

Five One-Act Plays

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Summary

Listen to the Boy! Johnny Bell wants to tell Mr Smith, the shopkeeper, that two men have stolen some apples from his car. But Mr Smith and the other customers in the shop think that Johnny is just being rude and trying to jump the queue. When he finally gets to tell Mr Smith about the theft, it is too late, of course.

The Right Person: Who is the right person to rent a room in Mrs Stone's house? She wants the young man who sees it first, although he thinks the furniture is too old, the bed too hard, the price too high, and he's not interested in the view. She doesn't want the old man who sees it next, although he thinks the furniture is nice, the bed is fine and the view is lovely. But she changes her mind about the old man when he discovers that one of her old paintings from the garage is worth a lot of money. She decides she would like him to have the room, even if she won't need to take tenants after selling the paintings.

An Afternoon on the Beach: Granny wants to sit in the shade during her afternoon on the beach, but her daughter is determined that she should sit in the sun. Granny appears to capitulate, but as soon as the rest of the family have gone exploring the smugglers' caves, she moves back behind a sheltering rock and goes to sleep. Some time later the family realise that the tide is coming in and Granny may be in danger. Sure enough, when they return to the spot where they left her, she has disappeared, although her book and umbrella are floating in the sea. It is a moment before Granny is discovered behind the rock and all is well.

A Bad Dream: Scene 1. Bank manager George Hill orders his wife to dismiss their cook Annie, after twenty years of loyal service, because, according to him, she is a bad cook

and makes terrible coffee. His wife points out that it will be difficult for Annie to find another job but George is implacable. It's Sunday afternoon, and Mr Hill falls asleep.

Scene 2. George is visited by two employees of his bank who inform him that he must resign, because of his lateness, laziness and generally impolite behaviour to the staff at the bank. He points out that he will find it hard to find another job at his age but they are implacable. He accepts his fate. However, there is more to come. His wife returns and is unsympathetic about his having lost his job and tells him that she is going away for a while and doesn't know when she will return. She leaves. Annie comes in and he asks if she wants to leave too. 'No,' she says, even when he says he might not be able to pay her in the future, she wants to stay because it is her home.

Scene 3. Suddenly, everything becomes clear. George has been dreaming – the men from the bank, his wife leaving, even his conversation with Annie. Luckily George's wife has not got around to dismissing Annie. George has had a change of heart. In fact, he wants to hire someone to help Annie now. Could his dream have had anything to do with his new attitude?

The Professor: The absent-minded old Professor has designed a new invention and offered it to the government for free. The day that the government men are due to come, the Professor's daughter has to leave the house to see her friend in a hospital. Two men arrive half-an-hour earlier than their appointment, present their identity cards and take away some of the Professor's papers. Then, horror of horrors, it is discovered that the men were impostors who had ambushed the real government men and taken their identity cards. The plans for the invention have been stolen. Or have they? It seems that the Professor, whilst absent-minded, is by no means senile. He saw through the two men and gave them some old papers of no value instead of the plans.

Background and themes

Lack of respect: All of the plays in the volume are, or could be seen to be, about lack of respect.

Ageism: Two of the plays deal with the theme of the lack of respect which is brought about by ageism. In *Listen to the Boy!* a young boy is the victim of ageism because he is not accorded the courtesy of a fair hearing and as a result a thief gets away. The boy cannot give his important news to the adults until it is too late. In *An Afternoon on the Beach* the ageism leads to the wishes of an aged parent being ignored. But Granny gets her own back – she simply

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waits until her family have gone and then does what she wanted to do in the first place.

Loyalty: The third play also deals with lack of respect, in this case the respect which is due to a loyal employee. In *A Bad Dream*, the bank manager is completely unmoved by the years of loyal service that his cook has given his family when he decides, almost on a whim it seems, to dismiss her. The moral of this story is clearly 'do as you would be done by' as the bank manager is lazy and work-shy and yet is amazed when, in a dream, he is dismissed or, at least, asked to resign. Even if Annie is a bad cook, perhaps she should be treated by George, a bad bank manager, with an element of fellow feeling.

Absent-mindedness: Perhaps *The Professor* is also about lack of respect. The professor's daughter and his secretary think he has to be looked after because he tends to forget things. We, the audience, are led to assume that the absent-minded old man has been easily hoodwinked into handing over the designs of his important new invention. But we should not confuse absent-mindedness with stupidity. The Professor has easily seen through the tricksters and, rather than confront them and risk a violent attempt to take the papers, fobs them off with some worthless papers.

Appearance vs. truth: There is another common theme running through all of the plays. Something is not what it seems. Johnny is not being rude, the old man looking for a room is more than just an old man, Granny is not dead, the bank manager has not really been asked to resign and the professor has not really given away his invention. Only in one play, however, does the playwright use dramatic irony, allowing the audience into the secret. In *An afternoon on the Beach*, we know that Granny hasn't really drowned and therefore the grief and concern is comical rather than tragic.

Discussion activities

Listen to the Boy!

Before reading

- 1 **Guess:** Have students look at the title of the play and the picture on pages 2–3. Have them predict what's going on in the play by asking the following questions:
- What's the title of the play?
 - How many people can you see in the picture?
 - Where are they?
 - What is the boy trying to do, do you think?
 - Why do you think three women look cross?

After reading

- Pair work:** Put students into pairs. Ask them to make a list of the ways that Johnny tries to tell Mr Smith about the men taking out a box of apples. *Example: Please, Mr Smith ...*
- Role play:** Put students into small groups. Have them discuss the situation in which one person has something important to say, but the other people won't let him/her say it until it's too late. Students could write down the script first if they prefer. Give them sufficient time to practise. Ask groups to role play the scene in front of the class.

The Right Person

Before reading

- Discuss:** Have students work in small groups to talk about the picture on page 4. Encourage them to discuss the following questions: *What kind of things are there in the room? What can you see from the window? Do you like the room? If yes, what do you like about? If not, what are the things that you don't like about it?*
- Discuss:** Talk about renting a room. Ask students to imagine that they are going to rent a room. Brainstorm what is really important to them when renting a room, e.g. size of the room, distance from public transportation, noise, with or without car park, etc. Then put students into small groups to discuss what is important to them. Encourage them to give reasons. Later, ask some students to share their opinions with the rest of the class.

After reading

- Role play:** Put students into pairs to role play a scene in which one person is trying to stop the other person doing something, e.g. letting a room, renting a room, buying a particular car, etc.
- Discuss:** Have students work in small groups to discuss what will happen after the end of this play. Ask each group to think of each character and what they might do next. Give each group a chance to report their ideas to the class when they are ready.

An Afternoon on the Beach

Before reading

- Discuss:** Talk about an afternoon on the beach. Lead a whole class discussion by asking the following question: *Imagine that you're going to spend an afternoon on the beach. What do you want to do? What do you need to bring with you?*

After reading

- Discuss:** Put students into small groups. Have them discuss the following question: *What do you think about the way Mrs Brown treats Granny? Imagine you are Mrs Brown. What would you do? How would you talk to Granny?*

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A Bad Dream

Before reading

10 Discuss: Talk about a bad dream. Put students into pairs. Have them talk to each other about a bad dream they have had. Encourage them to discuss the following questions: *Did you know that you were having a bad dream while you were sleeping? Were you frightened? Did you scream? How did you wake up from the bad dream?*

After reading

- 11 Role play:** Ask students to imagine that Mrs Hill told Annie she must leave. Have students work in pairs to act out the following conversation.
Student A: You are Mrs Hill. You need to tell Annie to leave. It's very hard for you to dismiss her. Be nice and polite when you talk.
Student B: You are Annie. You will be told to leave. Don't get upset. Be calm and ask Mrs Hill to think it over. Tell her the reasons why you want to stay. Think what you can do to make things better.
- 12 Discuss:** Have students work in small groups to discuss the following question: *Imagine you are Mrs Hill. Now you have just heard that Mr Hill has to resign. What will you say to him?* Ask students to write down what they will say. They can compare what they wrote in groups, and then in class.
- 13 Discuss:** Put students into groups to discuss how Mr Hill has changed at the end of the play.
- 14 Predict:** Put students into pairs. First, have them take turns to retell what happened in Scenes 1–3. Now that we know Mr Hill has changed, ask the pairs to think what happens to each character next. Encourage them to give reasons.

The Professor

Before reading

15 Discuss: Talk about inventions. Have students look at the picture of the professor on page 31. Tell them that he is an inventor and that his invention will help people. Now ask students to imagine that they are also inventors. Have a whole-class discussion by asking the following questions: *What would you like to invent? Who would the invention be for? Why do you want to invent it?*

After reading

16 Discuss: Put students into pairs to work out how exactly the Professor knows that Dr Pitt and Mr Rose aren't from the government. Have them discuss and write down what remarks made the professor think that and how he reacted. When students are ready, ask some pairs to report to the class.

17 Role play: Put students into groups of three to act out the scene between the Professor and the two men. Give students some time to think about their movement, body language and facial expressions before acting out. Ask some group to act out in front of the class. While they're acting, stop the scene at a certain point to make a tableau. Ask the rest of the class to describe what exactly is going on. Encourage them to make positive comments on the scene.

Extra activities

- 18 Discuss:** Talk about plays. Have a whole-class discussion by asking the following questions: *Have you ever been to a theatre to see a play? Where did you go? What was it about? What kind of play was it? Was anyone famous in the play?* Ask some students to share their experiences with the rest of the class.
- 19 Research:** Ask students to get some information on the plays that are currently showing in town. They can look at the newspaper, magazines, and / or the Internet. Have students write a few sentences about the plays. Students can report their findings to the class.
- 20 Discuss:** Brainstorm what kinds of play there are. Write a list on the board, and then put students into groups to talk about the kind of plays they like. Encourage them to explain why they like that kind of play.
- 21 Discuss:** Remind students of each character in each play. Have students work in pairs to discuss the following questions: *Which character is the most difficult to act out, do you think? Which character is the most enjoyable?* Encourage them to explain why they think so. Ask some pairs to share their opinions with the rest of the class.
- 22 Discuss:** Put students into groups to find connections between two or more plays in this collection. For ideas on connections, see Background and themes.
- 23 Write:** Have students work in small groups to write an alternative ending for each play. Give them time to discuss the plot first. Then students write the script for this alternative ending. When they are ready, ask them to read out their script. Or display them in the classroom so that other students can also enjoy them.