**Scene 11:** Several weeks later. Stella is packing Blanche's clothes while the men again play poker: she and Stanley are sending Blanche to a mental hospital. Blanche has told Stella what Stanley did to her, but Stella won't believe it. When a doctor arrives, Blanche thinks it is her millionaire; when she sees it is not, she runs into the bedroom. The doctor comes in and gently leads Blanche out. Eunice hands the baby to Stella, as she stands crying, and Stanley comforts her.

### Questions to Consider

- Drama often presents characters at some extreme point in their lives: at the end of their rope, or facing a last chance. What is Blanche's situation in this regard?
- Describe and analyze each of the four main characters: Blanche, Stanley, Stella, Mitch.
- In what ways are these four characters in conflict with one another?



Arthur Miller  
(© Inge Morath/Magnum Photos)

# Play Synopsis

## DEATH OF A SALESMAN (1949)

Arthur Miller (1915–2005)

### Chief Characters

Willy Loman  
Linda, *his wife*  
Biff, *his older son*  
Happy, *his younger son*  
Bernard, *Biff's friend*  
the Woman, *Willy's mistress*  
Charley, *a neighbor, Bernard's father*  
Uncle Ben, *Willy's brother*

### Setting and Time

Willy Loman's house in New York, and various other locations in New York and Boston. The present and flashbacks to the past.

### Background

Willy is an aging traveling salesman who doesn't produce much business anymore. Many of his friends and business contacts are dead; his sons are not the successes he expected them to be—Biff, for example, was a football star but did not graduate from high school. Willy has a tendency to daydream. Linda is a devoted wife and mother, trying desperately to keep her husband and family from falling apart.

**Act I:** Willy arrives home unexpectedly, having cut short a sales trip. He tells Linda that he kept driving off the road. Linda tells Willy that he should persuade the company to let him work in New York rather than travel. Willy expresses disappointment about his son Biff, who has just returned home after living as a drifter in the west. Meanwhile, in their bedroom upstairs, Biff and Happy discuss their concern about their father and an old dream of starting their own business.

Downstairs, Willy moves into a scene from the past in which he brags to young Biff about what a great salesman he is. Bernard, a neighbor who is the same age as Biff, is a good student. Because he idolizes the athletic Biff, Bernard wants to help Biff study so that he can pass

his exams. Willy puts Bernard down as the “studious type” and tells Biff that personality will get him farther than studying. Willy, in a different flashback, is shown in Boston with the Woman, with whom he is having an affair. Back in the present, Willy and his neighbor Charley have a minor confrontation during which Willy speaks out loud to his brother Ben's ghost. In Willy's fantasy, Ben is a successful self-made man who once, years ago, offered Willy a chance to go with him, a chance Willy refused.

Linda defends Willy and asks Biff to try to get along better with him. She confesses that she thinks Willy is trying to kill himself. Willy confronts Biff about his career and is rude to Linda while Biff stands up for her. Later, Biff finds rubber tubing attached to a gas line in the basement—a suicide device that Willy is evidently planning to use.

**Act II:** The next morning, Willy seems optimistic about the future: Biff represents Willy's final chance to prove that he himself has not been a total failure. He believes that Biff's former boss will give Biff a job. Also, Linda thinks that Willy has taken the rubber hose away and is no longer contemplating suicide, but later she finds out that Biff removed it.

The scene shifts to Willy's office, where he meets with his boss, Howard Wagner, and asks to be assigned to the New York office. Willy is aggressive but becomes desperate when Howard refuses his request and then fires him. Willy leaves in despair and vents his frustration on Ben's ghost.

The scene shifts to Charley's office, where Willy and Charley's son, Bernard, now a successful lawyer, discuss the time when Biff failed mathematics. Willy blames Biff's failures on that one incident. Bernard says that he always

wondered why Biff didn't go to summer school after he failed. Willy is evasive and asks Charley for a loan; but when Charley offers him a job, Willy turns it down, out of pride. Meanwhile, Biff and Happy are in a restaurant waiting for Willy. Biff tells Happy that he had an unsuccessful meeting with his ex-boss; but Willy, when he arrives, won't let Biff tell the real story—Willy wants to hear an upbeat version, though he admits to the boys that he himself has been fired. The scene shifts to the past and Willy's hotel room in Boston; because he has failed in school, the young Biff shows up unannounced and finds Willy with the Woman. He decides that everything Willy stands for is false, and returns home beaten. Back in the present, Happy and Biff leave Willy alone in the restaurant, distraught and fantasizing.

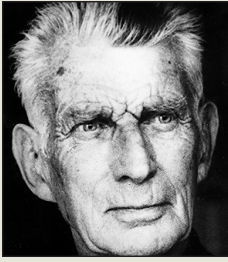
At home, Linda accuses her sons of deserting Willy. Willy, still caught up in his fantasies, has returned home to plant a garden at night. He tells Ben about his insurance policy—the \$20,000 would help Biff get on his feet.

Back in the present, Biff tells Willy that he has finally come to realize the truth about himself and tries to make Willy see the truth also. Alone, Willy gets into his car, drives off, and kills himself in an automobile accident. At his funeral, Linda expresses her sorrow and confusion.

### Questions to Consider

- Relate the actions of the characters in the play to role playing in everyday life.
- Did Willy Loman fool himself all his life, or was he a victim?
- Could Linda or Biff have done more to change the situation?
- Is moving in and out of the past confusing?





Samuel Beckett  
(AP/Wide World Photos)

# Play Synopsis

## WAITING FOR GODOT (1953)

Samuel Beckett (1906–1989)

### Chief Characters

Estragon, Vladimir, Lucky, Pozzo, Boy

### Setting and Time

A country road with a tree. The present.

### Background

Estragon and Vladimir have been coming to the same bleak spot every day for some time to wait for an unknown person called Godot. It is a crossroads, bare except for a small leafless tree in the background. While the men wait, they pass the time discussing the nature of humankind, religion, what they did yesterday, or anything else on their minds.

**Act I:** Estragon is trying to pull off his boot when Vladimir enters. The two men discuss where Estragon spent the night and that he was beaten again. Vladimir relates the tale of the two thieves crucified with Christ and explains that current religious scholars cannot agree on what happened to the thieves. As Estragon paces, the scene is punctuated by pauses, which enhance the feeling of waiting. Occasionally the men talk of leaving and then decide that they cannot leave because they are waiting for Godot. They consider leaving each other; they argue; they make up. They discuss hanging themselves from the tree but decide that they can't do it because the limbs are slender and might break.

At the point when they have decided not to do anything, two other men, Pozzo and Lucky, enter. Lucky is carrying heavy baggage and wears around his neck a rope held by Pozzo. Pozzo jerks occasionally on the rope and barks commands to Lucky, who responds mechanically. Pozzo sits, eats, and smokes his pipe. Estragon asks why Lucky doesn't put down the bags, and

Pozzo explains that Lucky wants to impress Pozzo so that Pozzo will keep him. Pozzo says that it would be best to kill Lucky; this makes Lucky cry.

Estragon tries to comfort Lucky, and Lucky kicks him. As the sky changes from day to night, Pozzo tells Lucky to dance, which he does. Pozzo tells Lucky to think, and Lucky, who has been silent until this moment, goes into a long, incoherent tirade which agitates the others. When they take Lucky's "talking hat" off, he stops talking and collapses in a heap. The men say good-bye, but no one is able to leave. Pozzo finally gets up and exits—with Lucky in the lead, wearing the rope around his neck. A boy enters, telling Vladimir and Estragon that Godot will not come today but will surely come tomorrow. After he exits, the moon suddenly rises. Estragon says he will bring some rope the next day so that they can hang themselves. They talk about parting but don't part. The curtain falls.

**Act II:** The next day at the same time, in the same place. The scene opens with Estragon's boots and Lucky's hat onstage. The small tree, which was bare, now has four or five leaves. Vladimir enters in an agitated state, paces back and forth, and begins to sing. Estragon enters, apparently in a foul mood. He and Vladimir embrace, and Estragon says that he was beaten again the night before—but he can't remember what happened the day before.

They discover Estragon's boots, which seem to be the wrong color. They discuss leaving but can't leave because they are waiting for Godot. Estragon takes a nap, and Vladimir sings a lullaby. They discover the hat and do a comic hat-switching routine. They hear a noise

and think that finally Godot is coming. They are frightened and rush around excitedly. Nothing happens; no one comes. Pozzo, now blind, enters with Lucky. Lucky stops short, falls, and brings Pozzo down with him. Pozzo calls for help, but Vladimir and Estragon think Godot has arrived. They discover that it is Pozzo and Lucky. Vladimir and Estragon try to help Pozzo up, but they fall also. Finally, everyone gets up. Estragon goes to Lucky and, kicking him, hurts his own foot. Lucky gets up and gathers his things together; he and Pozzo exit.

Estragon tries to take off his boots and then falls asleep as Vladimir philosophizes. The boy enters, tells Vladimir that Godot will not come that night but will come the next night, and exits. The sun sets, and the moon rises quickly. Vladimir and Estragon talk again of hanging themselves on the tree, but they have no rope. They test the strength of Estragon's belt, but it breaks and his pants fall to the ground. Vladimir says, "Well? Shall we go?" Estragon says, "Yes, let's go"—but they do not move.

### Questions to Consider

- Who do you think Godot is?
- Do you believe Godot will ever come?
- How universal are the characters in the play? Explain your answer.



Lorraine Hansberry  
(Bettmann-UPI/Corbis)

# Play Synopsis

## A RAISIN IN THE SUN (1959)

Lorraine Hansberry (1930–1965)

### Chief Characters

Lena Younger, *Mama*  
Walter Lee Younger, *her son*  
Ruth Younger, *Walter's wife*  
Travis Younger, *Ruth and Walter's son*  
Beneatha Younger, *Walter's sister*

### Setting

The Youngers' apartment in a poor section of Chicago, sometime after World War II.

### Background

The Youngers are a black family with dreams of improving their lives. The father has died, and his only legacy is a \$10,000 life insurance policy.

**Act I, Scene 1:** Friday morning; the family is looking forward to the arrival of the insurance check. Walter tells Ruth that he has a chance to buy a liquor store with some friends. Walter's sister Beneatha, an aspiring doctor, tells him that the insurance money is Mama's, not theirs. After Walter goes to work, Mama enters. Ruth talks to Mama about Walter's liquor store. Mama, a God-fearing woman, doesn't like the idea of selling liquor. Mama wants money for Beneatha's education and to buy a house in a nice neighborhood. Ruth suddenly becomes ill.

**Scene 2:** The following morning, Saturday, is cleaning day. Walter goes out to talk with his friend Willy about buying the liquor store. Ruth comes back from seeing the doctor and tells Mama that she is pregnant. Beneatha's friend Asagai arrives with an African outfit for her to wear. Beneatha is pursuing her African roots. Asagai is from Africa, an intellectual who is attracted to Beneatha,

but she wants to find her own identity. The insurance check arrives, and it reminds Mama that instead of a warm, loving husband, all she now has is a piece of paper. Walter enters, excitedly talking about buying the liquor store, and Ruth storms out. Mama tries to tell Walter that she understands his frustration, but she explains to him that Ruth is pregnant and wants an abortion.

**Act II, Scene 1:** Later the same day. Beneatha enters, ready for a date with George, a wealthy, successful black man. Walter is jealous of George's success. Mama enters and tells everyone that she has made a down payment on a house with part of the insurance money. Ruth and Travis are happy to hear the news, but Walter is depressed—this is another setback to his dream of owning the liquor store. When the young people discover that the house Mama plans to buy is in an all-white section, they wonder whether they will be accepted.

**Scene 2:** Friday night, a few weeks later. The apartment is strewn with packing crates in anticipation of the move to the new house. Walter has not gone to work for three days, spending his time in a bar. Mama fears that she may be destroying her son. She decides to give Walter \$6,500—the remainder of the insurance money—to invest as he chooses. She tells Walter that he should become the head of the family. He excitedly begins to talk to his son about his dreams.

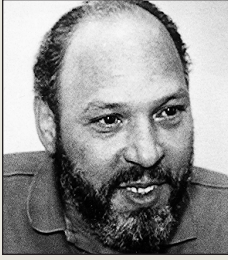
**Scene 3:** Saturday, a week later—moving day. Walter enters, followed by Mr. Lindner, a middle-aged white man who has come to discourage the Youngers

from moving into their new house. Walter throws him out. Mama is greatly moved when the others give her some presents for the new house. In the midst of the celebration, Walter's friend Bobo enters with bad news: Willy has run off with all their money. Walter breaks down and tells the family that he had invested the whole \$6,500 with Willy. Mama is distraught.

**Act III:** An hour later. The mood is despairing. Beneatha attacks Walter and he exits. Mama starts unpacking because now they must stay in the old house. Walter returns and tells them that he has called Lindner to make a deal. Mama is against it: "We ain't never been that poor." Walter is about to sell out to "the Man" when his pride stops him; he tells Lindner that they have decided to move into the new house because his father earned it. The family members bustle into activity. After everyone else has left, Mama stands alone, and then exits into the future.

### Questions to Consider

- *A Raisin in the Sun* was written half a century ago. How relevant, today, are the story and the struggles of the characters? How universal is the subject matter? The situation?
- Will African Americans relate more easily to *A Raisin in the Sun* than other groups? In what ways can other groups relate to it?
- Will it help to understand the play better if we know the social and political climate of the 1950s and 1960s?



August Wilson  
(AP/Wide World Photos)

# Play Synopsis

## FENCES (1987)

August Wilson (1945–2005)

### Characters

Troy Maxon—53, *a sanitation worker*

Jim Bono—*a fellow worker*

Rose—43, *Troy's wife of 18 years*

Cory—17, *their son*

Lyons—*Troy's son by his first wife*

Gabriel—*Troy's younger brother*

Raynell—*Troy's daughter by another woman*

### Setting

The backyard of Troy Maxon's house in a northern industrial city.

**Act I, Scene 1:** A Friday evening, fall 1957. Troy, a large, self-confident man; and Bono, his sidekick, enter. Rose tells Troy that their son Cory is being recruited by a college football team. Troy objects because he himself was a talented baseball player, but African Americans could not play in the major leagues at that time. Troy describes a past encounter with Death, whom he “wrassled” and beat.

Lyons, Troy's older son, who wants to be a jazz musician, comes to borrow money, which Troy refuses to give him.

**Scene 2:** The next morning. Troy's younger brother Gabriel enters. Gabriel has a metal plate in his head—a result of a wound in World War II. He carries a trumpet because he thinks he is the angel Gabriel. Soon, Troy disappears, claiming that he is going to listen to a ball game on the radio.

**Scene 3:** A few hours later. Cory enters and then Troy arrives. Troy is building a fence around the backyard and wants Cory to help him. Troy again expresses strong disapproval of Cory's taking a football scholarship. Cory asks why Troy

doesn't like him. Troy says that he puts food on the table for Cory and a roof over his head. That's enough: “What law is there say I got to like you?”

**Scene 4:** The following Friday. Troy and Bono enter. Troy tells about his past: his family in the south lived in poverty; he left home at 14 and had to steal to live; he was thrown in jail for 15 years. When he got out of jail, it was too late for him to star in baseball. Then he met Rose and settled down. Cory arrives, and there is another confrontation between him and Troy.

**Act II, Scene 1:** Saturday. Bono warns Troy that he shouldn't mess around with Alberta, another woman—Rose is a good woman and doesn't deserve such treatment. Troy starts to work on his fence as Rose arrives. Troy, with great difficulty, tells Rose that he has made another woman pregnant. Rose denounces him, explaining all that she has sacrificed for him.

**Scene 2:** Friday, spring 1958. Troy, who has stayed away from the house, returns to get his clothes. Rose accuses him of committing Gabriel to an institution, so that he himself can take part of the money that will come as a result. Troy angrily denies this, but it becomes clear that it is true. The phone rings, and Rose learns that Alberta has had a baby girl but has died in childbirth. Left alone, Troy once more challenges Death to come get him.

**Scene 3:** Three days later. Troy shows up at the house with Alberta's baby daughter, Raynell. He wants Rose to raise her. Rose says no, but later she agrees.

**Scene 4:** Two months later. Cory has graduated from high school, and he and Troy have another confrontation. Troy orders Cory out of the house; Cory says that the house was built partly with money that Troy took from Gabriel's disability payments. The two fight with a baseball bat. Troy finally gets the bat but does not hit Cory.

**Scene 5:** Summer 1965. Troy has died, and it is the morning of his funeral. Cory, now a Marine, is home, but he refuses to go to the funeral. Rose says that staying away is not the way to become his own man. Rose explains how much she sacrificed to be Troy's wife, but life has given her as compensation little Raynell, whom she loves like her own daughter. Cory decides that he will go to the funeral. Gabriel attempts to blow his trumpet, unsuccessfully, but instead does a dance that announces Troy's arrival at heaven's gate.

### Questions to Consider

- How would the experience of seeing *Fences* differ for different ethnic and racial groups?
- What themes in *Fences* have universal audience appeal?
- Could a reviewer or critic who is not African American do justice to *Fences*? Explain your answer.