

Activity Plan

<i>Title</i>	Fractured Families in American Drama: Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, by Tennessee Williams, and Long Day's Journey into Night, by Eugene O'Neill
<i>Subject</i>	Theatre: Responding
<i>Author</i>	ArtsEdge: Jayne Karsten <i>Original Writer</i> Jen Westmoreland Bouchard <i>Adaptation</i>
<i>Grade level</i>	Grades 9-12
<i>Time duration</i>	60-120 mins
<i>Overview</i>	The complicated dynamics of families have served as a continual source of examination for American playwrights. Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, by Tennessee Williams, and Long Day's Journey into Night, by Eugene O'Neill are two haunting and compelling masterpieces that explore the tension, tragedy, heartbreak, and love within flawed and fractured families.
<i>Objective</i>	Students will: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Probe possible causes of breakdown in relationships within families.• Collect biographical data on the lives of two of America's most valued playwrights.• Exercise oral play-reading skills.• Explore the nature of modern tragedy and modern concepts of the "heroic."• Add range to their understanding of ways dramatic force is achieved through structural patterns, diction, tone quality, rhythms of syntax, and pace of dialogue.• appreciate the value of the playwright's stage performance directions.

<p><i>Materials</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience growth in the writing process, skills of research, collaboration, oral presentation, contextual and comparative analysis. • Experience and appreciate the work of two of America’s most valued playwrights. <p>Materials</p> <p>Resources</p> <p>Printable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bio - Arthur Miller • Bio - Eugene O'Neill • Bio - Tennessee Williams • Essay Topics - Fractured Families
<p><i>Activities and procedures</i></p>	<p>ENGAGE</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have students read and discuss the biographical Information handouts of Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill, and Arthur Miller located under 'Resources in Reach'. 2. Ask students to respond to the following question: In your perception, what are some of the major causes that can build tensions in and contribute to the breakdown of interrelationships within a family? Record your thinking in a free form mode (jot list, vignette of informal prose). The response will not be handed in. 3. After giving students about 10 or 15 minutes to respond, engage them in making a master list on the board. If the following causes are not generated by student contributions, consider adding them to the list: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of honest communication • Addiction (alcohol, drugs, gambling, etc.) • Obsession • Different outlooks on religion, politics, or people • The lack of fulfillment or erosion of expectations • Jealousy • Personality clashes • Distrust • Irrationality • Guilt • Prejudices • Illness—physical and/or psychological

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- Divergent interests
 - Financial concerns
 - Problems related to inheritance of money/property

BUILD KNOWLEDGE

1. Have the students read, either silently or in a series of oral readings, Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*. The reading of the plays could also be assigned as homework.

2. Assign students one of the [Essay Topics](#) located on the handout that can be found above under Resources in Reach. Distribute and read through the Essay Topics handout and have students choose one of the assignments to complete.

APPLY

1. Review with students the events in the first acts of both plays. Ask them to list the sources and nature of tension in each family, as well as those of each individual family member.

2. Review the following list of personality types, and ask students to match characters in each play to each "type." Which character would they match to each of the following behavioral designations?

- Enabler
- Negotiator
- Victim
- Facilitator
- Oppressor
- Appeaser

3. Ask students whether they find the matching difficult. If so, why? (*A probable answer is that the characters seem to shift in and out of these designations in their conversations with each other, contributing to the complexity of each playwright's attempt to capture the family tensions and relationships in the play.*)

4. To further probe the tensions and conflicts between individuals in each play, point out to students that toward the end of Act Two of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Tennessee Williams interrupts the dialogue to explain how he wants the scene to be played. The interruption also includes a compelling editorial comment on what he strives to achieve in the play: "The bird that I hope to catch in the net of this play is not the solution of one man's psychological problem. I'm trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people, that cloudy, flickering, evanescent – fiercely charged! – interplay of live human beings in the thunderstorm of a common crisis."

In his "Person- to-Person" prologue to the play, Williams cites a line from his play *Orpheus Descending*: "We're all of us sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins." Williams says that this line helps explain the difficulty of capturing the "truth" and "honesty" of "interplay" in human communication.

5. Using the above quotes by Williams, initiate comparative critiques of O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* and Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Discussion questions/topics could cover the following subjects:

- Which playwright, overall, is more successful in capturing the "truth" and "honesty" of the "interplay" of communication in the two families facing crisis situations?
- Identify specific aspects of a specific scene that is especially powerful in its capturing of "honesty" in the "interplay" of communication. Include an examination of tone quality (charged, sarcastic, soothing, nuanced, candid, etc.) diction, directions for body language, rhythm of lines spoken by individual characters, and pace of dialogue.
- Have students act out, extemporaneously, a vignette of a hypothetical brisk exchange between or among family members. Have other students critique the performance from the point of view of its verisimilitude.
- Compare father-son and/or mother-son relationships as defined in specific scenes in the two plays. (Note that this study could be expanded to include father/son and/or mother/son scenes from another "fractured" family play— Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.)

6. Discuss the nature of tragedy. Arthur Miller, in his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man," asserts that there is a prevailing idea that "tragedy is of necessity allied to pessimism." He counters this idea with the argument "that in truth tragedy implies more optimism than comedy, and that its final result ought to be the reinforcement of the onlooker's brightest opinion of the human animal."

7. Initiate a large group discussion in which students share opinions about whether or not O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* and Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* qualify as "tragedies" according to Miller's requirements of optimism and final result. Encourage students to probe modern definitions of nobility, courage, the anti-hero, and the heroic in examining the two plays. Do the family dynamics contribute to or detract from the tragic nature of the play?

Conclusions

REFLECT

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1. Review the master list of causes of relationship breakdowns within families that students created earlier in the lesson.
 2. Have students select one of the “causes” as the thematic center for sketching out a design for a one-act or longer playwriting script. A follow-up could be the full development of only one scene or act, or of a complete dramatic script.
 3. Students will then perform their scenes or acts with the class. (Another option would be to discuss them).

ASSESSMENT

Assess the students' performance based upon the following criteria:

- Level of serious and cooperative participation.
- Substantive contributions to class discussion and special projects.
- Range and depth in analysis.
- Evidence of creative thinking.
- Thoughtful response in pre-writing, pre-discussion “brainstorming” activities.
- Seriousness of purpose in following through on creative and expository writing assignments.
- Solid preparation for performance activities.
- Alignment of written performance with good practices of the writing process.
- General level of engagement in all activities and assignments.

Adaptations

Extend the Learning

Have students research the lives of Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams and discuss whether aspects of their autobiographies resonate within their plays.

Links and Websites

Teacher Background

Note: This lesson explores the complicated dynamics of families, as portrayed in American drama. Exploring this topic with students will require a heightened sensitivity to family issues faced by your students.

Teachers should familiarize themselves with O'Neill and William's work using these sources:

- *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, by Tennessee Williams, and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, by Eugene O'Neill
 - [eOneill.com](http://eoneill.com)
 - [Great Performances: Long Day's Journey into Night](#)
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- [PBS American Masters: Tennessee Williams](#)
 - [The Tennessee Williams Annual Review](#)

Prior Student Knowledge

- Students should be aware of who O'Neill and Williams were and the types of plays they wrote.