

Mirror, Mirror: The American Family on Stage in the Twentieth Century

MIRROR, MIRROR: THE AMERICAN FAMILY ON STAGE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY 1

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Overview

Since the post-World-War-I revitalization of the American theater, playwrights have continually held up the proverbial mirror to our lives in plays that dramatize the hopes and conflicts of our culture. During that time, few aspects of our social and political lives have captured the imagination of American playwrights and audiences as fully as family life and family relationships. Many of our most-admired and most frequently staged plays explore the meaning of the American experience and the perils and promises of the American dream primarily through that lens. The six dramas that comprise this series examine family relationships from different historical, regional, ethnic, and cultural perspectives, focusing on how individuals and generations have defined the American dream and made the search for it their own. In doing so, they encourage us to understand and weigh issues and experiences that have molded our personal and national cultures for the past seventy-five to eighty years.

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) has remained at the center of American drama since it first appeared, by virtue of its immediate and continuing popularity, the many awards it has received, and its author's claim that the play is a "modern tragedy." Miller's then highly experimental stage environment captures Willy Loman's dreams, past and present, and reveals their effects not only on Willy's future, but also on the futures of his wife and sons. In examining the differences between honesty and dishonesty, glitter and substance, appearance and reality, the play focuses as much on family values as on social values and the business ethic.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955) was Tennessee Williams's personal favorite among the more than sixty plays he wrote. He described it as "[coming] closest to being both a work of art and a work of craft." The play depicts the bitter tensions that result from a family's struggle for control of a

plantation, a struggle that centers on the intense efforts of Maggie, the cat of the title, to reclaim her husband from alcoholism and sexual indifference and the efforts of her husband's father, Big Daddy, to see his son produce an appropriate heir. Chief, perhaps, among Williams's thematic concerns is the issue of "mendacity," the public and private results of the willful perpetuation of illusions.

Set in the 1950s in a working-class Chicago neighborhood, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) depicts the struggles of an African-American family to realize their dreams in the face of overwhelming social and economic obstacles. The issues that test this family, from within and without, are both specific to the play's time and timeless. *A Raisin in the Sun* was the first play by a black woman produced on Broadway; its author was the first black woman to win the New York Drama Circle's Award.

Edward Albee's darkly satirical *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* startled theater audiences out of their comfortable 1950s' notions about the American dream and American society when it appeared in 1962. Set in the context of an all-night drinking bout in the home of a middle-aged college professor and his wife, the play dramatizes the subtle ways in which family members are estranged from each other and questions the substitution of artificial for real values in contemporary society. It is, in Albee's own words, "a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen."

Buried Child (1979) is one of a loosely connected trilogy of plays by Sam Shepard, often called the "family trilogy." Although different in style from the other two plays, *Curse of the Starving Class* and *True West*, *Buried Child* shares with them a characteristically unsentimental view of the American family, whose evident qualities are rootlessness, emotionlessness, and the capacity for violence. The play begins in a deceptively realistic world and moves increasingly into the surrealistic and mythic realms, exploring several of Shepard's central themes, including family discord, the nature of individual identity, and the myth of the Old West.

Set in a black tenement in Pittsburgh in the 1950s, August Wilson's Pulitzer- and Tony-winning play *Fences* (1985) is a powerful slice of life portrait of a black family trying to survive together and to make sense of their lives and future in a world set up to treat them unfairly. At the center of the play is the agonizing struggle between Troy, a former baseball player in the Negro leagues, now a garbage collector, and his son, Cory, to determine the son's future. The strong feelings of pride and independence on both sides and the characters' mutual misperceptions of each other make the play a powerful study of human relationships that reaches far beyond issues of white oppression.

Resource Guide and General History of American Drama Online

Resource Guide: American Plays and Playwrights
<http://www.library.uiuc.edu/egx/guides/drama.html>

**PAL: Perspectives on American Literature:
American Drama**
<http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap8/8intro.html>

Drama Reviews and Criticism—Sources
<http://www.library.uiuc.edu/egx/guides/drama.html>

General Comments on the Series

Except for *Buried Child* and *A Raisin in the Sun*, all plays received at least one vote as favorite to someone. Comments that a play about family values that is not such a downer should be added to the series.

Betty Shurley, Feb. 2003

Death of a Salesman

Most of the participants seemed to like the play, or at least, they didn't dislike it. I think they chose this series because it includes plays they are "supposed" to have read. That is, three of them are plays with familiar titles so they are curious about them.

Because some participants thought the play was primarily a story of dementia or an unhappy person, I started the discussion by looking at page 81-Willy's description of Dave Singleman and the introduction of the phrase "death of a salesman"--and from there we looked at Willy's desire to be a salesman, what it meant to him, the changing climate of U.S. business, and the position of the worker. Of course, we looked at family dynamics and compared the dynamics of this family in comparison and contrast to the family in *Cat on the Hot Tin Roof*. Inheritance also plays a part in both plays.

We discussed the impact that dishonesty had in the Lomans' life-how all of them were dishonest, and they were dishonest about their dishonesty. We talked about the phenomenon when people lie for so long that they believe their own lies and the impact that has on their lives. It was a natural bridge to talk about the relationship between dishonesty and the sales profession.

Overall, we had a good discussion.

Margaret Garner

Our group of ten initially focused on the differences between reading and discussing drama instead of fiction

and non-fiction. Then we discussed the importance of setting, stage directions, dialogue, time and space, and the influence of the Depression and technology in the play. One discussion member felt an essential theme of *Death of a Salesman* is the idea that we don't really see ourselves as we really are. Another member compared the themes of culture and family relationships in *Death of a Salesman* to those in Scott Momaday's book *House Made of Dawn*. We talked about the concept of a "business jungle" and interior worlds as well as the idea that people who are powerful are often not well-liked. The group agreed that Willy Loman's failure was not just commercial and that often people cheat in the world of sports to win just like some do in business. We spent a great deal of time discussing whether Linda was a victim or an enabler, what her economic choices and power struggles were, and the fact that freedom to her meant economic freedom. We also explored why Biff calls his mom "pal" and whether Linda's constant mending of her silk stockings was done on purpose to annoy Willy. Last, we discussed the differences in the Cobb 1966 made for TV video version of *Death of a Salesman* and Hoffman's 1986 video.

---Jennifer Sorensen

Laramie: We started with discussing the series as a whole, and discovered that very few people had ever before read a play. We talked a bit about varying styles among playwrights in giving specific stage directions, and will make this a point of comparison throughout the series. Then we turned to the play.

We worked to understand the motivations of all the major characters. In particular, readers were a bit baffled and not sympathetic toward Linda, whom they felt could have done more to improve the family's finances and counter the harmful effects of Willy's dominant personality. In spite of reader's impatience with the behavior of various characters, they felt Miller's story was true, as one participant put it, "too true." She told a story of a man she knew who was very much like Willy, and others in the group could relate, because they all knew a "Willy" too. We had great fun trying to decide what it was that Willy sold, and realized that Miller left the product intentionally unidentified. As many critics have pointed out, Willy was all about selling himself.

A couple things the group found useful: 1) I brought an edition of the play with a preface by Miller and an afterword by Christopher Bigsby (Penguin, 1999). It had b/w photos of the original stage production, which helped participants visualize the theatrical set. 2) I brought a video of the Dustin Hoffman version of the play, which is nicely presented as a filmed play enhanced with values of early production. I showed about 10 minutes of it, a scene film on with the family in the backyard, Biff promising a touchdown at the game, ending with the appearance of the Woman with the new stockings. Not exactly a discreet Scene, but a chunk of the play in which we can see the main characters and get a sense, again, of the production and characterization. The group encouraged me to find videos of our future plays when possible. I agree that it is

helpful to see such things, especially when one isn't used to reading plays and filling in one's own production ideas.

--Julianne Couch

Farson: We began our first session with a reminder of the purpose of the BDP - to foster thoughtful responses to the readings and to discuss how each is relevant to our lives. We also reviewed the theme of this series, "Mirror, Mirror." Then I asked how the group felt about reading plays in comparison to reading novels as we have in previous series. I was surprised that few had had experience reading plays. We spent some time discussing how to read plays. The consensus was that reading at least one act at a time was better than trying to read the play in smaller increments and, of course, paying close attention to the stage directions to help visualize the play. Since most of the group were having trouble with visualization, I suggested that they rent or check out from the library videos of the plays when available. We discussed photos I brought showing Miller's innovative stage setting and how that enhanced his ability to show present/past action and what Willey was thinking as well as what he was saying.

Although most in the group found *Death of a Salesman* depressing to read, they were full of questions and observations which led to a wide-ranging discussion. We also referred to a handout of short excerpts related to the play's historical context, Miller's style and purpose, as well as his controversial view of tragedy applying to the common man. Our discussion of the various kinds of success depicted in the play led us to explore how each character represented a different view of the American dream. The group felt that the Loman family's dilemma has parallels in today's world in such things as the greedy materialism of Enron, Martha Stewart and others, in the dislocation of today's workers as a result of changes in our economy, and in the hero worship of sports figures.

My primary sources for background material were: *Student Companion to Arthur Miller*, by Susan C.W. Abbotson
Understanding Death of a Salesman, by Brenda Murphy and Susan C.W. Abbotson

--Marcia Hensley

We agreed that everyone would try to read Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* in conjunction with *Death of a Salesman*, and several members thanked me for the idea. It certainly gave us another dimension to our analysis – the Lomans could have invented "dysfunctional" but we remarked on the core idea of "get rich quick" which is at the basis of most of the plays. We also remarked on the "hidden secret" at the core of each family's crisis. Some wondered about Willy's obvious mental illness and his seeming lack of device at the end. Having *Babbitt* as a context, our discussion also ranged to economics, consumerism and capitalism.

Dennis Coelho, Feb. 2003

Miller's life and influences, his wide range of subjects, his critics finding his works growing more didactic, and his many awards were presented.

The group was asked to bring something to represent the various symbols in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. The most unusual item was a salesman's sample burial vault; the most authentic was a small sewing basket with stockings, colored thread to match, and a light bulb; others included stocking packages, a real fountain pen, seeds, football, car keys, bunch of roses, etc. As each member presented her symbol a detailed discussion followed. Everyone enjoyed this very much.

A clip from the Dustin Hoffman video stage production was shown showing Linda as Willy's protector to her sons.

Betty Shurley

Riverton met Sept. 9 to discuss the first play in our series. The group is excited about the plays and we had a wonderful turnout with new people present. I presented information on Miller's life, how this play was received at the time (1949), and a short sketch about Miller's newest play. Everyone in this large group offered some comment about the play or its characters. We agreed that the play is as moving today as it was in 1949. People disagreed as to whether they felt sorry for Willy or even sympathized with him. Several felt great compassion for the boys. We discussed the theme of order and disorder, contradictions, the images of machinery and things breaking down. Whether this play is primarily about a family or more social commentary on post war American elicited vigorous debate. We were interested in whether or not the "American Dream" is different today from 1949. The group ended with an interested discussion of whether this or any piece of literature has so dramatically affected our lives that our lives were changed. I previewed our next play, encouraged participants to see this play (video with Dustin Hoffman is widely available) and we adjourned to tea, cookies, and the book exchange.

Barbara Gose

I was surprised to learn that so many in our group had not read or seen *Death of a Salesman* before, so I shifted gears to a more basic discussion of the play's major themes (the American Dream, imagination versus mental illness, the meaning of success, fathers and sons, dreaming in general, etc.). We talked about Willy's relationships, and we contrasted Ben with Charlie. We weren't sure about Linda's role as enabler and challenger, but we agreed that the social forces seemed to limit her maneuverability. I asked why might society need the Willy Lomans of the world, and why we can't all be Bernards. Perhaps the most interesting discussion arose from our focus on Charlie's last speech at Willy's funeral and what it meant to have the wrong and right dreams. This led to a sustained discussion about the meaning of selling, with the general consensus that many of us who participate in American society are engaged in selling every day, in one

form or another. The question remains: when we sell something, do we sell a little part of ourselves? Some in the group thought that the dreams in *A Raisin in the Sun* were more legitimate than those expressed here. We finally thought about responsibility: did Willy make his own misery, or did culture? There was no resolution to that question.

Clifford J. Marks

A Raisin in the Sun

Participants tended to like this play more than *Cat and Salesman* because they saw it as more hopeful. However, after our discussion, I don't think they were feeling quite as optimistic about the Youngers' future.

We talked about the focus on money and family-important aspects to *Cat and Salesman* too. We looked at each character's dream and each character's concept of money. One participant thought it is totally unrealistic that Mama would give money to Walter because he is such a poor money manager, and she saw that part as being totally contrived. Those of us who are parents could understand that action better.

Three good quotations to use for discussion are Walter's "Daddy's going to make a transaction" speech, p. 108; Asagai's "everything depends on the death of man" speech, p. 135; and Mama's "always something left to love" speech, p. 145. Looking at those three quotes allowed the discussion to focus on some of the main ideas.

I was the only person who realized that fire bombings of black homes really did take place during that era. After discussion, people realized that maybe the Youngers would have some problems living in their new neighborhood. I brought up the incident in Hansberry's life upon which the play was roughly based (i.e., when she was eight, her parents bought a home in a white neighborhood and they were greeted by a racist mob; the situation ended up in an anti-discrimination case before the Illinois Supreme Court).

Overall, people liked the play and found it easier to understand than the previous two we have read.

Margaret Garner

Laramie: A couple people announced at the start of the discussion that they did not like the play. Then they left early, and we never got to hear reasons for that opinion. The rest of us thought it a fine play. We thought the characters were realistic in their dreams and disappointments. We saw a connection between the Younger family and the families depicted in *Death and Cat*. That observation got us started talking about matriarchal families and the sorts of men they produce. We talked a lot about the cultural and historic forces that

created characters like Mama, Walter Lee, and even Walter Senior. We also looked at Beneatha's two suitors, and what direction for the black family they represented. Inevitably, the conversation turned to racism the group members have perceived over the years. Each felt that racism of white toward blacks had greatly diminished as a result of civil rights laws.

I made a point to direct this conversation back to the play as much as possible, to help us see what Hansbury had to say on a topic that she had much more immediate experience of than did any of our group members, including the leader. Last, I played a video of approximately the last 15 minutes of the Sidney Poitier film, from the point he learns his bitter lesson from Willie (the man who took his money) through the second visit of the white representative of Clyburn Park and Walter Lee's reclamation of manhood, ending with the family's last goodbye to the apartment. Not a dry eye in the group, even after picking the film up at such a late point. It really is a fine movie. I'd tried to find the American Playhouse version with Danny Glover, but no luck. However, none of us was disappointed with the power and emotion of the old standby from the 1960s.

--Julianne Couch

Our WWCC lunch group decided that *A Raisin in the Sun* is their favorite play so far in this series. They found the themes of racial and social injustice in the play fascinating to discuss. I started the discussion by asking group members if they thought Lorraine Hansberry wrote the play primarily as an Africa American play or a play about family struggles for lower-class families after World War II. Our group was divided in their responses, and then I read a quote from Hansberry where she claimed she was writing about Negro families on Chicago's south side after World War II. Next, one of the group members read the poem by Langston Hughes found at the beginning of the play out loud. The group felt it mirrored the events in the play. We wondered if Walter Lee might have been more powerful and effective as a husband and father if he hadn't been living in his mother's household. We discussed the influences of the Civil Rights Act and then the Women's Rights Movement. Some of us sympathized with Beneatha while others identified more with Ruth's struggles. Most of the group members shared stories about racial discrimination they had either observed or experienced in Wyoming. Next, some of the female members of the group shared stories about gender discrimination in the workplace. Our meeting was the longest so far this year and none of us wanted our discussion to end.

--Jennifer Sorensen

Farson: The group's initial comments about this play were positive. They thought the play portrayed a more optimistic and affirming view of the American family than *Death of a Salesman* or *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. They were especially interested in the topic of black integration of white neighborhoods with which several in the group had past

experiences. I shared some information from *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* about Hansberry's family's experiences with integrating a white neighborhood. We discussed the importance of money and what it represented to each of the main characters in this play compared and contrasted to the characters in *Salesman* and *Cat*. This led us into a good discussion of what we mean exactly when we refer to the "American Dream," something we probably should have done in the first session. Another topic of interest was how the characters were not only realistic as individuals but were also symbolic of different attitudes about black identity (Asagai, the intellectuals and anti-assimilationists, Merchison, the wealthy blacks, etc.) We also talked about the ideas in the play that would have been extremely radical in 1959, such as valuing African "roots", integration of white neighborhoods, women choosing career over marriage, abortion.

Comparisons to *Salesman* and *Cat* came up throughout the evening. We viewed Act III of the American Playhouse version of the play which took only 30 minutes. The wrap up discussion centered around how the play was relevant and had universal appeal regardless of the race issues.

- Marcia Hensley

The group enjoyed the play but really became involved with Hansberry's insight into life when they realized she may have written much of the play when she was only 26 or 26 years old. Her ability, at such an early age, to develop the characters so well helped the group to appreciate her writing even more.

The majority of the evening's discussion centered on Mama and her role as matriarch. They enjoyed her ability to spoil a grandson as best she could while she continued to nurture the others especially Walter as she did her plant. Mama's lesson for Beneatha about love and judging Walter was scrutinized and then regarded as perhaps one of Hansberry's finest insights into realistic family conflicts.

The group exchanged various views about the American family from both the book and their own life experiences. Brother-sister relationships in drama and in real life seem to be most appreciated for their common threads of attitudes and problems.

Jim Fassler

We had a spirited discussion about pride, morality, family values, masculinity, economics, and the complexities of Afrocentrism and assimilation. I began with a close reading of Langston Hughes' "Montage of a Dream Deferred," focusing quite a bit on the food imagery. We then moved to a general analysis of the play. Some brought up how the story reflected universal human struggles, while others pointed to how the play depicted, specifically, some of the difficulties of African American life. While we spent the first part focusing on the men of the play, we shifted the second half of the discussion to

the women. Some general questions: What problems does gender pose? How do class and race impact on a society that, technically, is not supposed to care about such things? What kinds of changes do the characters experience? Why does Walter assert pride at the end? Why does money matter so much here? What is the thematic significance of Walter wanting to invest in a liquor store? What does it mean to have dreams, and how do African-Americans have different kinds of dreams than Caucasian Americans (if, indeed, they do)? What does Beneatha's desire to be a doctor mean in the context of her shifting life aspirations? Why does Leana change her mind about giving Walter money and moving to the new house? These are just a few of the broad questions that helped me shape the discussion.

Clifford J. Marks

The group liked this play and had a lot to say about it. I started by reviewing Hansberry's brief life and sharing reviews of the play. I also talked about Hansberry's role in the civil rights movement and placed the play in historical context. Using quotations from *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* was helpful, especially some quotes relating to the production and reception of *Raisin in the Sun*. We discussed characters, with much time spent on Beneatha. Most readers argued that the idea of medical school for a Negro female in the late 1950s was no more than a pipe dream. They saw her as being unrealistic, even in her desire to celebrate her race. I emphasized the radical elements Hansberry plants with the family - Africa roots, rather than assimilation, abortion, marriage versus a career, moving into a white neighborhood. We debated: was this play primarily about class, race, family and the strength of love, marriage, pursuit of the American dream? We ended by reprising the views of the American dream and individual family members' take on the dream in the earlier plays we read, and then adding *Raisin* to the discussion. Throughout the evening participants drew on their experiences with minority groups; growing up in Chicago among African-Americans, in Duluth among Jews, in Mason City, Iowa, where an African-American musician was refused lodging until a white family came to his rescue. The group was unanimous in their belief that the play has great relevance today.

Barbara Gose

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

The Medicine Bow group seemed to have a mediocre reaction to *Cat on the Hot Tin Roof*. And the ensuing discussion was well, mediocre. Perhaps that sounds more negative than I intend. The discussion was just average, not bad but not inspirational.

We mostly looked at characters--how they are presented to us in the play and the readers' reactions to them. I'm very attracted to Maggie as a character, but that reaction

wasn't shared. We talked, of course, about the movie version and the actors who were in the movie.

We talked about Williams' notes and how his sharing helps us understand his intent.

We discussed some of the issues presented in the play—sexuality, greed, southern culture, the effects of alcoholism, family relationships. We ended up talking a lot about inheritance and wills (and lack of wills).

The discussion started “a step behind” because the Senior Center was locked so we had to find another place to meet. Fortunately, one member had a key to the

Methodist hall so we were able to meet there (and leave a note at the center). Medicine Bow switched to a fall series this year because several members said that schedule would be better for them, but those people weren't there.

Margaret Garner

Farson: We began the evening by viewing part of the movie version of the book as we were waiting for everyone to arrive. I had prepared some comments about where the "Mirror, mirror" theme of this series originated - the classic view that "drama holds the mirror up to nature." We discussed what that meant, especially in the context of the 20th century drama of this series. I also provided some general background on the history of theater to put the modern plays we are reading in context and added some comments on the reasons that 20th century drama is so concerned with alienation and social problems.

I was hoping to forestall complaints about the bleakness of the two plays we've read so far (*Death of a Salesman* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*). Generally, I don't like to "lecture" but the group seemed to appreciate the added background information and no one complained!

We discussed to what extent the play was realistic. Some felt the situations and characters were too exaggerated. Yet, everyone recognized some truth in the conflicts of the play. They especially related to how families can be torn apart by contention over the disposal of property at the death of a patriarch. We discussed the theme of homosexuality and related that to Williams' life, noting how daring that topic was in the 1950s.

We wondered about Maggie's motivations and felt that Williams was deliberately ambiguous about them. We agreed that although none of the characters were very likeable, we did develop sympathies for various ones as the play progressed, especially Brick. We compared *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to *Death of a Salesman*, noting the similarities in the father/son relationships, the way women are depicted, and the importance of "sports," but then noted the contrast between the "success" of Big Daddy and the "failure" of Willy Loman. This led us to consider the materialism that seems inherent in the American Dream and how destructive that is to so many families.

We concluded by viewing the last part of the movie to see whether it followed Williams' first ending or the Broadway version. We discovered that it created yet another ending, but felt that it was closest to the Broadway version. Viewing parts of the movie seemed to enhance our discussion.

- Marcia Hensley

Laramie: We began by comparing *Cat* to the play we read last month, *Death of a Salesman*. We talked about similarities of general outlines: a man with a somewhat overwhelmed wife, and two sons, one of whom is a football hero gone sour. We thought Big Daddy Pollit is who Willy Lowman would have loved to have been. We're looking forward to seeing how the rest of the plays in the series compare in terms of family units and the relationship of those family units to the outside world. We also talked about differences in how the plays appeared on paper, with stage directions and authorial interruptions to coach the actors. Some found the chronological narrative in *Cat* easier to read than the stratified presentation of time & place in *Death*, but others had opposite reactions, for various reasons. We spent some time talking about the two endings of the play, and compared those endings with the Newman/Taylor movie, which I brought and showed the last 10 minutes or so. Williams' biography played a bit into the discussion, but mostly we talked about his use of ambiguity to make the central "lie" of the play as point of some dispute. Just what was the relationship between Brick & Skipper, and do we really need to know for the rest of the play and the way characters react to each other make sense? We decided the ambiguity was good, and that the "all's well" ending of the movie was, well, not as good. Overall an interesting discussion, especially as people get their play-reading sea legs in shape.

--Julianne Couch

Our Western Wyoming Community College lunch bunch began with each member giving a two-minute observation, question, comment or point concerning *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. One member commented on the way the storm interrupted action within the play. Another felt the main themes of the play included power, greed, money, and sexuality. We spent a few minutes pondering the archetypal "prostitutes" in the play (both men and women) and exploring Brick's indifference. Next, we went on to compare the similarities and differences of the staging of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to that of *Death of a Salesman*. We also discussed Tennessee Williams' open homosexuality and the way that his own life experiences may have influenced his writing. We pondered whether or not Maggie might have had an affair with Big Daddy. Last, we discussed the major theme of lying and the ambivalent relationships between Maggie and Skipper, Maggie and Brick, and Brick and Skipper. Most discussion group members said they felt sympathy for Gooper but not for Maggie and Brick. Many of the members had seen the 1958 film with Elizabeth Taylor and Paul Newman. We

ended the discussion agreeing that Elizabeth Taylor looked wonderful in her white slip.

-Jennifer Sorensen

Maggie Kelly began by commenting that she had thought we picked the "Mirror, Mirror" series because we were tired of reading about dysfunctional families.

We continued our discussion, the first of the year, talking about the differences between reading drama and novels. Some in the group were confused by the abbreviated stage directions in Williams' additional act three, but most were able to get through those to the exchanges of dialogue among the characters. Many in the group had seen the play, but those who hadn't questioned why were reading it and why it had received a Pulitzer prize. I used the latter question to launch a discussion about drama and emotion. I asked the group if they had read Hamlet or Greek tragedy and I asked them to draw parallels between those older dramatic forms and the one before us. This led to a contemplation about the intransigence of human emotions-- although the characters are not dead at the end of the contemporary works, their emotions have been powerfully moved. Naturally, we then began discussing the difference between the two third acts. One in group ventured that Williams was not being honest by allowing the amended version, as suggested by Elia Kazan, to be produced on stage and screen. I countered that Williams was one of the most transparent writers I've ever read. His constant direction through his inserts demonstrate what he's thinking. And that by including both acts, he was allowing for the possibility that the writer might be wrong occasionally. This permitted us to discuss the myth of the sovereign writer and how that any written work usually goes through many versions and eyes before being released to the public. That some in the group preferred the cleaner revised third act to the original one led to a great discussion about what we want out of literature. Some said that they wanted literature to reflect life--they liked Williams' original, messier version; others commented that they read literature to escape from life's problems-- they liked the version that eventually was produced. I then led them to analyze some of the play's major themes: masculinity and homosexuality, lying (mendacity), female sexuality, father/son relationships, the American dream, etc. We finished on the question of whether it was Maggie's, Brick's or Big Daddy's play. All in all, it was a lively discussion that lasted over 90 minutes.

Cliff Marks

Eight of ten said that they felt this play had not "aged well," that it was difficult to see why it had been so strongly received in 1955. The issues (homosexuality, assertive women, hidden [?]) were less sensational today, and without the sensationalism, the characterization seemed thin. We kept coming back to the binary oppositions--Brick (Skipper)/Maggie, Gooper/Mae, Big Daddy, Big Mama, Preacher/Doctor. Other than that, it was difficult to keep the conversation going. All in all, a disappointment.

Everyone was looking forward to "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf."

Dennis Coelho

The group as a whole approved of the revised third act so much that they spent a great deal of time finding reasons why it was so much better, e.g., Big Daddy is too strong a character to go quietly to his death bed; the father/son relationship is clarified; Maggie can declare her victory as the cat on the hot tin roof. Most of the group prefer a clear, dynamic ending rather than a quiet, fading-into-the-night conclusion. The wonderful symbols (the various elements of the storm, the man running in the yard) in the revision added to the drama.

The father-son relationship in the three plays read so far were analyzed, the fathers were compared as were their problems and dreams; the sons were compared by family status and dreams; mothers' roles were discussed as to their strengths and weaknesses. How different really are Linda and Big Momma?

Finally, they were asked, "If the audience doesn't know the truth behind the crucial relationship between Brick and Skipper, does that lessen the impact of the drama?" Resoundingly, the group felt that that mystery was the thread which created the imagery of heat and fire; remember the storm?

Jim Fassler

Fifteen people met to talk about this play. One of the participants had recently read a biography of Williams and willingly shared some background information as well as pictures from the book. Together, we covered Williams' life and a chronology of his plays. We covered a variety of topics over the following 90 minutes. Some of us felt that homosexuality was not explicit in the play. This elicited a lively discussion as to whether establishing the homosexuality was necessary to explain Brick and Maggie's problems. For there, we moved into how homosexuality was viewed in the 50's and how this has changed. A discussion followed on treatment of Africa and of African Americans in the play. We discussed the characters: the three main characters and who was the main character (we divided over Maggie and Big Daddy with equal numbers of us seeing each as the "glue") and the extent to which the more minor characters were one dimensional. The main characters were analyzed and then compared to their counterparts in *Death of a Salesman*, our first play. We examined the family as a whole in each play. The role of mendacity, fertility, homosexuality, and the dysfunctional family was discussed. We compared the "American Dream" of both families in the two plays we have read. I discussed the place that Williams may hold as a playwright - breaking taboos, being controversial, champion of the outcast, etc. And finally, I introduced the next play, *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Barbara Gose

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf

Laramie: A record crowd of 15 turned up at the Eppson Center for Seniors, most of whom couldn't wait until the discussion officially started to voice their feelings of "disgust" and so forth toward the play. Sensing a major case of resistance (I'm nothing if not aware of the obvious) I asked the group to start by going around the circle and giving everyone a chance to summarize their response. "Vent their spleens" was how I put it, I believe.

So they did: a few people found the play interesting because they acknowledged that some people do behave in ways like the play depicted. Those in the majority camp embellished on the feelings described earlier. Then I gave a little speech about why we need to move beyond liking or disliking when discussing literature. I told them I was happy they felt angry and disgusted and so on, because it meant we could examine why they felt those things, what values in particular of theirs they felt were under assault. I may have been a bit heavy handed, I'm not sure. But we were able to then talk about details of the play: the degree of intimacy in the marriage that could allow George & Martha to construct an imaginary world, and the notion of unfulfilled expectations, to name two. I had a copy of the Taylor/Burton film, and showed a fairly long chunk of it, starting with Martha's description of the son's birth, through George's revelation about the death, the symbolic exorcism, and the loving moment between G&M at the end. Funny, after seeing the performance, most participants were touched and sympathetic toward Martha, mainly.

One last note: there is an article in the Denver Post from Jan. 14 2005 about the staging of Albee's play *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia*."

--Julianne Couch

Farson: Reading the play was not pleasant for most of the group (myself included) but the discussion was one of the liveliest we've had, probably because the play elicits such strong reactions and contains so much ambiguity.

After talking a bit about Albee's life, we began with each person's questions or reaction to the play. Those ranged from extreme distaste and having to "make" themselves read the play to being "sucked in" and not being able to put it down. As we analyzed each of the characters trying to figure out their motivations, we found ourselves going back to the plays text often to verify what was said or done. We talked quite a bit about the reason for the imaginary child, Martha and George's relations, their alcoholism, Nick and Honey's relationship and how they might be affected by their night with George and Martha. We speculated on whether George and Martha would change after their imaginary son and their illustrations are destroyed at the end, deciding that Albee had made that as ambiguous as everything else in the play.

One thing that worked well with this discussion was that I had a list of 8 quotations taken from various reviews of the play I had read that demonstrated both the clear central theme of the play and the widely diverging interpretations people have given it. Each person read one of the quotes and then we talked about it, trying to decide if we could see the reviewer's point or not. That led us to some good ideas we might not have come up with on our own.

The best insight to arise out of our considering how the play related to our lives was that we realized how often we have to decide in our own lives what is truth and what is illusion. For example, what we hear on the news about politicians, about the war, etc is a manipulation of the truth. We thought Albee made us (the audience/reader) aware of our illusions just as he did the characters.

We concluded the evening by watching the first 20 minutes of the movie version. All of us were struck with the fact that humor is much more evident when you see the movie than when you read the play. I pointed out that our version of the play had no stage instructions, which left each person to visualize the play on his/her own.

--Marcia Hensley

Today's lunch discussion proved that intense, uncomfortable reading material sometimes makes the best spring board for an energetic reading discussion as it did in our case today. We talked about the Liz Taylor / Richard Burton video of the play which most of the group members have watched. Next, we moved on to the topics of sexual abuse, marriage, and alcohol in the play. One group member said she thought Nick and Honey were just earlier versions of George and Martha. Another member said she felt George and Martha were just performing well-rehearsed roles and needed Nick and Honey for an audience that was a safety net so they didn't physically hurt each other. We also talked about how both couples suffered from unmet expectations of each other and that the women characters often acted like children. Other topics included the historical and social atmosphere of the early 1960s and writer Virginia Woolf and her possible influence. It was one of the best discussions we have had this year.

----Jennifer Sorensen

Busy time of year, so only nine of us showed up for the Evanston group, but we had an excellent discussion of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* We started with Albee's life and politics and how the characters of Nick and George were named for Kruschev and Washington, respectively. We then lapsed into an energized discussion of the absurd and absurdist literature. One gentleman in the group, a former merchant marine, grew up in San Francisco in the fifties, and he likened the play to the Beats of that time and place. We really got into the psychology of each character and discussed their motivations and possible motivations. All agreed the play

made them feel closed inside the room in the house for too long and tense throughout, but I think without exception we all left with a better understanding and appreciation of the play. Most expressed a desire to rent the Taylor movie.

Jon Billman, Dec. 2003

This was an unexpectedly lively discussion. Everyone came with strong opinions about the play, and about the four characters. We 'deconstructed' each of the characters and tried to decide if we liked any of them. I stressed the uniqueness of Martha's powerful, almost Falstaff-ian personality. One member said couldn't ever "like" such "perverted" personalities – another suggested that we should add up the drinks to see how much liquor they actually consumed. I don't know if it was the play, or the fact that we'd had a two-month lay-off but this was a really excellent discussion. I've got a bad cold, and practically no voice, but they thanked me for helping them to understand the text. Maybe that's a sign I've talked too much in the past! Finally, we had no agreement at all in the meaning of the title.

Dennis Coelho

Buried Child

Farson: Each person expressed varying degrees of confusion about the play's meaning. Thus, we spent the first part of the discussion talking about each of the characters and the numerous contradictions in what they say and do. We spent time going back to the play and rereading passages trying to unravel those contradictions, especially the question, who was the buried child? We finally decided that there were many buried children, in one sense or another. We also talked about Shepard's life, looking for clues in his background. I shared some information about his relationship with his own father, his growing up in California, his becoming a playwright by default (what he really wanted to be was a rock star.) We talked about how these factors might have influenced the style and content of the play.

I had made a list of brief comments about the play by critics and scholars trying to pin down the play's meaning. After each person read one critic's comment, we discussed it. (I did this last time and it worked so well I tried it again.) This got everyone focused on the larger themes and issues in the play. We talked about American life in the 1970s, a time when it seemed to us that the nuclear family was disappearing (more women going to work, families living at a distance from each other, increase in the divorce rate, the generation gap.) We decided the play's theme was the disintegration of the American family. The group observed how families do silence certain family truths they are ashamed of or tell stories to excuse them until they begin to believe the fiction rather than the fact. The play also prompted us to discuss how families can hand down traditions of negative

behavior. We discussed parallels between the family in *Buried Child* and other families in the plays in this series: father-son conflicts, denial of the truth, miscommunication. Although participants did not find the play funny as they read it, when I pointed out that reviews of productions of the play praise its dark humor, it prompted everyone to think about incidents in the play that could have been humorous in a stage production. We discussed some of the reasons the play might have been considered worthy of the Pulitzer Prize.

Although we still had many unanswered questions about the play, we decided that Shepard probably didn't want his readers/audience to find answers but rather to make them think. Trying to figure out the meaning of this play led to a satisfying discussion.

- Marcia Hensley

Rock Springs: We discussed many themes including the decline of the American family and American patriachs in the Midwest, conflicts between fathers and sons, power and control, and hypocrites. We talked about American history in the 1970s and what effect in might have had on Shepard's writing. Both groups spent a lot of time discussing the idea of murder and resurrection, fertility and vegetables, and the significance of Tilden's name. There were differing opinions about whether or not the end of the play is hopeful.

-- Jennifer Sorensen

Laramie: We all found the play fascinating. When people started saying things like - Is this realism? Is it symbolism? I can't tell - I knew they'd really been able to penetrate what Shepard was doing in this play. We decided that the play was "polyrhythmic" in that all the characters were following their own motivations and attempting to overcome obstacles simultaneously, without a lot of coordination by the author for the sake of audience comprehension.

We had lots of fun comparing Shepard's technique with postmodern art or avante garde jazz. One person had brought along a play review that talked about the laugh-out-loud humor, which prompted some head scratching. So, we read through one of the many funny (to me) scenes, the one where Vince tries to get the family to recognize him by drumming on his teeth & etc. Reading aloud helped the group discover the play's humor. We talked about how, after all the absurd and seemingly random props appear on stage, in the form of vegetables, etc., the audience would react when the last prop appears on stage, that is the until-recently buried child. The emotion impact of the sight of Tilden carrying in that corpse would likely be gut-wrenching, we agreed.

Here are a couple sources I found useful. I checked them both out of Coe Library at UW:

Frederick J. Perry "A Reconstruction-Analysis of 'Buried Child' by Playwright Sam Shepard." Mellen Research University Press: San Francisco. 1992.

The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard. Matthew Roudane, ed. Cambridge University Press. 2002.

--Julianne Couch

Sam Shepard is difficult for most readers, myself included. It's hard to argue with a well-read person who understands what Shepard's getting at, but is uncomfortable with the play and sees it as ineffective because Shepard uses shock value and "stunt effect" to get there. Most claimed at the beginning of the discussion that the emperor has no clothes. After most of the group vented their frustrations at the play, we settled into a discussion of character and family and the 70s. Shepard is a master of dialogue, we agreed, and writes with the grace and energy of a poet, and though uncomfortable to read and imperfect, we all agreed that the play is nearly impossible to forget, perhaps the mark of good theater/literature at the end of the day.

Jon Billman

When we gathered to discuss Sam Shepard's play, *Buried Child*, I began with background on Shepard, then asked each reader to share his/her reaction to the play. Reactions ranged from loving the language ("akin to poetry") to distaste for the subject. All had read the play and come with open minds to discuss it. Highlights follow: two farm women eloquently shared their views on rural farm life for women, which helped to explain Halie, the mother; patriarchy in the play; the negative view of this family; Shepard's use of family to depict the state of American society in the late 1970s; whether the ending was hopeful, as depicted by the farm flourishing, or indicative of a dead family finally destroying its last generation in Vince; symbolism in the play, the role religion plays, and the issue of lack of memory. We ended wishing we could see the play; of all we've read, this play begs to be seen. People are glad to have read these plays, but found them painful and depressing. Of course, that produces good discussion. One word: scholars might make clear that only *Buried Child* is required reading. One member read the entire book of Shepard's seven plays. Incidentally, she was glad she did. Most of us read his poetry.

Barbara Gose, Riverton 02-03

Buried Child, I am sad to report, was perhaps the most abhorred book my group has read in the three years I have led their discussion. Words used were "atrocious, horrible, sick, nauseating, abominable, deeply depressing." Frankly, though they recognize the pervasiveness of family dysfunction, the group is tired of reading about families that seem extremely off the margins. They also thought that Shepard borrowed enormously from plays like *Fences*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*,

and *Death of a Salesman*. Nonetheless, I suggested to them that the play had more affinity with a comedy than a tragedy, and went over Aristotelian and Shakespearean notions of comedy and tragedy, and asked whether or not modern drama attempts to dispose of such categories, but in the end returns to them (a play has to end— even ambiguous endings lean one direction or another). I also proposed that the play was more about renewal than decay, and used the context of Jimmy Carter's "Malaise in America" speech (1979) to suggest that this play follows the turbulent 1960s, Watergate, and the exploding inflation and interest rates in such a way to see the problems buried at our core, but the death of the old guard (Dodge) and the unearthing of the corpse by the next generation (Tilden carrying in the mummified corpse of the baby at the end) served to move out those who have destroyed and unveil the depths of their destruction. The play follows many of the motifs found in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, but in a post-modern sense where the fantastic imagery comes out the expense of a Norman Rockwellian, tranquil veneer. In that sense, the play is deceptively realistic— one expects some of the scenes to be fantasies, but their bizarre "truth" confuses the viewer. Although ambiguity reigns (hence offending my book group), things seem a little less ambiguous at the end, thus leading to an extremely guarded hope.

Clifford Marks, 0202

Fences

The Medicine Bow group thought that *Fences* is the best play of the four we read this fall. They thought it easy to understand, realistic, and less depressing than the other plays (*Cat*, *Salesman*, *Raisin*). The group talked more about how much they disliked *Death of a Salesman*.

We discussed the significance of baseball (and the fact there are nine scenes in the play), the significance of the yard, the father-son relationship, Troy's life, the importance of oral tradition for Troy, the theme of death, the concept of duty and responsibility, the last scene, and, of course, *fences* (and the fence).

One group member said the play reminded her of *The Honeymooners* (and Troy reminded her of Ralph). So we took some time to discuss the similarities and the differences. Group members mentioned that the play could have been about a poor white family just as easily so we talked about the aspects of black culture that are present in the play.

I was delighted when one member gave us some insight from baseball culture. When a baseball player is "riding pine," he is on the bench. When he is at bat, he's using (obviously) hard wood. That information enhanced our discussion of Troy's insistence on using hard wood for the fence rather than "inside" pine wood.

Fences was a great way to end the series.
Maggie Garner

Laramie: For this discussion I brought in a tape of blues singer Robert Johnson, which I had playing in the background as group members came in. The acoustics in the room where we meet aren't the greatest, so the sound turned into a muddy mess and I gave up my plan of setting the mood. I did find a good book about the play, called *Fences: A Reference* (sorry, I don't have the full citation right now) which gave me some good critical insights and contained some very interesting photos of the play staged with James Earl Jones, and another production staged in China. The end result of this discussion is that I don't think there was a single character, theme, or plot element we didn't bring up and examine for about 30 seconds. Wow!

--Julianne Couch

Rock Springs: Our WWCC group ended our lunch discussions for the year with *Fences* by August Wilson. We started off discussing fences and their use as symbols throughout the play. Next, we discussed the motif of sins and virtues of one generation and how they can influence the next. We also explored Troy's poor relationships with his sons and the irony that his last child is a daughter. The group wondered why Rose was so willing to accept a child that was not genetically related to her. We ended by discussing baseball and some information of the Internet about the role of Negro Leagues in the 1950's and 1960's

--Jennifer L. Sorensen

Farson: I started by sharing more detail about August Wilson's life and accomplishments because I thought the parallels between Wilson's stepfather and Troy Maxon were relevant to the discussion of *Fences*. Also, I reminded them of the fact that the play was one in Wilson's series of plays depicting black Americans in the 20th century and that this play's setting was pre-civil rights era. We talked a little about what the time period was like. After that each person contributed an observation about the play and that launched the discussion nicely. Everyone liked this play. In fact, it was their favorite because it was easy to understand (after *Buried Child*), gave insight into black culture, but also dealt with universal family problems. They also enjoyed Wilson's use of the colloquial speech patterns of blacks of the time. We discussed the father-son conflict and how that was especially reminiscent of *Death of a Salesman*. They observed that generational conflict of some sort was a theme in most of the plays in this series. They noted that several plays in this series dealt with the role of sports in men's lives.

We discussed each of the main characters. While Troy was the most complex and interesting of them, we also found Rose to be fascinating. We frequently returned to the text of the play, rereading passages that gave us insight into each of the characters. The stories Troy tells are especially revealing. As one scholar pointed out, they are consistent with the black oral tradition and are one way Wilson evokes the black history and identity of his characters. Our discussion of "fences" both literal and

symbolic in the play came late in the discussion, which surprised me. I thought it would be the first thing the group would bring up. We discussed the concluding scene and wondered how it would have been staged to show the opening of the gates of heaven. We all agreed that we wished we could see this play acted with James Earl Jones as Troy. Some of us recalled seeing the Hallmark Hall of Fame version of *The Piano Lesson* by Wilson. The group also wished we had black participants in our discussion. We wondered what their reactions to the play would be. We concluded by discussing the different attitudes about integration each of the participants had experienced living in the West, the upper Mid-West, and the South.

--Marcia Hensley

The group's best discussion yet. Everyone enjoyed the play, which was not true for most of the list. Also, not necessary, I might add. The character of Troy came to the forefront of the discussion first. Many shared experiences of an interface with someone of Troy's socioeconomic situation and tried to add to that the time in which the play is set. Most agreed he's a complex character and the play captures this family's struggle brilliantly, without stereotype or a predictable plot. We then broadened the discussion to take a look at all six plays we've studied. We really enjoyed the unique perspective plays allow not only a playgoer, but also a reader. There's a sense of sharp, sobering focus when reading a stageplay that novels and screenplays cannot always relay.

Jon Billman, 02-04

I began our discussion by passing out Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" and I engaged the participants on the general need for fences in our lives. We talked generally about whether a fence was to keep something in or out, and then we moved on to a specific discussion about the play. After analyzing the symbol of fences and where it was obvious or not, we examined the characters for their relative worth. The group did an excellent job of commenting on the gender roles of the play, and they wondered why the main character could move so seemingly easily into his affair. I pointed out that the father created a symbolic world where his rules mattered until he broke them – once he broke his own rules, the rest of the characters diverged from their previous sets of assumptions. The group generally liked the play, particularly Wilson's ability to move beyond questions of race to universal human values.

Clifford Marks 02-03

A beautiful fall day, but we still had an active, enthusiastic audience. Our discussion profited from the fact that we had previously read *Raisin in the Sun*, which seemed a precursor for *Fences*. The characters from *Fences* seemed in many ways to be extensions of the earlier play. We talked about the difficulty in thoroughly understanding

a character in a play without the "thick" texture of a novel. Overall, it was an intense and enjoyable discussion--one of the best so far.

**For what it's worth--In comparing characterization in fiction and drama, I always think of the "thickness" of fiction as coming primarily from point of view. Playwrights don't have that powerful tool, and they do all sorts of things to make up it. The original (i.e., working) title of *Death of a Salesman* was "The Inside of his Head." To me, part of Miller's genius in that play was the way he technically solved the problem of getting inside Willy's head, of creating an almost stream of consciousness point of view on stage.

Dennis Coelho

The music of Bessie Smith, from whom August Wilson discovered the blues, playing and a miniature fence and baseball bat on the table greeted the group.

Information was presented on the life of Wilson, his numerous awards, comments, and critiques concerning his many plays and his desire to represent each decade of the 20th Century African America's culture. This was followed by a dramatic cutting by Nancy Moore and Bob Gottsch. This was the springboard for the discussion.

The group appreciated the powerful language of *Fences* and wanted to show some of this dialogue during various points of discussion. The discussion centered around the "fences" of the characters from Troy's father, to Troy, his brother, his children, particularly Cory, Rose, and his friend Bono. Other "fences" in our lives were mentioned, and how those have changed from those of our parents.

Bunny Shurley