

# Theater as Literature: The One-Act Play

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Edward Friedman

The course will focus on the analysis of dramatic works, with the reading and discussion of one-act plays. In certain respects, the reading of a play transforms the reader into a type of director, who can imagine inflection of the lines and a staging of the work. The course will be virtual and limited in the number of participants, so that the class sessions will be open—fittingly—to dialogue. The plays will include selections by August Strindberg, Anton Chekhov, Ferenc Molnar, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Louise Bryant, Arnold Bennett, Susan Glaspell, Alice Gerstenberg, Joseph Shipley, and others. Participants will receive files with copies of the playtexts and “points to consider.” The readings will average around 45 pages (14-point font) per session.



Edward Friedman is Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor in the Humanities, Emeritus, at Vanderbilt University, where he taught Spanish literature and comparative literature and served as director of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities. His courses in the Osher program have focused on the short story and *Don Quixote*.

## **SCHEDULE**

### **Session 1**

Introduction

Ferenc Molnar, "A Matter of Husbands"

Joseph T. Shipley, "Echo"

### **Session 2**

Alice Gerstenberg, "Overtones" and "He Said and She Said"

Colin Campbell Clements, "Yesterday"

### **Session 3**

Susan Glaspell, "Trifles"

David Pinski, "A Dollar"

Alice Dunbar Nelson, "Mine Eyes Have Seen"

### **Session 4**

Anton Chekhov, "The Boor," "The Proposal"

Arnold Bennett, "The Stepmother"

### **Session 5**

August Strindberg, "Pariah, or the Outcast," "The Stronger," "Debit and Credit"

### **Session 6**

Louise Bryant, "The Game"

Eric Coble and Darius Stubbs, "The Talk"

Amy Evans, "Incident at 57<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>"

D. M. Larson, "Pity the Fool"

Neith Boyce and Hutchins Hapgood, "Enemies"

Synthesis and Conclusions



## THE PLAYWRIGHTS

**Ferenc Molnar** (1878-1952) was a Hungarian-born writer of plays and novels. He became a U.S. citizen. His 1909 play *Liliom* was turned into the Rodgers and Hammerstein 1945 musical *Carousel*. Among other well-known plays is *The Swan*.

**Joseph T. Shipley** (1893-1988) was a drama critic, professor, and playwright. His writing on topics in drama was prolific.

**Alice Gerstenberg** (1885-1972) was a playwright, actress, and proponent of feminism. She was active in theater production in Chicago.

**Colin Campbell Clements** (1894-1948) was a Nebraska-born playwright and Broadway actor. His play *Harriet*—about Harriet Beecher Stowe—played on Broadway with Helen Hayes in the title role.

**Susan Glaspell** (1876-1948) was a playwright, novelist, journalist, and actress. With her husband George Cook, she founded the Provincetown Players, a theater company that helped to promote the plays of Eugene O'Neill and others.

**David Pinski** (1872-1959) was born in modern-day Belarus. He studied in Europe and the U.S. The major part of his work was written in Yiddish. He lived in Vienna, Warsaw, Berlin, and New York, where he studied at Columbia University. He was an active Zionist, and in 1949 he emigrated to the new state of Israel.

**Alice Dunbar Nelson** (1875-1935) was an African American poet, short story writer, dramatist, journalist, and political activist associated with the Harlem

Renaissance. In her literary works, she treated serious (and controversial) social issues.

**Anton Chekhov** (1860-1904) was an internationally acclaimed Russian playwright and short story writer. His most studied and lauded plays include *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*, and *The Seagull*.

**Arnold Bennett** (1867-1931) was a British novelist, short story writer, and literary critic. He kept a massive journal. His novels, more popular than his ventures into theater (but not outright successes) include *Anna of the Five Towns* and *The Grand Babylon Hotel*.

**August Strindberg** (1849-1912) was a Swedish writer who is considered, with Henrik Ibsen, of Norway, the founder of modern drama, or dramatic realism. Among his most famous plays are *The Father* and *Miss Julie*. Ibsen and Strindberg are credited with bringing daring social issues to the stage.

**Louise Bryant** (1885-1936) was an American political activist, feminist, journalist, and writer. She is noted for her support of the Bolshevik cause during the Russian Revolution of 1917.

**Eric Coble and Darius Stubbs.** Eric Coble is a playwright and screenwriter. He is a member of the Playwrights' Unit of the Cleveland Play House. He was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, and raised on the Navajo and Ute reservations in New Mexico and Colorado. Coble's play *The Velocity of Autumn* premiered on Broadway in 2014, starring Estelle Parsons and Stephen Spinella. Estelle Parsons received a Tony Award nomination. Darius Stubbs is a poet, playwright, performer, educator, and transgender advocate who has been living and working in Cleveland since 2006.

**Amy Evans** is a writer and educator based in Brooklyn, New York. Her plays include *The Champion*, *Achidi J's Final Hours*, *Many Men's Wife*, *The Next Question*, *The Big Nickel*, *The Most Unsatisfied Town*, and *English-Free Zone*.

**D. M. Larson** is an award-winning playwright, film writer, and producer. He founded the website [freedrama.com](http://freedrama.com), which provides free plays to schools and community groups.

**Neith Boyce** (1872-1951) was a novelist, journalist, and theater artist. She was married to **Hutchins Hapgood** (1869-1944), a journalist, educator, and author. They were associated with the Provincetown Players.

## POINTS TO CONSIDER

1. What constitutes the action (the forward movement) of the play?
2. With what topic(s) does the play deal?
3. How can one describe the dialogue of the play? Is language direct (natural, realistic) or figurative (stylized)?
4. How does the playwright treat characterization?
5. Is the play comic, serious, or a combination of the two?
6. Is irony a feature of the play?
7. Does the play have a moral or a particular message?
8. What do you consider to be the most significant aspects of the play?
9. On what elements might you focus as a director of the play?
10. Would you give the play—as a literary text—a strong, weak, or in-the-middle review? On what facets of the work do you base the final assessment?