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1990 Volume II: Contemporary American Drama: Scripts and Performance

What's A Nice Girl Like Me Doing in a Place Like This?

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I am a drama teacher at Roberto Clemente Middle School. I have been aware since I was a young girl that males treat females quite differently than their own kind, I do not think that males, in the early days of human history, deliberately set out to discriminate against women. This practice, I believe, developed over time as the social order of various cultures became increasingly complex. My dad was the first male in my life to discriminate against me. I recall one sunny Sunday afternoon when I was eleven, dad and I were playing catch in the back yard. My younger brother, whom I could beat in most sports, came out to join us. Dad told me that I could no longer play. When I asked why, he said that my brother needed the practice for Little League try-outs. I he said was a girl and not allowed to join. Being a properly passive young lady, so typical of my day, I did not express any rage or disappointment, though I felt both quite strongly. Instead, I went quietly off to my room and cried.

As I grew and matured I learned to hate being a girl. I did not enjoy wearing dresses, playing with dolls or acting like a little lady. Running, climbing and jumping rope were activities that really interested me. If I had had my way, I would have been born a boy. It wasn't until the 1960's when books like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* became popular, that I began to get some understanding of the impact of those early discriminatory practices upon my development. My physical, intellectual, social, and emotional growth had been adversely affected by the insensitive behavior of males. As a young woman, the idea of sex discrimination made me furious. I personally feel a great debt of gratitude to the women of the 1960's and 1970's, who not only inspired the feminist movement but who met the challenges its new idealism created. These women fed and nurtured their cause in its infancy until it became a force for social change in America. The youth of to day seem to have little knowledge of this important event or its impact upon their lives today.

My goal in this unit is to present some of the important issues of the feminist movement in order to increase their awareness of this social phenomenon. I have selected four plays from modern and contemporary American drama which have mothers and daughters as central characters. These plays all written by women, are the core of this unit. Each play offers its own unique perspective of the mother/daughter relationship. By examining the relationships of women in these plays, in conjunction with the issues raised by the feminists concerning marriage and motherhood, students will better comprehend the role the feminist movement has played in contemporary society. Because it is beyond the limits of the classroom teacher to guide students through the reading of four complete plays, I have selected scenes from each work which offer a detailed and comprehensive look at the mother/daughter relationship. Strategies for teaching the unit include: an introduction to feminist issues; the reading of scenes as an in-class activity; a guided discussion of the works;

staging of the scenes; and rehearsal of the scenes.

This unit can be used by teachers of drama, English, history, or life skills in grades seven through twelve. Many schools participated this year in the celebration of "Women's Week" in February. This would be an excellent time of year to make use of this unit.

Adolescence has been called the search for identity, Developmental psychologists believe the primary purpose of this time in a child's life is to experiment with new value systems, try out new roles and ideas before settling into a solid identity. This process ideally occurs against the background of a stable culture. Yet according to Janet Chase in her book *Daughters Of Change*, American culture has been anything but stable during the past thirty years; one of the major causes of disruption has been the feminist movement (27). A closer look at some of the important issues raised by the feminists will bring with it a better understanding of how the women of today are operating in our society.

Perhaps the most significant issue raised by the feminists is the way children are reared in the home. Prior to the 1960's the majority of married women with children, considered the responsibilities of the home to be their full time occupation. Today, the majority of married women with children hold jobs outside the home as well. Although the early feminists were not solely responsible for this change they were largely responsible for initiating it. A 1962 Gallup poll found that 90% of all house wives surveyed did not want their daughters to lead the same type of life they had. Early feminists of the 1960's began to wonder why women were so dissatisfied with their lives. They wondered if their unhappiness was caused by some flaw in themselves or with the social system of which they were a part. They looked at the institutions of marriage and the family in their quest for answers. The conclusion they came to following their inquiries was that the institution of the family as it presently stood was detrimental to the psychological well being of women (Deckard 60). This finding countered the position of the social scientists whose structural functional theory of the nuclear family proclaimed the institution to be universal and necessary if society is to survive (60). The structural-functional theorists supported the then popular philosophy which advocated a division of labor between husband and wife as necessary if the family was to function effectively. According to the feminists, this group ignored, dismissed, or disregarded two important factors in their arguments.

The feminists felt that the social scientists failed to establish whether or not it was a positive goal for society to maintain its present state. Furthermore, the feminists wanted to know if husband and wife benefited equally from the family model as it presently stood. Investigation by feminists of these two issues led them to conclude that as an institution, marriage benefits men and makes women sick. The following data support their conclusion. When comparing the mental health of married women, the men show up much healthier. Many more married women than married men suffer from depression, anxiety phobias and other symptoms of psychological distress (72). Does this mean that women are less psychologically stable than men? No. When using the same measures to mark the state of mental health, unmarried women prove to be healthier than both married women and married men. An unmarried women's mental health compares favorably to that of a single man. In other words, if a man wanted to maintain his mental health he should get married. If a woman wants to maintain hers she should stay single. Working women married or not are, on the average mentally healthier than housewives (74). What happens to housewives that they become psychologically distressed? Perhaps it has something to do with her expectations of marriage.

When a young woman gets married she expects that she will fulfill her nature as a loving wife and mother. The reality is that housekeeping and child care are not in themselves creative, glamorous or self-fulfilling activities. Young children's schedules often require the mother to stay close to home. As she becomes isolated

from the main stream of society, a mother may find herself becoming increasingly dependent upon her husband for emotional and economic support. This sort of dependency is not psychologically healthy for women, the feminists discovered.

The feminist movement destroyed many of the traditional modes and mores from which young women previously took their cues. History for women is still being rewritten. Women are still very much in the process of re-defining their roles in American Society, especially the roles of wife and mother.

In this country there are still many myths about motherhood which we, as a society continue to sanctify and perpetuate. One of the important questions raised by the feminists concerning the nature of mothering asked of women needed to become mothers in order to be biologically fulfilled. According to the experts, there is no evidence that women need to become mothers in order to fulfill their biological destiny but there are tremendous social and cultural pressures for them to do so (76). The culturally accepted course of action for women to take in our society is to become a mother. This is a kind of peer pressure. For example, if the fashion trend is to wear short hair and wear long skirts, many women will follow the current mode. While some women may not choose to subject themselves to fashion trends, there is still pressure placed upon them to do so. It has been determined that a woman's desire to have children is socially developed and comes from her psychological state rather than her biological state (76).

Another absurd assumption of the pre-feminist movement held that since most women are biologically able to have children, they are psychologically equipped to raise them. However, cases of child abuse and neglect point out that mothering is not a natural or innate talent but one that is learned (77). The feminists have helped women to see motherhood more objectively. By destroying the "motherhood is bliss myth" women were free at last to break patterns of behavior which were in many ways self-destructive. Many of the early feminists blamed their mothers for the situation they now found themselves in. They felt angry and hurt, that mom had let them down. The feminists vowed to change the world of women, and in many ways they have succeeded in attaining their goals. But a look at our present generation of young females, the daughters of the daughters who have changed, makes me think that we, as women still have a ways to go in our relationships with our daughters.

We women are at present in a state of confusion as to the nature of our relationship with ourselves and our daughters. We have few role models and no new values to tell us how to survive. Statistics reveal alarming trends in suicide, violent crime and pregnancy among adolescent women (Chase 2).

Suicide:

1. 300,000 adolescent girls attempt suicide each year.
2. 40% of all successful suicides are committed by female adolescents.
3. The methods which females are using in their suicides are no longer passive, but parallel the more violent methods that adolescent males have chosen.

Crime:

1. Arrests for girls under 18 have risen 500% in the past 15 years for violent crimes.
2. Arrests for crimes committed with firearms has risen 400%.

Pregnancy:

1. 1,000,000 adolescent girls become pregnant each year.
2. 42% of all females will have been pregnant by age twenty if this current trend continues.
3. One quarter of this population will bear a child and keep it. Most of these young girls will leave school never to return. Programs of support for these young women and their children costs the federal government an estimated 20 billion dollars annually.
4. 13% of these girls will have had one or more abortions by age 20.

Clearly young women are having serious difficulties in adolescence. What has happened to the promise of the feminists, the change for the better? Are women better off today than they were thirty years ago? And what about their daughters, why are they having so much trouble in adolescence?

To be adolescent female in America today is to be on the edge of a new world full of opportunity or on the edge of vast confusion because what looks like freedom really is not. Often this freedom is just a compulsion to fulfill the offers of the new age. This puts young females in an impossible bind, one that is taking its toll. Our efforts to be superwoman in the classroom, bedroom, and boardroom is creating a pressurecooker situation for our daughters as they make their way to adulthood (Chase).

Today children are physically and emotionally being abandoned at a much earlier age than in past generations. Many parents are so concerned with their own issues that they cannot adequately nurture their own children. To make matters worse, we as a society do not like teenagers, yet paradoxically we are a culture who worships youth. If adult women try to look and act like their daughters, how can they effectively lead them?

Most young women think of feminism as some thing for ranting older women, They do not see it as a set of principles the way their mothers did. Although the old order was sexist and restrictive, the order of today is uncertain and at times too demanding. Moms want their daughters to be super kids, to be all that they were not. Daughters want their mothers to be Super Moms; they want mom to keep the home fires burning while accomplishing some thing for themselves. It seems that mother and daughter have in this recent generation created great expectations of not only themselves but each other.

Mothers and Daughters in Conflict

When people in any relationship have high expectations of each other there is likely to be tension, which if unresolved can lead to conflict. Conflict is a vital element in drama; it provides the energy necessary to move the action forward. It also serves as an attention getter; conflict absorbs us into the play and gives us a

dynamic role in the play experience.

Introduction to Feminine Issues

Adolescents have a strong sense of justice. It is not unusual to see them defend each other against the enemy (usually a cruel and unfeeling authority figure). I am sure that the following story will capture their interest. Once you have their attention, guide them in a discussion using the questions which follow:

(From an issue of Newsweek) In Korea, the year 1990 is the year of the horse, an event which occurs every twelve years. If a female child is born during this year, it is said that she will make a bad wife because females born during the year of the horse are unusually smart and confident. These qualities in a female are regarded as negative attributes in a wife by men. Today some pregnant mothers are choosing to abort their female fetuses rather than have them be born into this unlucky situation. The technology used to determine the health and development of the fetus also identifies the sex of the child. Some mothers, with the help of their doctors, are using this technology in an illegal and unethical manner. In fact the number of abortions has risen so sharply this year that the government has had to impose even stiffer penalties on those engaging in this illegal practice.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you find most disturbing about this story?
2. Do you think it is right for a pregnant woman to abort the fetus solely on the basis of sex?
3. Do you think that stupid, submissive women make better wives?
4. What is a good wife?
5. Do you think that pregnant women in New Haven would abort a fetus on the basis of its sex?
6. Do you think it would be hard to find a doctor in New Haven to perform such an abortion?
7. What qualities make a good mother?

The purpose of this discussion is to introduce students to the world of feminine issues. It is not important that students agree or reach any kind of conclusions about this one issue. What is necessary, is for them to be aware that there are feminine issues that need to be looked at.

The following exercise helps prepare the student for the scripted material used in the unit. It can be done as an in-class activity or as home work. The exercise is in the form of an interview which I have adapted from a book called *My Mother Before Me* by Julie Kettle Gundlach (315). The questions asked in the interview exercise concern the student's relationship to his/her mother. Inform your students that this activity is to be a personal learning experience. Assure them that no one will see their answers, not even you. Instruct students to answer all questions as fully and honestly as possible. They will probably not be able to answer many if they follow the norm. The objective of this exercise is to raise the consciousness level of the class regarding the subject of the

interview, Mom.

Who Was My Mother Before Me?

Childhood

1. What year was your mother born?
2. Where was your mother born?
3. What is her birth order? oldest, youngest, etc.?
4. Who was your mother's best friend when she was growing up? Her favorite relative?
5. Did she like school? What was her favorite subject?
6. What was her favorite toy? game? hobby? sport?
7. What were her fears as a child? How did she overcome them?
8. Did she like her mother? Did she like being a girl?
9. Who was her first boy friend? where did she go on her first date?
10. Did she like herself as a teenager?

Adulthood

1. Does your mother work outside the home? What does she do (what activities does she perform)?
2. What is her education?
3. How did she meet your father?
4. Where and when did they get married?
5. How many children did she want? How many boys? How many girls?
6. What did she like most about your dad when they married?
7. Do you think your mother is happy?
8. Does she have friends? What do they do when they go out together?
9. Are there things you wish she would express an interest in?
10. Do you have any regrets about your relationship with your mother? Would you change anything?
11. Does your mother like being a mother?
12. Does she give you advice about being a parent? any warnings?

13. Do you think your mother has had a strong influence in your life? How would you be different if you had not had the mother you had?
14. What kind of things have you learned from your mother?
15. Do you see your mother as a person, an individual with wants, dreams, and needs of her own?
16. What do you like most about your mother?
17. What does she value the most in life?
18. What is your mother proudest of?
19. What has been your mother's contribution to the world?
20. What does your mother want for your future? Does she treat the males in the family differently than the females? Does she want you (if you are a girl) to follow the example of her life, or does she want something different for you?

A Guide To Rehearsal And Performance

Most of my students like to work from scripts—they want to do 'real plays'. Therefore, I try to get them onto scripted material as quickly as possible. I begin by giving them a synopsis of the play. This gives them the necessary background before beginning scene work. I usually perform this task while passing out the scripts. The next step is to have students do a read-through of the script. Each student should participate in the first reading so that the teacher can assess their reading levels. Following the first read-through the group should complete an analysis of the script. This helps students understand the given circumstances of the scene. Script analysis reveals important information about the setting and plot. In addition we learn who the characters are and why they are important to the scene. Once students have reached this level of understanding they can then begin to create a role for the stage. Teachers can find a sample of the format I

use to guide my students in the process of script analysis and character profile in my last year's. This unit is titled 'Family Ties in Latin American Fiction,' pages 69-82. In addition, there is a synopsis of each play used in the unit.

The art of acting requires the actor to go beyond superficial appearances of characters and search for motivations, intentions and obstacles which lie within them. When answers are found as to what makes a character really tick then the actor is successful in creating a three dimensional character; one with a body, mind, and soul.

It is now time to cast and begin rehearsing the scenes. In order to help students become comfortable on stage, the first thing I do is give them a short lesson in stage geography. A graphic representation of a proscenium stage can be found on page 48 in the same unit referred to above. Students usually have no trouble in mastering this concept. However, I should warn you that there are a small percentage of students, I myself was one, who have spacial learning disabilities and cannot tell right from left. I always tell directors about this problem so they do not think I am ignorant of stupid. I usually have no difficulty compensating for this disability but on some occasions I cannot interpret oral directions so I have to be shown what is wanted. If I identify a student who also seems to be confused by oral directions that refer to space, I tell them that I have the same difficulty and always "show" instead of "tell" for them.

An activity which tests their comprehension of stage directions is the game 'Simon Says'. The teacher selects a Simon who must use stage directions in an effort to catch fellow students off guard:

Simon Says—hop stage right

Simon Says—hop down stage left

Simon Says—cross right

cross up left

This activity also gives students a chance to practice their newly learned skill in a relaxing manner.

Once students are comfortable with the stage as a space, I give them a physical warm-up exercise to get their bodies and voices ready for work. One I have success with is the game of Tag. I like it because most of my students are familiar with it and I do not have to take time to explain a new set of rules.

At this point the students are ready to begin work on constructing a scene. I start them in this process by only giving them a few lines to work with. This helps them to gain confidence and enjoy acting from the first day because they lose their fear of memorizing lines. Most of my students, even those who are not particularly good readers, are surprised at how quickly they master the lines, Once they are comfortable with the lines and the blocking they are usually eager for more. Before moving on I have students switch roles. This activity helps them to identify the motivations, intentions, conflicts and obstacles within a scene because they are forced to play a different point of view.

A note about conflict: I find that students usually have little trouble identifying the conflict in a scene, however, they often have difficulty expressing it if they are inexperienced actors. I use two activities to help students overcome this block. The first is tug-o-war (we use an imaginary rope). I split the class into two groups. I ask each group to select a captain whose duty it is to coach them during the competition. The coach says one word to encourage his team—pull. I act as umpire and official. I ask each team to make it real by

playing to win. This simple game allows students to feel the sensations associated with opposition, it arouses their energy, and gives them an opportunity to express emotions physically. The second game also requires two teams who form two lines facing each other with a one foot space between the two teams. Team 1 begins the game by saying “no” to the person directly opposite them in team 2. Team 2 members respond by saying “yes”. The verbal volley continues in this fashion for three minutes. By this time students are usually involved in a shouting match and are really yelling at each other. When the class has finished the game, rehearsal is then resumed.

When staging a scene in rehearsal the first thing the teacher-director does is give the student actors their blocking (movements on and off stage). The most important thing to remember when blocking is to make sure the actors are visible to the audience. I personally like to set the action downstage for young actors because they usually do not project their voices well. The other important aspect of blocking is to make sure that exits and entrances have a sense of architectural logic. Once the scene is blocked, then the focus of rehearsal is on the interaction of the characters on stage.

The director must have a clear idea of how he/she wants a scene to develop. It is important to know where the high point of the scene is. In a well written play it is not too difficult to ascertain where the action hits its peak. Usually it is where the conflict reaches the maximum point of opposition. The momentum of a scene most often progresses in a peak and valley pattern. There is a slow climb to the top, followed by a quicker descent. The last responsibility of a teaching director has to do with motivations, obstacles and intentions. Because young student actors do not have a great deal of life experience, the director helps the student discover what a character wants (intentions) in a scene, why he wants what he wants (motivation), and what gets in the way of satisfying his desires (obstacles). Once this is accomplished, students can give life to a scene. The rest of the process is just practicing until the scene can be performed with ease and confidence. In my classes we always end a unit with some kind of simple performance. I invite one or two classes from a lower grade to watch the production. A small audience is less intimidating for inexperienced performers.

Now that the sequence of the acting process has been discussed it is time to introduce the mothers and daughters who play the starring roles in this unit. There are copies of the scenes on file at the Teacher’s Institute for those teachers who want to use them in class.

The Women, by Clare Boothe Luce

The Women opened on Broadway on Dec. 26, 1936 and closed after a very successful run of 657 performances (*XI Sixteen Favorite American Plays*). The production was remarkable for two reasons. Prior to the 1970’s, very few plays written by women were actually staged for performance. In addition, this play was exceptional because it had a cast of thirty-five women and no men. Until very recently, most plays featured predominantly male roles. These male characters were as a rule, more fully developed than their female counterparts.

The Women is a comedy written in three acts. It offers its audience a female perspective of women from many stations in life. Despite its comic approach, the play is essentially a satirical commentary about the relationships of women. The central characters are a group of wealthy women who reside on New York’s ritzy Park Avenue. These socialites are supported in their roles on stage by maids, waitresses, shop attendants and other service oriented personnel. Although represent many different female stereotypes, they all have thing in common: an interest in men. The action of the play is moved forward by the ever changing status of their relationships (or lack of them) with men. The playwright uses infidelity and betrayal as a means of creating conflict between the characters. The vision of the women Boothe Luce has created in this work likens them to

jungle cats, who are often beautiful but none the less dangerous.

The protagonist in *The Women* is Mary Haines. As the curtain rises, the scene is her Park Avenue apartment where a Bridge game is in progress. When Mary leaves the room to answer a phone call, her friend Sylvia reveals to Edith (a fellow bridge chum) that Stephen Haines is cheating on his wife. Although Sylvia lives to gossip, she does not want to hurt Mary, so she and Edith decide to keep the matter secret.

In scene 2 one of the beauty salon girls lets the “cat out of the bag”. This event sets the play in motion and the dramatic tension begins to build. By scene 3, Mary knows the sordid details of her husband’s affair with Crystal Allen. As the play progresses, Mary divorces Stephen, Stephen marries Crystal, Crystal cheats on Stephen, Mary finds out and confronts Crystal, and in the end Mary wins back her man. By the end of the play Mary has become a more realistic about life. In the play she learns to aggressively pursue her man. Mary, at the end of the play, has learned how to survive in the jungle of life. I have selected scene 3 from Acts I and II as the material for use in the classroom.

Act 1, scene 3

The beginning of this scene finds Mary in her boudoir where she is awaiting a visit from her mother, Mrs. Moorehead. As the curtain rises Mary is discussing the business of the day first with her cook and then with the children’s nurse, Jane. Jane informs her that Little Mary has hit her brother, Little Stephen, quite hard. Jane exits as Little Mary enters. The high points of the scene are tender dialogues between mothers and daughters. First, Little Mary tells her mother why she hit her brother. He had been teasing her about the womanly changes in her adolescent body. Little Mary hates being a girl. Mary is touched by her daughter’s emotional pain. In an effort to console her daughter, Mary explains the real and special purpose of women in the world, which is to be mothers. Little Mary quietly accepts her mother’s explanation and exits to her room. Her conflict has been resolved. At this time Mrs. Moorehead enters. She and Mary discuss Stephen’s affair with Crystal Allen. Mrs. Moorehead advises her daughter to ignore the situation. She is certain that Stephen’s affair is just a temporary fling, one that many men engage in midlife. She suggests that the mother and daughter take a cruise for two months and give the affair time to burn itself out. The scene ends with Mary reluctantly agreeing to her mother’s plan. Although Mary’s conflict (what to do about Stephen’s infidelity) has not been completely resolved, a decision has been made by Mary to give the matter time. Mary realizes that she is not the first women, nor will she be the last, to face a problem of this sort.

Questions to Consider

1. Do you think that motherhood fulfills a women’s biological nature? her psychological nature?
2. Do you think that all women should have children? Why?
3. Do you think that Mary’s explanation to Little Mary was accurate?
4. Do you think Mrs. Moorehead’s advice to Mary was sound? If you do not then what would you have advised her to do?
5. If you are a girl, would you rather be a boy? Why? If you are a boy, would you rather be a boy?

Act II, scene 3

In the later part of this scene Mary tells Little Mary that she is divorcing her father. Although divorce is now a common event in American society, its impact upon the children in the family is still very emotionally disruptive. Relationships between family members become strained as the security of familiar family patterns are dissolved. In this scene students have an opportunity to explore the realm of divorce and its impact upon the Mother/Daughter relationship.

Questions for Consideration

1. Is it necessary for Mary to apologize to little Mary because she is divorcing her father ? Does she need to be forgiven?
2. Do you think it is better for children to live with mother when parents divorce? Why?
3. Do you think the relationship of Mary to little Mary will change once the divorce occurs? Why?
4. How do you think Mary will support herself after the divorce? How do most women support themselves and their children after divorce?

A RAISIN IN THE SUN, by Lorraine Hansberry

According to Margaret B. Wilkerson, Lorraine Hansberry's *A RAISIN IN THE SUN* has attained the status of American classic. Its enduring appeal to audiences throughout the country is due to several factors: it has a solid text; it was brilliantly cast in the original production; and its warm and positive reception on Broadway during the 1958-59 season subsequently impacted on a new generation of artists (119). The play explores the frustrations of a working-class black family struggling to survive in Chicago's South Side Ghetto during the 1950's. Lena Younger (Mama) has received \$10,000.00 as beneficiary of her deceased husband. Each family member regards this money as a means of fulfilling a private dream. Although the conflict is sharpest between the dual protagonists of the play, Mama and her thirty-five year-old son, Walter Lee, there is at the end of act I scene one, a very dramatic moment between mother and daughter. Mama Younger finds her authority and values challenged by her nineteen-year-old daughter, Beneatha (121).

Mama represents the old order. She is a woman of courage and spiritual strength; one who is prepared to defend her traditional Christian beliefs. Beneatha, the daughter of the scientific age, rejects her mother's religious philosophy. She worships the god Technology.

Prior to Beneatha's entrance in this part of the scene, Mama and Ruth (Walter's wife) have been sharing memories and dreams. Their mood is quiet and reflective. With Beneatha's entrance the pace of the scene changes. She is not in a good mood. Unthinkingly Beneatha refers to God in an irreverent manner which upsets Mama. Although the subject is changed, the dialogue is now tense, sentences are short and somewhat curt. The conversation takes on a thrust and parry quality as the women discuss Beneatha's plans for her future.

Beneatha's dream is to be a doctor. This is a dream to which Mama gives her approval. When Mama subjects

her approval to the will of God, this makes the already agitated Beneatha furious. Beneatha rejects the will of god as a factor in her life. Mama and Beneatha clash in a conflict of values.

In order to give dramatic strength and structure to this interpretation of the script, it is important to consider the placement of the characters on the stage. The diagram below indicates the sequence of events in the scene as well as the pace and build of the scene.

(figure available in print form)

KEY

SR stage right SL stage left CS center stage

US up stage DS down stage

1. Mama seated CS, Beneatha seated CSL, Ruth standing DSL. Thrust and parry conversation, builds to climax.
2. Mama stands DSC, Beneatha stands just right of CS. Mother/daughter confrontation, climax of scene.
3. Beneatha seated on couch USR, Ruth seated on ottoman USR. Action falls, move to acceptance and reconciliation of events.
4. Ruth seated USL at table, Mama seated CS at table. Falling action, movement toward acceptance and insight.

As indicated in the diagram, Mama and Beneatha are blocked on a horizontal line (1). Although the script indicates that Mama rises and crosses to Beneatha, I think this weakens my interpretation of the script. Therefore, I have Beneatha rise and cross to her mother as a direct challenge to her mother's philosophical position (2). Beneatha intends to unload her anger and then exit to the bedroom. However, Mama recovers quickly from the verbal assault and physically blocks her daughter's exit. Mama shakes her daughter into submission, then quickly retreats to the safety of her bedroom. Beneatha then crosses up stage right and sits on the couch, Ruth crosses and tries to comfort the shaken young woman (3). In her discussion with her sister-in-law, Beneatha has her moment of recognition. She realizes that she still needs her mother and is not yet prepared to face the world on her own. She gathers her books and leaves for school. Ruth rises from the couch and crosses to the stage right bedroom door, asking Mama to come and talk. As Mama re-enters, her posture is somewhat less erect, her gait less quick. Both women cross to the family dining table and sit(4). Although Mama has won the battle with her daughter, she recognizes the difference in their value systems, which frightens her. She seeks solace by asking her daughter-in-law to sing her a spiritual song, one which will soothe her troubled soul.

Questions for Consideration

1. What is a conflict of values?

2. Do you ever clash with your mother in such a conflict? If so, What are the issues involved.
3. What does Beneatha want in this scene? Does she get what she wants?
4. Do you seek your mother's support and approval?
5. How do you feel when she does not give it to you?

LETTERS HOME

Sylvia Plath was a brilliant poet who ended her own life in 1963 at the age of 30. *Letters Home* is a play by Rose Leiman Goldemberg, which dramatizes her life. During the course of her life, Sylvia wrote over 600 letters to her family. After Sylvia's death, her mother, Aurelia Schober Plath, published many of these letters, adding brief comments of her own. Every word in the play is taken from this book. This work is important to this unit because it is very close to being a non-fictional representation of a mother/daughter relationship. Yet, it still retains the dramatic form of a play.

The play was written, produced and staged in 1979 as part of the Women's Project at the American Place Theater. The Women's Project was conceived by Julia Miles. Her intention was to create a nurturing environment for women in theater, especially playwrights and directors. She recognized that women needed plays written by themselves in which they could see themselves. *Letters Home* is such a play.

As the play opens Aurelia is in a place with her grief where she can emotionally afford to share the experience of her daughter's suicide with others. The first act of the play contains letters written by Sylvia during her first two years at Smith College. The sequence of these letters is interrupted by accounts of Aurelia's early years. As she tells us, Sylvia often fused the mother and daughter together in her prose and poetry. This fusion of mother and daughter into one makes it necessary to have knowledge of the mother, if one is to fully understand and appreciate the life and work of the poet daughter. In the early moments of the play we learn that both Sylvia and her mother, as young women, shared a common passion for reading. Both were obsessed with literature during adolescence. It is the first of many instances where we see the daughter as a reflection of her mother's past.

As the first act continues we discover that, as a young woman, Aurelia gave up her career as an English teacher to become a full time home-maker at the request of her husband, Otto Plath. He was a college professor and much older than she. During their marriage Otto dominated every aspect of Aurelia's life. This dominance of Aurelia ended abruptly however, when Sylvia was eight. Otto Plath died from complications of diabetes. It was an unnecessary death, one caused by his stubborn refusal to get medical attention during the onset of his illness.

When Aurelia tells Sylvia of her father's death, Sylvia vows never again to speak to God. The death of her father changed the happy course of Sylvia's childhood. This event marked the beginning of a life in which she would experience feeling of great despair. For ever after, Sylvia's emotions would continue to seesaw, wildly out of balance.

Although Sylvia was academically successful during her first two years at Smith, she was plagued by self-

doubt. During the summer, between her sophomore and junior year, Sylvia became severely depressed. Despite psychiatric help, she declined to the point where she attempted suicide by over-dosing on sleeping pills. As the first act ends, Sylvia is in a private psychiatric hospital, undergoing shock therapy.

Act two opens with Sylvia back at school in the fall term of her junior year. Although Sylvia seems happy, Aurelia continues to be concerned about her daughter's mental stability. That spring Aurelia suffers with stomach problems for which she is hospitalized. Sylvia graduates from Smith with honors—wins a Fulbright, and goes happily off to England.

In her first letter home Sylvia writes of her concern about being a single woman. She feels she can not return home unless she is married. By the time her second letter arrives home, she has met the man who is to be her husband. She falls deeply and happily in love with Ted Hughes. He is also a brilliant poet. Sylvia goes to Europe to witness their marriage. The happy couple honeymoon in Spain.

Sylvia shares the dreams for her marriage with her mother in her third letter home. Sylvia envisions their wedded life as being filled with joint projects including travel, writing, learning, teaching and having many babies. As Aurelia reads the letter, she is reminded of her own past and remarks on Sylvia's need to cater to men of any age. Once again the daughter seems to be following the same path as her mother's past.

As act II progresses Sylvia adopts a secondary position role in her marriage, much the same as her mother had. Like her mom, Sylvia first bears a daughter and then a son. Sylvia writes less during this time as the growing needs of family life demand much of her attention. Her husband's career flourishes. Shortly after the birth of her son Sylvia discovers that her husband has been seeing another woman. Feeling betrayed and abandoned, she vows in anger never to speak to God. The seesaw once again shifts suddenly from the up position to the down.

Sylvia tries very hard to push herself up from the bottom of her despair. She begins writing again. But endless economic, emotional and family pressures keep her in a state of emotional exhaustion. During this time Aurelia tries to support Sylvia by sending money and gifts. Sylvia requests that her mother not come to Europe—she wants to make it on her own. When Sylvia takes her own life, it is Aurelia's turn to be angry with God. In the closing moments of the play, Aurelia comes to understand that she and Sylvia have both done their best with life. Although Sylvia's life is over, Aurelia knows she will go on living.

When thinking of this play from a director's perspective, it is important to have an understanding of its non-traditional dramatic structure. Traditional dramatic structure is the Aristotelian model which calls for complication (a series of rising actions that build toward a climax and create suspense in the spectator); recognition or climax (a turning point in the protagonist's journey); and a denouement or unravelling (this follows the protagonist's descent from the turning point to his demise) (Vena 81). These characteristics are representative of male physicality and are alien to many who support a feminist aesthetic (97). Feminist theater is a thematic response to the sociological and psychological issues that pertain to the welfare of women (98).

Letters Home can be likened in many ways to Shange's play *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enough*. Both have a structure that responds to the needs of the playwrights as women. The language of the plays reflects the interior lives of its female characters. Finally the plays explore a powerful theme—the instinct for survival. This aspect gives the plays a universal appeal while addressing a specific female audience (98).

Like Shange's play, *Letters Home* requires very few scenic elements: two stools and a small bench are all that's needed. Each of the two women, Aurelia and Sylvia, require their own space for their respective journeys. The diagram below set a basic stage picture, triangular in shape.

(figure available in print form)

The bench is the apex of the triangle, the point where the two women meet when experiencing moments of closeness or concern. However, mother and daughter never violate the up stage space of the other. In order to work with this play, I think it is best if the teacher reads the entire work and then chooses the moments he/she wishes to stage. *Letters Home* is not divided into scenes. I have grouped the events of the play into three categories: youth and marriage, career, and death. The questions which follow ask about the impact of these events upon Sylvia and Aurelia.

After students and teacher have read the synopsis of the play, segments from the play can be read in class and discussed using the appropriate questions from the unit.

Youth and Marriage

1. What interests did mother and daughter share as teenagers? How were they different?
2. How were the marriages of Aurelia and Sylvia similar?
3. Was marriage a satisfying experience to either?

Death

1. What impact did the death of Otto Plath have on Aurelia? On Sylvia?
2. What is the difference between the death of a parent and the death of a spouse?
3. Is the loss of a spouse by divorce similar to the loss of a spouse by death?
4. Why did Sylvia kill herself?

Career

1. Consider the fact that both Aurelia and Sylvia were brilliant women. Why then did they both choose to put family life ahead of their careers?
2. Do you think this was a wise decision? Why or why not?

Ma Rose, by Cassandra Medley

Ma Rose is a play which gives its audience an intimate view of a black midwestern family. Much of the play's action involves an emotional tug-o-war between three generations of mothers and daughters. The central issue of the play is what to do with Ma Rose, the aged and senile matriarch of the family (V *Womens Work*). The drama depicts a conflict of values between a new generation, upwardly mobile black woman and her tradition bound family.

The play presents us with three generations of women tied together by the bond of the mother\daughter relationship. There is the aged and senile grandmother, Ma Rose, her daughter Vera, who has recently been feeling the effects of the aging process herself, and Vera's daughter Rosa, the successful young black business woman. Each of these women feels somewhat resentful of the duties and responsibilities imposed by the traditional mother\daughter relationship. Much of the conflict in the play is the direct result of each individual woman's struggle for autonomy.

For the purpose of this unit we will take a closer look at Act II, scene 1. *Ma Rose* is a non-realistic drama much like *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams. The play is set both in the past and the present. Much of what transpires on stage is memories. Memories are distortions of reality, some of the details are missing, others are influenced by the emotional charge given by their owner. There is a certain fuzzy quality about memories which can be dramatized by the use of dim light. Scenes which take place in the present should be more brightly lit.

Act II, scene 1 begins in the present. A spotlight comes up on Rosa who is sitting on a bed (a simple platform). Slowly the lights come up on a separate area of the stage (up stage right) and we are back in the past in Rosa's mind. The faint sound of gulls and gentle lapping of waves can be heard. Ma Rose enters, she is young again. She calls out to Vera to join her for a swim (down stage right). Vera enters and is frightened; Ma Rose calms her daughter, asks Vera to hold on to her hand, and trust her. Vera beckons to Rosa to join them at the water's edge to hold on, to trust. A hopeful smile appears on Rosa's face just as she begins to rise the lights fade quickly. The memory has come to an end.

Vera silently joins Rosa on the bed. Once again we are in the present. Rosa and Vera enter into a dialogue about Ma Rose and home. Rosa, trusting the moment, asks Vera for a more adult relationship, However, Vera spurns Rosa's advances. She ignores or rejects Rosa's attempts at closeness. Vera is emotionally unable to give her daughter what she needs. At the end of the scene, the status quo of this mother/daughter relationship has been maintained. Vera holds onto her authoritarian position of parent. Rosa is still her mother's child.

Questions to Consider

1. How does a daughter, as she grows into her own womanhood, become independent of her mother?
2. Are there questions about your past that you would like to ask your mother?
3. Are women today happier and freer than their mothers?
4. Are the issues of today's women different than those of their mother's generation? In what ways are they different? alike?
5. Are the choices women face today more complex than in previous generations? If yes, then state how.

The core of this unit is finished. Some of the issues and concerns of the feminist movement have been presented. Methods for teaching the unit have been discussed. Connections between the dramatic material and the feminist movement have been established. All that is left to do is to bring the material into the classroom where students can interact with it. The sharing of knowledge is, after all, a teacher's ultimate objective in creating a curriculum unit like this.

You may have noticed the scenes I've discussed do not have any men in them. This was intentional. In this unit I've engaged in a little affirmative action of my own. The ratio of girls to boys in my classes is about nine to one. Before I can teach them anything, students must feel that they are worthy of learning. The boys as a rule have much higher self-esteem than the girls.

This unit is for all the girls in my classes. Our society has a bad habit of disregarding the needs of women—we do it automatically. Hopefully this unit will raise the consciousness level of the students in my classes so that they begin to think differently about women in America. Two of the plays in this unit have roles for males. Scenes from *Ma Rose* and *A Raisin in the Sun* are on file at the Teacher's Institute.

STUDENT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cerfand, Cartmell. *Sixteen Famous American Plays* . New York: Garden City Publishing, 1941.

The wonderful thing about this collection of plays is, they are all appropriate for classroom use. In addition these plays are now all considered to be classics. The play *The Women* is found in this anthology.

Gundlach, Julie Kettle. *My Mother before Me* . Secaucus, N.J.: Lyle Stuart, 1986.

Who was my mother before she had me? What kind of person was she? These are questions Ms. Gundlach never got to ask her mother. She died before Ms. Gundlach got the chance. This book is a tribute to her mother. It tells the story of generations of mothers and daughters. This collection of first hand accounts by daughters of their mothers is more than sentimental remembrances. It positively connects one generation to the next. I plan to use excerpts from this book in my class next year. It provides excellent background material for this unit.

Seto, Judith Roberts. *The Young Actors Workbook* . New York: Grove Press, 1984.

A must for the serious young actor. This book not only contains scenes which are suitable for younger actors, it provides a step by step account of how to build each character.

Vena, Gary, Ph.D. *How To Read And Write About Drama*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1988.

An easy to read textbook for the serious student of drama who wants an overview of all the important elements of theater. This book includes chapters on stage history, the patterns and dynamics of stage characters, and dramatic structures.

TEACHERS BIBLIOGRAPHY

Case, Sue-Ellen. *Performing Feminisms* . Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990.

This is the most current publication of feminist critical theory and theory. I found Glenda Dickerson's paper, *The Cult of True Womanhood: Toward a Womanist Attitude in African-American Theater* to offer a Cross-cultural discussion of women in theater. I also used Margaret Wikerson's, *A Raisin in the Sun: Anniversary of an American Classic* in the writing of this unit.

Chase, Janet. *Daughters of Change: Growing Up Female In America* . Boston: Little, Brown, 1981.

This book begins by questioning the status of adolescent females in America. It goes on to answer the questions it poses by offering us an explanation of what has happened to women since the feminist movement.

Deckard, Barbara Sinclair. *The Women's Movement* . Harper and Row, 1983.

This textbook offers insight to socioeconomic and psychological issues of the women's movement. It traces the history of discrimination towards women from the beginnings of recorded history to the present.

Jacobus, Lee A. *The Longman Anthology of American Drama* . New York: Longman Inc, 1982

This collection of 22 plays includes works written as early as 1787. It offers a comprehensive over-view of drama from the beginning days of our nationhood. Lorraine Hansberry's, *A Raisin in the Sun* can be found in this Anthology.

Miles, Julia. *The Women's Project* . New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1980.

The *Women's Project* is a collection of seven plays by women. *Letters Home* is included in this anthology. While not all the plays in this book are appropriate for the classroom, they are very colorful portraits of women in relationships.

Miles Julia. *Womens Work: Five New Plays from the Women's Project* . New York: Applause Theater Book Publishers, 1989.

This collection of new plays voices the efforts of women to take their place in the world of theater. Although the plays tell different stories, they have a common interest: that of the personal voice in the midst of large public issues. The play *Ma Rose* is found in this collection.

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