



The Year of Magical Thinking

by **Joan Didion** | starring **Seana McKenna**

A Belfry Theatre Production

DIRECTOR
Michael Shamata

SET & COSTUME DESIGNER
John Ferguson

LIGHTING DESIGNER
Michael Walton

COMPOSER
Brad L'Écuyer

STAGE MANAGER
Anne Murphy

Tarragon's Education and Outreach department supports and fosters a strong relationship between, teachers, students and professional theatre artists. If there is further information that you would like about the production or more ideas about pre-show and post-show activities, please don't hesitate to contact us.

We are very pleased to be presenting the Toronto Premiere of *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

In this study guide you will gain a further understanding of what has gone into creating this production, as well as information and questions to apply to discussions and activities with your class.

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The Year of Magical Thinking

by **Joan Didion**

You might think you'll be seeing it straight but you won't.

A couple arrive home to their apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. It has been a difficult day. They decide to eat in that evening. She builds a fire and begins to prepare dinner.

I was at the table, making a salad. He was sitting across from me, talking. Either he was talking about . . . World War One. . . or he was talking about the scotch, I have no idea which.

Then he wasn't. Wasn't talking.

In an instant, life as she knows it ends. Her husband is rushed to the hospital – their second hospital of the day. Earlier, they visited their only child in intensive care. Now, as she struggles to imagine how she will care for them both – husband and daughter – she meets her husband's doctor who delivers the worst possible news. Once she returns home and friends and colleagues begin to call, she makes a secret decision that will shape the next year of her life:

Let me make myself clear. Of course I knew he was dead. Of course I have already delivered the definitive news to The New York Times and the Los Angeles Times. Yet I was myself in no way prepared to accept this news as final. . .

That was why I needed to be alone.

I needed to be alone so that he could come back.

That was the beginning of my year of magical thinking.

The Year of Magical Thinking, adapted for the stage by Joan Didion from her best-selling memoir of the same name, chronicles Didion's survival of the month of December 2003, when her daughter Quintana Roo suddenly went into a coma and her husband, John Gregory Dunne, died in front of her due to a massive coronary. It won the National Book Award in November 2005 and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award as well as the Pulitzer Prize for Biography/Autobiography

The *Year of Magical Thinking* Study Guide was written and contributed to by:

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ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



Joan Didion was born in Sacramento California and earned her BA degree from the University of California at Berkeley. She has written five novels, eight works of nonfiction, and seven screenplays with her late husband John Gregory Dunne, including the screen adaptation of her novel *Play It As It Lays* and *Up Close & Personal*.

After landing her job at *Vogue* right out of college, Didion worked her way up from promotional copywriter to associate feature editor, remaining there for two years. While at the magazine, she wrote her first novel, *Run, River*, which was published in 1963. A few years after returning to California with her new husband, John Gregory Dunne, Didion published *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* in 1968, her first work of non-fiction.

She is a contributor to various periodicals, most frequently *The New York Review of Books*, which published in serial parts both "Salvador" and "Miami".

Didion began writing *The Year of Magical Thinking* on October 4, 2004, and finished 88 days later on New Year's Eve. She went on a book tour following the release of this memoir, doing many readings and interviews to promote it. She has said that she found the process very "therapeutic" during her period of mourning.

In 2007, she began working on a one-woman adaptation of *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Produced by Scott Rudin, this Broadway play featured Vanessa Redgrave. Although at first she was hesitant about the idea of writing a play, she has since found the new genre to be quite exciting. *The Year of Magical Thinking* was first produced at the Booth Theatre in New York on March 29th 2007.

Didion is a member of the American Academy of Arts & Letters, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, The Berkeley Fellows, and Council on Foreign Relations. Awarded the 1996 Edward MacDowell Medal, 1999 Columbia Journalism Award, 2002 George Polk Book Award, 2005 American Academy of Arts & Letters Gold Medal in Criticism & Belles Lettres; 2005 National Book Award for Nonfiction; and 2007 National Book Award for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.

In 2011, Knopf will publish a new memoir about aging by Joan Didion called *Blue Nights*.

Magic is based on a unique type of consciousness:
the awareness of the interrelatedness of all things in the world
by means of simple but refined sense perception.

- *The End of Magic* by Ariel Glucklich

The word “magic” conjures up a plethora of meanings. It can refer to a magician’s trick – an elegant sleight of hand or a complex optical illusion – or the realm of the supernatural, where symbols, rituals, and incantations have the power to sway one’s destiny. However, perhaps the most widely practiced form of magic is one that human beings engage in from day to day – often without realizing it.

Magical thinking begins when we are very young. In *Imagining the Impossible*, Karl S. Rosengren and Anne K. Hickling observe that children, particularly from the age of 3½ to 6½ years old, reserve magical explanations for events they would otherwise describe as impossible. Deprived of rational explanations, children concoct the most elaborate flights-of-fancy to explain occurrences they cannot otherwise understand or accept. The truly fascinating realization is that many adults, across time and culture, in much subtler and more subdued ways, do exactly the same thing.

Throughout the twentieth century, psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists have struggled to define magical thinking. Though there is no perfect consensus, scholars agree that its hallmark is a belief that one’s thoughts are related to real events. In *Anomalistic Psychology*, Leonard Zusne and Warren H. Jones write more specifically, “In American psychiatry magical thinking is defined by characterizing the patient as an individual who ‘believes that his or her thoughts, words, or actions might, or will in some manner cause or prevent a specific outcome in some way that defies the normal laws of cause and effect.’” As such, magical thinking stands in direct opposition to scientific thinking. Science values the law of cause-and-effect, and takes great pains to distinguish between a causal relationship – where event A causes event B – and a correlation – where event A and event B occur close together in time or space, but are not necessarily causally related. Magical thinking, in contrast, privileges similarity as well as spatial and/or temporal contiguity.

It is probably easiest to illustrate this with the following example, initially published in *Totem and Taboo* by Sigmund Freud, and reprinted in the fascinating book *The End of Magic* by Ariel Glucklich:

In some parts of Java, at the season when the bloom will soon be on the rice, the husbandman and his wife visit their fields by night and engage there in sexual intercourse to encourage the fertility of the rice by their example.

Here we see the principle of similarity: the couple’s fertility mirrors the crop’s fertility; the principle of spatial contiguity: the couple make love in the field where the plants grow; and temporal contiguity: the couple make love at a critical point in the growing season. Notice, however, that despite the parallelism of the act (lovmaking) to the objective (bountiful harvest) that there is no causal relationship between the couple’s fertility and the crop’s abundance – hence no scientific rationale to engage in such behaviour.

For this reason, magical thinking was often disparaged by early modern and modern scholars. They attributed it to a weakness of the mind, a primitive, human failing. Zusne and Jones explain that it was characterized as an “ego defense mechanism” that spares the ego the anxiety which results from recognition of conflict – for example, the conflict between one’s inner desire for rain and the real lack of rain.

It is only in the last twenty or thirty years that experts have begun to acknowledge positive aspects to this universal human practice. In *Imagining the Impossible*, Carol Nemeroff and Paul Rozin explain that when real life becomes uncertain, frightening or frustrating, people invoke magical explanations to fill the gap. Though it is not rational, magical thinking allows human beings to believe they can predict and control otherwise overwhelming circumstances, and this belief, however scientifically unfounded it might be, can actually be psychologically very healthy. This bears out Ariel Glucklich’s observation that “Magic. . . is intrinsically subjective – sometimes apparently successful, sometimes a failure – but always extraordinary to its beholders.”

THE TOURING PRODUCTION

This is a photo of the set for *The Year of Magical Thinking*, as it appeared at the Belfry Theatre in Victoria. As this is a touring production, the set was built in Victoria, and then shipped to Tarragon to be installed in our Mainspace Theatre. When our run is over, it will be shipped to the next stop on the tour, The National Theatre Centre in Ottawa.

During the production, it's unlikely the audience will be able to see the various doors at angles as clearly as you can in this photo. The lighting design of the show helps to transition scenes and implies places in memory. It is quick dark, but subtle changes suggest hospital rooms, hotel rooms and beaches. It also helps to create a great sense of depth behind the actor, and a place for the audience to rest their vision and stay immersed within the world of a play, as it is particularly difficult to look at a single performance the entire time.



On the next page, you'll find the Technical Rider. It is the first piece of information that Tarragon receives while considering if we are able to program a touring production into our season. From this document (and from set drawings and lighting plots) our production manager and technical director can begin asking the questions they need answered, renting additional equipment and hiring the necessary crew to load in the set (and any lighting or sound equipment) when it is delivered.

THE BELFRY THEATRE TOURING TECH RIDER FOR THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING

CONTACTS:

Shawn Donellsen, Production Manager

Mary Desprez, General Manager

Michael Shamata, Director

John Ferguson, Set Designer
Michael Walton, Lighting Designer
Seana Mckenna, Performer

Introduction:

The Year of Magical Thinking is a one act play that runs approximately 1 hour 25 minutes. The performer enters at the top of the show and exits and the end. Transitions are accomplished with lighting changes and minimal sound cues. The entire action of the play takes place downstage of the set.

Personelle:

The production travels with a Stage Manager and performer. The presenter is responsible for providing a backstage person for cueing purposes and simple set (door) moves. There are no props moves, or costume changes.

Staging:

The set consists of a series of walls that run stage left to right.

The downstage most wall is a large plexi and steel wall, and all other walls are standard wood construction painted blue and white.

A detailed ground plan and section will be created for each venue.

The Floor of the downstage playing area is a ribbed rubber mat flooring that is comprised of sections that run upstage – downstage that are taped together, and stapled to the stage floor at the downstage and upstage edges.

The Rubber floor is to be mopped prior to each performance, and no foot traffic is allowed on the floor between mopping and performance.

The Upstage floor is gloss black painted within the confines of the set and Flat black outside of the confines of the set.

The walls are self-supporting but are designed to be screwed to the stage deck. If screws are not appropriate in the presenting venue please contact the Production Manager to discuss options.

Masking:

A detailed masking ground plan will be developed for each venue in consultation with the Production designers and venue production representative.

Props:

The show props consist of 1 book, 2 benches, and one chair all to be provided by the Producing company.

Costumes:

The show costumes consist of: 1 pair of black pants, 1 white shirt, and 1 black sweater. All costumes to be laundered in accordance with the costume plot.

Sound:

Sound cues were designed to run on SFX. Stereo L/R playback for all cues.

Audio can also be provided to be run from two CD players.

Lighting:

A detailed Lighting plot will be provided.

Dressing Rooms:

A clean well-lit dressing is required for the performer with access to a washroom. The performer also requires a warm up area separate from the stage.

ROSE AYLMER

Ah what avails the sceptred race,
Ah what the form divine!
What every virtue, every grace!
Rose Aylmer, all were thine.
Rose Aylmer, whom these wakeful eyes
May weep, but never see,
A night of memories and of sighs
I consecrate to thee.

Walter Savage Landor (1775-1864) was an English poet and writer. He had disagreeable, tempestuous nature and so many people, including his family and friends did not want to associate with him. He travelled a great deal (often fleeing from disagreements from altercations with powerful people and/or libel lawsuits.) He spent most of his time in France and Italy.

His career was defined by *Imaginary Conversations*, a dialogue between famous characters of history, but he also wrote for *The Morning Chronicle* and was the author of many essays, political writings, plays and poems. Landor used words as a way to satirize his peers. He often wrote in Latin, because in England one cannot be sued for libel in Latin. However, he could and did write with sensitivity on matters of a gentler nature. His poem "Rose Aylmer" was dedicated to the sister of Lord Aylmer, a friend of Landor's. Rose died of cholera in India in 1800. An analysis of this poem is found in the text of *The Year of Magical Thinking*:

JOAN: "Rose Aylmer" worked, the lecturer said, because the overblown and therefore meaningless praise in those first lines get thrown into sudden, even shocking relief by what he called "the hard sweet wisdom" of the last, which suggests that grief has its place but also its limits. "A night of memories and sighs / I consecrate to thee. "A night of memory and sighs," he repeated. "A night. One night. It might be all night but he doesn't say all night, he says a night, not a matter of lifetime, a matter of some hours." (Didion, 5)

THE HOUR OF OUR DEATH

JOAN: Philippe Ariès, in *The Hour of Our Death*, points out that death as it appears in the literature of the Middle Ages "gives advance warning of its arrival" even if sudden or accidental. What did Gawain say when he is asked, "Ah good my lord, think you then so soon to die?" "I tell you I shall not live two days."

Philippe Ariès (1914-1984) was a French historian and medievalist. The two main focuses of his work were childhood and death and the way these concepts have been viewed by people through out history. Ariès is the author of *Centuries of Childhood* (1962) which posited that "in medieval society, the idea of childhood did not exist" as well as *Western Attitudes Towards Death* (1974) and *The Hour of Our Death* (1981) both which explore humanity's changing relationship with death.

SIR GAWIN

JOAN: What did Gawain say when he is asked "Ah good my lord, think you then so soon to die?"
"I tell you that I shall not live two days."
And didn't he call that one right?

Sir Gawain appears very early on in the development of the Arthurian legends and in many different stories within the legends. The story of Sir Gawain that Joan Didion refers to is his appearance *in La Morte D'Arthur*, an epic by Sir Thomas Malory (1405-1471) about the adventures of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Gawain and Lancelot were both Knights of the Round Table, but became enemies after Lancelot killed Gawain's brothers. The conflict between the Knights causes the collapse of the Round Table and instigates the downfall of King Arthur. Gawain and Lancelot battle twice. Lancelot wins each time, but refuses to kill Gawain. After Gawain is struck down for that final time in battle, he realizes he is dying and he sends a letter asking Lancelot for his forgiveness, which Lancelot gives.

GLOSSARY

TELEMETRY is the science and technology of automatic measurement and transmission of data by radio or other means from remote sources to receiving stations for recording and analysis.

TRIAGE is the principle or practice of sorting emergency patients into categories of priority for treatment. Often emergency rooms or their assessment areas are referred to as triage.

ANOXIA is a lack of oxygen

LACUNA(E) refers to an empty space or a missing part; a gap; a defect.

INCORPOREAL describes something without material form, body, or substance.

ERADICATE means to remove or destroy utterly.

ASYSTOLIC means the absence of heartbeat.

APNEIC describes something that has temporarily stopped breathing.

RIPTIDE is a tide that opposes another or other tides, causing a violent disturbance in the sea. It is also called an undertow.

UCLA is the acronym for University of California, Los Angeles.

ICU is the acronym for Intensive Care Unit (of a hospital).

PRE-SHOW ACTIVITY 1: Imagery and Symbolism

Subject/ Grade: Drama or English 10-12

Suggested Time: 1 Class

Lesson Description: This is a pre-show lesson that will examine imagery and symbols in storytelling and will also explore less conventional ways of staging drama.

Strands:

- Drama - this will be an excellent exercise to move from tableau theatre on to more explorative, movement based theatre (e.g. viewpoints). For
- English - this can be a very effective exercise to help students visualize and understand the crucial images and symbols throughout the play.

Expectations *(overall)*

- Understand the creation of theatre in a poetic, less naturalistic context
- Explore ways of using movement and tableau to create key themes and images
- Explore and describe key images and symbols
- Understand the relationship between visual and vocal storytelling

Prior Knowledge Required *(the knowledge/ concepts and skills students must possess to be successful in this lesson)*

- Basic understanding of tableau and the significance of imagery and symbolism

Resources

EXCERPTS #1, #2 and #3

Mental Set/ Hook

(10-15min)

Ask students about symbols or images they recognize from everyday society and have a discussion about the meaning of these symbols (e.g. cross, golden arches etc.) Break the students up into groups of 4-5. Have them decided on one of these established images or symbols and create a tableau representing the image/ symbol itself, the meaning behind it or how it relates to the world around them, or any combination of these. Then have the students rehearse in preparation of performing. Students will then perform these tableaus for the class one immediately after the other to create a sense of flow between them. Have a brief discussion about what was evident/ powerful etc. in these tableaus and what could be clarified.

Main Activity

(timing will depend on number of classes dedicated)

Split the class into three groups (these groups can then be split further depending on class size etc. and then simply doubling up on images) Give each group either the excerpt relating to fire, the river or the vortex. Have one person in each group read the excerpt out loud to the rest of the group. Instruct the groups to discuss amongst themselves what these images look like and how they are significant to the character and/or society. Also have them discuss whether this image is a calming one or a disturbing one for the

characters. As the teacher it will be important to move between groups facilitating these conversations. For example students may need clarification on the significance of the ferryman and the river Styx.

After this discussion, instruct students to begin creating a tableau that will show the image and how it is significant to the character in the play. Have them perform these tableaux for the other groups. Have the students reflect on each tableau discussing what was particularly powerful what could use more clarification etc. Have the students go back to their groups to rework these suggestions. Also now have them create a beginning tableau and an ending with the first tableau as their middle. The tableaux could escalate in conflict or resolve based on the students choosing. Again, show them to the class and reflect.

Finally, if there is time, have the students return to their groups once more and this time establish how to move between tableaux in a way that relates to the image and how they are trying to portray it. This time have students perform each piece twice. During the first performance they move from tableau to tableau pausing briefly on each. The teacher can give them a count down from 5 to move from one tableau to the other freezing briefly on each. Then on the second run they will move from tableau to tableau with only a minor freeze on each for clarity. Once more, reflect on these pieces they have created and if the students think this would be an effective method of dramatizing these powerful images.

#1

Fire

"I would build a fire. The fire was the point. In California we heated our houses by building fires. Malibu we built even on summer evenings, because the fog came in. Fires said we were home, we had drawn the circle, we were safe through the night"

"I built the fire. I drew the circle. I have no memory of what I meant to have for dinner."

#2

Rivers/Calm Water

"To myself I am invisible, incorporeal. I have crossed one of those rivers that divide the living from the dead. I feel for the first time the power in the image of rivers, the Styx, the Lethe, the cloaked ferryman with his pole. I saw the ferryman. I heard the ferryman speak. It was the ferryman who asked if I had the *fare*."

"She needs to be in the water. She needs to let what hair she has go green from the chlorine."

#3

Vortex

"Going back has trick currents, unrevealed eddies, you can be skimming along on what looks like clear water and suddenly go under. Get sucked down. Get caught in the vortex and let go of her hand. Lose control. Lose her. Feel the water take her."

"I am outmaneuvering the vortex. The trick is to remain flexible... What makes no sense at all. What I do next is everything I have been working not to do. I take the detour I cannot take. I lose all control... I let the vortex take me."

PRE-SHOW ACTIVITY 1: Your Rituals

Summary

Subject/Grade: English / 9-12

Suggested Time: 1 Class (~75 Minutes)

Outline: Students will reflect on and discuss the nature of ritual in their lives – which rituals are important to them and why they are so meaningful. For homework they will write a more extensive description of their most important ritual and how they would react if it broke down.

Planning Information

Strands (English):

- Oral Communication
- Writing

Expectations

Overall:

- Listen in order to understand and respond appropriately in a variety of situations for a variety of purposes.
- Draft and revise writing, using a variety of forms and stylistic elements appropriate for the purpose and audience.

Specific:

- Develop and explain interpretations of both simple and complex oral texts, using evidence from the text and the oral and visual cues used in it to support the interpretation.
- Understand and explain how their own beliefs, values, and experiences are revealed in their pieces of writing.

Pre-Requisite Skills and Knowledge:

Comfort with writing and sharing short written reflections on personal experiences and preferences. Respect and compassion for classmates in discussions that will involve each others' personal lives. Technical and creative skills in written English for the eventual summative assignment.

Resources:

- Students' individual writing materials, pencils/pens, paper, etc.
- Copies of **EXCERPT #4** from Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

Agenda:

- Class Discussion – Define 'Ritual' (10 minutes)
- Individual Assignment – Find and List Rituals in your Own Life (10 minutes)
- Group Discussion – What do our Rituals Share? Do they Match our Definition? (10 minutes)
- Class Discussion – Why Are Rituals Important? Where Do They Come From? (15 minutes)
- Individual Assignment – What Ritual Do You Most Miss? (5 minutes)
- Class Discussion – Why Do Rituals Break Down? What Happens When They Do? (15 minutes)
- Homework Assignment – Your Most Important Ritual (10 minutes)

Lesson Description:

Students are asked to arrive at an initial working definition of 'ritual' behaviour. The teacher should try to elicit focus on rituals as a) repeating an exact pattern over time and b) somewhat irrational – something one has to do for complex reasons. Make sure 'ritual' is distinct from 'routine' – there is magic and whimsy, but also compulsion in it. When the discussion has reached some consensus, students will think of their own lives and behaviours and list some rituals that they perform or make use of in their daily lives and how they first started

– or how they first became aware that their behaviour had become ritualized. Try to avoid shared cultural rituals – keep the rituals as self-invented and personal as possible.

The class will then discuss some common themes of their personal rituals and where they tend to originate. When the discussion has covered a good spread of students' rituals, take five minutes to reflect individually on rituals that students once observed but can't anymore. Return to a class discussion of where rituals go wrong and break down. Try and get students to, even briefly, discuss a ritual that they regret the loss of in their lives – what they miss about it, what the loss has cost them. If they grasp how this regret is largely centred around loss of the stability rituals bring, students can develop a sense of rituals as important and supportive, but also as vulnerabilities, as fragile ideas which can wound us with their sudden absence should we come to depend upon them. This should elicit the right frame of mind to experience *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a play structured around the rituals and psychological bargaining that define one woman's coping with unspeakable grief. Students will, ultimately, be better prepared to understand how rituals help that character cope with loss – and better prepared to empathize with the devastation that results when these rituals cease to work and she is faced with naked reality

For summative homework students can write a short composition on the ritual they hold most important in their lives, what happens when it is disrupted, and what they might do if it became impossible to perform. This can be an informal journal response or a more extended composition, depending on the context of the current unit; try and assess the level to which the behaviour described is specific and ritualized, and how deeply the student has thought about its meaning in their lives and the likely consequences were it to be suddenly stripped away.

Additional Notes/Caveats:

ESL students and those with Special Educational Needs should be given some extra attention in writing out their rituals – happily, though, if it comes off well, it might demonstrate the basic commonalities of their (likely rather different) experience with the class; Make it clear that rituals don't need to be 'important' or elaborate – whatever matters to students is sincerely worth studying for that reason alone.

Assessment Guidelines:

- Did students work hard at making connections between their lives and the definition of ritual put forward by the class?
- Were students able to analyze the text of the 'Magical Thinking' extract and relate the therapeutic and sincerely helpful aspects of ritual back to the class' prior discussions?
- Was the student prepared and respectful in group and class discussions?
- Was the student's Summative Assessment written thoughtfully? Does it establish their understanding of ritual's importance in their life?

There came a day when it occurred to me that I supposed to give his clothes away. Many people a hand mentioned the necessity for doing this, usually in the guise of offering to help, but I had resisted.

I did not need help. I could manage this.

I began. I filled many bags with T-Shirts, sweatpants, socks, Brooks Brothers.

A few weeks later I assembled more empty bags. I was not prepared to address suits or shirts or jackets but I thought I could handle the shoes.

I stopped at the door to the room.

I could not give away his shoes.

I stood there a moment then realized why: he would need shoes if he was to return.

The recognition of this thought by no means eradicated the thoughts

“Magical Thinking” us a phrase I learned when I was reading anthropology
Primitive cultures operate on magical thinking. “If” thinking.

If we sacrifice the virgin—the rain will come back.

If I keep his shoes—

I now see the autopsy as an early example of this line of thinking.

I wanted the autopsy.

In the course of doing research I ad watched autopsies. I knew exactly what happens, the face peeled down, the chest open like a chicken in a butcher’s case.

I still wanted the autopsy.

In fact I wanted to be in the room when they did it, I didn’t think I present this point rationally so I didn’t ask.

Here was my reasoning, which for some remained hidden even from me: an autopsy could show that what had gone wrong was not more than a transitory blockage or arrhythmia.

If so, the reasoning went they might be able to fix it.

Quintana is out of the hospital.

We can do the funeral.

St John the Devine.

A Catholic priest and an Episcopal priest. Gregorian chant. Gerry walked Quintana to the pulpit. Still weak by staging very straight in a black dress in the same cathedral where she had eight months before been married, she read a poem she written to her father. “I love you more than even one more day,” she said.

Everyone except Quintana referred to John in the past tense.

I had succeeded.

I had convinced them.

They had said good-bye.

I had done it.

I had made this happen.

I had played along, I had followed the ritual, I had made the arrangements.

I had acknowledged that he was dead.

I had done this in as public a way as I could conceive.

And it still didn't bring him back.

POST-SHOW ACTIVITY 1: Context, Setting, 'Fact' in Memory-Narrative

Summary:

Subject/Grade(s): English / 11-12

Suggested Time: Two Periods (~150 Minutes)

Outline: Students will work as a class to define 'Magical Thinking' and how a memory play like this shapes our memory not only of events, but also the places in which they happen. This will develop into each making a memory-based map of the city, and for homework describing one location on that map in relation to the attached memory. The next class will take up the idea of how we redefine places through memory in an attempt to control how that memory affects us.

Planning Information:

Strands (English):

- Oral Communication
- Reading and Literature Studies
- Writing

Expectations:

Overall:

- Listen in order to understand and respond appropriately.
- Generate, gather, and organize ideas and information to write for an intended purpose and audience.
- Recognize a variety of text forms, features and stylistic elements and demonstrate understanding of how they convey meaning.

Specific:

- Demonstrate an understanding of a variety of interpersonal speaking strategies and adapt them to suit a given purpose, situation, and audience.
- Extend understanding of texts, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, by making appropriate and increasingly rich connections between the ideas in them and personal knowledge, experience, and insights; other texts; and the world around them.
- Establish a distinctive voice in their writing, modifying language and tone skilfully and effectively to suit the form, audience, and purpose for writing

Pre-Requisite Skills and Knowledge:

A basic background in compositional writing – conceiving and structuring a brief essay on a given topic. Familiarity with the concept of autobiography and the practice of using one's own experiences as the basis for a writing assignment. Some capacity to understand and articulate the potential use of the storytelling process as a strategy for making sense of our experiences.

Resources:

-Students' individual writing materials, pencils/pens, paper, etc.

-Photocopied Maps of Toronto and attached extract from Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*. ('Places She Can't Go In Los Angeles', pp. 38-42)

Agenda - First Class:

- Group Discussion – First Impressions of the Play (10 minutes)
- Class Discussion - A Class Definition of 'Magical Thinking' (15 minutes)
- Individual Assignment - Map Out Your City (10 minutes)
- Group Work – How Does a Place Hold a Memory (15 minutes)
- Class Discussion – Mapping Out Her City – Subjective Geography (15 minutes)
- Homework Assignment – It All Happened There (10 minutes)

Lesson Description:

Start with a recap of the play – make sure everyone’s on board with the layers of fantasy and reality that structure the protagonist’s memories. Get students into small groups and have them informally critique the play and the experience of watching it; give them, as a broad guideline, the instruction to focus on how it incorporated ‘Magical Thinking’. After students have spoken more generally regarding their feelings on the play, try to elicit students’ further thought on the play’s idea of ‘Magical Thinking’ – the overlaying of self-created narratives onto life to make it seem more meaningful and predictable. Get students talking about ‘why does magical thinking appeal to the protagonist?’ and ‘what effects does it have on her perception of the wider world?’

Making it more personal, encourage students to think of and briefly list locations in their lives that they associate with a significant personal experience. Focus on places that seem banal or uninteresting except for the memory associated with them – and try to emphasize that these ought to be important memories with some emotional resonance (first dance, last time seeing an old friend, etc.). When they seem comfortable with the sort of memory-place required, pass around a photocopied map of Toronto and ask them to map a few of them as clearly as possible.

When they have decided on their choices, they will be asked to discuss in groups how their factual memory of these places relates specifically to the underlying memory. Try and monitor the groups to make sure they’re being thoughtful regarding how accurately their memories describe time and setting. Emphasize the fluidity of memory regarding places – move between groups helping them think of returning to childhood haunts and how different they seem when returning later in life. After some minutes, put a focus question on the board: “What in this place holds the memory most strongly?” Despite the inherent fluidity of memory in remembering setting, what is the anchor in memory of a place that allows us to be confident in the vividness of our recollection of it? What makes some memories bedrock and unchanging?

For homework, students will write a brief sketch of one location chosen from their list, focussing on seemingly unimportant details of the setting that are made meaningful by their connection to a foundational memory. Their primary instruction, however, should be to write evocatively about the setting in a way that suggests or alludes to memory via its visual or thematic aspects. They should avoid explicitly bringing the event up, trying to convey the essence of that memory while avoiding overt description of its ‘important’ central events – letting tone trump content as subjective memory trumps factual reality in the process of recall. This will be used next lesson.

Agenda - Second Class:

- Class Discussion - Introduction/Recap (10 minutes)
- Class Presentations - Reading Reflection Assignments (25 minutes)
- Group Work – Feedback/Workshopping Assignments (15 minutes)
- Class Discussion – Effective Strategies for Conveying Memories (20 minutes)
- Closing Summary/Questions/Comments (5 minutes)

Lesson Description:

Receiving a handout with an excerpt of the play, students will share their sketches in groups and workshop them for form and style, but also to look at how carefully they have described the site of a significant memory without simply outlining that memory’s chronology. Sketches should be compared to the section of the play on the handout and how it describes places with clear emotional impact but often avoids specifically defining the source of that emotional reaction in memory. Students should aim to make the pieces stronger for possible submission by class’ end.

To move this into a class discussion, share some assignments with the class at large – perhaps each group will pick one they feel especially strong. Discuss how the various assignments used setting and other ‘neutral’

aspects of the memory to fuel a simplified, streamlined reading of the complex emotional resonances on which memory is based. Look at how and how much the central 'events' of the memory were alluded to, and how they demand to be specifically read in a particular light by virtue of the surrounding description of place. Is neutrality impossible in relaying one's own experience, even through the simple description of where it happened?

Ask the authors probing questions. Are their methods effective? Do they give a real sense of the attached memory? Is it easier to share very personal information in such an indirect way? How else do we manipulate and distort our language to deal with painful memories – making excuses, omitting unpleasant truths, or outright lying? What's the difference between actively editing our memories and outright lying? Is there a moral dimension to one's memory – what one should, or should not consent to have subjectively remembered and on which points one should insist? This can close out the period. Take up all finished or rough 'memory' sketches as students leave.

Additional Notes/Caveats:

Students for whom English is a second language or whom have special needs regarding literacy would likely benefit more from a simpler version of the assignment, reflecting openly on the relation between a place and a memory rather than trying to convey it in nuanced and impressionistic prose. All students ought to be reassured that their privacy is important and will be respected – if they are sincerely uncomfortable sharing a difficult experience with the class as a whole, try and inform them that you can read their work privately and reassure them regarding the confidentiality of their submission. Alternatively, they might try performing this exercise with locations that bring up more positive emotions, such as joy or pride, to contrast with the play's grimmer overtones of mood and theme.

Assessment Guidelines:

- Did students seriously engage with the project of defining difficult experiences in relation to the very specific places and times in which they occurred?
- Could students express how style and tone can convey as much information as content?
- Were students respectful and productive in their groups, trying to collaborate effectively and help each other develop and improve their compositions?
- Did the summative written projects show creativity and thoughtfulness in trying to convey the implicit or explicit ways in which memory's grasp of facts relates to underlying emotions?
- Were all assignments technically proficient, with appropriate style, grammar and diction?

POST-SHOW ACTIVITY #2: CHORAL SPEECH

Subject/ Grade: Drama 9-11

Suggested Time: 1 Class

Lesson Description: This is a post show lesson that will examine choral speech and explore how to create one narrative with multiple students.

Strands:

- Text analysis and manipulation
- Character development
- Vocal variation
- Directing

Expectations *(overall)*

- Understand the creation the manipulation text
- Explore vocal variety in the creation of character and scene
- Understand the relationship between visual and vocal storytelling

Prior Knowledge Required *(the knowledge/ concepts and skills students must possess to be successful in this lesson)*

- Basic understanding of choral speech and blocking
- Basic understanding of directing

Resources

EXCERPTS #5, #6 #7 and #8

Mental Set/ Hook

(5-7min)

Using a passage from the play, give each student a line and tell them which line they follow. Give them a few moments to decide the emotion and delivery of their line. Go through the passage having the students say their line. Then have them try their line with a different intention/objective, or as a different archetype (police officer, teacher, ring leader, etc.) then in a different order, then start experimenting with repetition. After experimenting with lines have a brief discussion with the students about choral speech and the differences and possibilities of having multiple voices instead of just one storyteller.

Main Activity

(approx 30 min to rehearse, perform and discuss each piece)

Split the class into groups of 7-8 and have them decide on one person to be the director. Students will then use the pieces of the text they are given to create a piece of choral speech theatre using vocal variety, volume variety, repetition etc. They will then rehearse these and present their pieces to the class. Classes will reflect and discuss worked and what they thought could be improved in both their own performances and their classmate's. Students will then go back to their groups and work on these improvements. Finally students will add blocking to their piece and perform once more exploring character movement, levels, etc. Have a final brief discussion about the differences between one storyteller and many.

#5 Full Class Choral

"I am seized by the need not to let anyone at the *Los Angeles Times* read this in the *New York Times*. I call a friend at the *Los Angeles Times*. As he picks up I realize that I have made a mistake. It's still early in Los Angeles, is John even dead there? What time was it here when they said he was dead? Is it that time yet in Los Angeles? If here's time left on the West Coast, does it even need to happen there? Should I be taking him there right now? If I hang up and fly out can we have a different ending on Pacific time?

...

When I wake and he still isn't here I try not to move.

I lie very still.

I analyze the situation.

Maybe it takes time for people to come back.

Maybe you have to wait.

Maybe you need to play along, maybe you need to make what everyone is calling 'he arrangements'...

On most surface levels I seem rational. To the average observer I would appear to fully understand that death is irreversible. I have authorized an autopsy. I have arranged for cremation.

Still.

He does not look as if he needs to be dead.

He looks pale and a tooth is chipped from the fall but he is wearing faded jeans and a checked shirt and a navy blue blazer from Sills and he does not necessarily look dead."

#6

Group 1

"This happened on December 30, 2003. That may seem a while ago but it won't when it happens to you.

And it will happen to you. The details will be different, but it will happen to you. That's what I'm here to tell you.

We had come home... Early evening, maybe eight o'clock. We discussed whether to go out or eat in.

I said we could stay in, I would build a fire.

The fire was the point.

In California we heated our houses by building fires. Malibu we built even on summer evenings, because the fog came in. Fires said we were home, we had drawn the circle, we were safe through the night."

#7

Group 2

"I continue to wait.

I continue to play along.

I mention this to no one.

For one thing no one wants to hear it.

They want to believe that I am 'being strong'.

To myself I am invisible, incorporeal. I have crossed one of those rivers that divide the living from the dead. I feel for the first time the power in the image of rivers, the Styx, the Lethe, the cloaked ferryman with his pole.

I saw the ferryman.

I heard the ferryman speak.

It was the ferryman who asked if I had the *fare*."

#8

Group 3

"Clearly I am not on top of the self-pity question.

Am I failing to understand this as something that happened to him?

Am I still understanding it as something that happened to me?

The crossword clue that first gets my attention this morning is 6-Down, 'Sometimes you feel like...'

Instantly see the answer, a good long one that that will fill many spaces and prove my competence for the day. '...a motherless child.'

Motherless children have a real hard time-

Motherless children have such a real hard time-

No

6-Down has only four letters.

I abandon the puzzle and look up the answer. The correct answer for 6-Down is 'A-N-U-T.' A nut? Sometimes you feel like a nut? How far have I absented myself from the world of normal response?

"I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear."

Joan Didion