



Set Text Guide: The Maids

AS and A Level Drama and Theatre

Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced GCE in Drama and Theatre (9DR0)

**Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced Subsidiary GCE in
Drama and Theatre (9DR0)**

GCE Drama 2016: The Maids

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Summary

All the action takes place in one place in real time. It is a short play, but this should be seen as a gift. Much of the action involves the business of maids: tidying, cleaning, dressing etc., and this can be made as long or as short as the director feels is necessary.

The plot may at first appear relatively simple; two maids, sisters Claire and Solange, role-play as maid and Madame. Claire has anonymously sent a letter indicting Monsieur, which has led to his imprisonment. Monsieur calls on the telephone and informs Claire that he has been released on bail. The doorbell rings and Madame has returned. Before she comes in, Solange tells Claire she will need to put ten sleeping pills in Madame's tea in order to kill her. Madame enters and eventually notices the phone off the hook, and they tell her that Monsieur is freed and that they were waiting to tell her as a surprise. Madame frantically gets ready to go out, and Claire is unable to persuade her to drink the tea. After she leaves, the maids slip back into their role-play. Things turn darker, as Solange forces Claire onto her hands and knees with a riding whip. Claire begins to feel ill, and Solange takes her into the kitchen. Solange returns and it appears that she has killed Claire. This proves to be a false murder, as Claire emerges from the kitchen and resumes the role of Madame, ordering Solange to fetch her the tea, which she eventually does, and Claire drinks it, committing suicide.

However, as you explore the intricacies of the text, you discover a much subtler subtext that exists between the sisters, and that the play is an exploration of servitude, fantasy and harsh reality.

Synopsis

Madame's bedroom. Louis-XV furniture. Lace. Rear, a window opening on the front of the house opposite. Right, a bed. Left, a door and a dressing table. Flowers in profusion. The time is evening.

**For this synopsis, when characters are playing another part in a game, italics will signify that it is not their true character.*

The play takes place in the bedroom of a wealthy Madame. We first see Claire and her sister Solange, role-playing. Claire is playing *Madame*, while Solange is playing *Claire*. It may not be clear for the audience that this is a game at first.

Madame is scolding *Claire* for playing with a pair of rubber gloves. She accuses her of wanting to seduce the milkman with them. *Claire* begs her pardon, stating that she was making tea (pronouncing it 'tay'). *Madame* then chastises her for using spit to clean the slippers. No matter how harshly *Madame* treats *Claire*, she responds politely and obediently.

For a moment, the real Claire drops the *Madame* tone and states that the milkman hates them and that they are going to have a kid by him. As the play goes on, the game and reality begin to blur, to the point where we are unsure which is which. It is at the discretion of the director to decide what the real truths are.

Madame quickly switches back into the tragic tone of voice and demands for *Claire* to fetch her dress. She wants to wear the white dress, and as they argue Claire slips out of character and calls her sister by her real name, Solange. It is clear that there is a real tension between the two. We hear of an anonymous letter to the police that caused Monsieur to be imprisoned. *Claire* maintains character and persuades *Madame* to wear the red dress. As she helps her put it on, *Claire* is continually scolded, told that she smells. Though they are playing the game of Madame and maid, their arguing is that of sisters bickering; fraught with love and hatred. As *Claire* tries to help arrange the dress, *Madame* kicks her in the temple. When their hands accidentally touch, *Madame* recoils and says she cannot bear it when they touch. *Claire* warns there is no need to overdo it, and this might be as Solange, telling Claire not to overdo it within the game. She then asks if *Madame* is ready, which she is, then launches into a tirade of hateful insults. This

is apparently a motif of their game, where whoever is playing maid switches into a rebellious outburst against Madame. Solange gets carried away in her outburst and refers to herself as Solange. Claire hastily corrects her. It is as though they both get satisfaction out of the hatred, no matter which role they are playing, as an audience might empathise with the character that is closest to themselves.

Suddenly, an alarm clock goes off, and the pair huddle together, agitated. They snap out of character and Claire begins to get out of the dress, aware that Madame will be home soon. Solange is annoyed with Claire as they have not got to 'the end', and that this happens every time. It is not initially clear what the end is, though it later transpires that the end would seem to be murdering Madame. They begin readying the house for Madame's return. They bicker as they tidy, Solange frustrated that Claire merged details of their private lives into the story, specifically about the milkman. Claire says she is jealous that Solange got to see Madame's face when Monsieur was taken to prison. We learn that the letter indicting him was sent anonymously by Claire. They continue to argue, and Claire becomes anxious that they will be caught as their voices grow louder. Solange reveals that she tried to kill Madame but was unable to go through with it.

Suddenly, the telephone rings. It is news that Monsieur has been released on bail. Claire begins to panic, thinking that she will be found out, but also that they will have left a trace of their game in the room when Madame returns. She works herself into a frenzy, until Solange tenderly tries to calm her to sleep. Almost instantly, Claire switches moods, stating 'no weakness'.

The doorbell rings, signalling the return of Madame. As they make the final preparations, they begin to fantasise about killing her. Solange tells her sister that she needs to put ten sleeping pills in the tea to do it. Claire agrees, and says she has the tube ready in her pocket.

Madame enters. We immediately see the stimulus for their game. She accuses Solange of treating her like an invalid. We see great hypocrisy and irony in the troubles that Madame speaks of, having just seen the emotional turmoil that servitude has left the sisters in. Madame's troubles are that she feels guilty asking for tea. We do see glimpses of kindness from Madame towards them, though. Claire enters carrying the tea. Instantly the stakes are raised here, as the audience believe there is the potential for death in the scene. Both sisters separately remind her 'the tea is ready'. She does not drink it though, and asks for it to be put down on the side.

Madame dramatically decries her old age, and tells the sisters that they are to inherit her lavish lifestyle and things. She gives Claire the red dress, which she has just worn in the game. She gives Solange a fur coat, then notices that the phone is off the hook. At this she switches into manic suspicion, and we see why the maids were so panicked about leaving any trace of their game. Claire informs her that it was Monsieur and that he has been freed on bail. Madame is dumbfounded as to why they didn't tell her immediately. She pushes Solange out of the room, sending her to fetch a taxi, then excitedly begins to get ready to go out again and meet Monsieur. Madame is now in a changed and happier mood. She playfully mocks Claire when she notices she has some make-up on. Claire doggedly tries to persuade Madame to drink the tea, while Madame curses the time Solange is taking. Claire suggests she may be struggling to get a taxi and will have had to go down the road. The dramatic irony here is that we know Solange will be stalling to allow Claire time to poison Madame with the tea. Madame then notices the alarm clock and is puzzled as to why it is there. Another trace of the game has been discovered, and now the tension is building to fever pitch, as Claire is trying to poison Madame before Solange returns, and before their cover is blown.

There is the sound of a car outside, and as Claire desperately tries one more time to make Madame drink the tea, Solange bursts in and informs them that the taxi is here. She seems surprised to see Madame alive, having given Claire quite some time. Madame excitedly leaves. Solange sarcastically remarks what a fine job Claire made of killing Madame. Claire is totally defeated, and wants to go to sleep. Solange tries to instigate the game right away. It is as though the escapism of their game is all they have. Claire is reluctant to rush into it, and Solange reminds her that it is her turn to be *Madame*. Claire

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is unsure, worried that Madame might come back at any moment and discover them if she has forgotten anything. Finally, Claire gives in, but assumes the role of *Madame* again. She goes behind the screen and puts the white dress over her black one. She wants to skip straight to the insults, but Solange, now as *Claire*, slips into the usual routine of praising *Madame* first. *Madame* says that she despises servants, and throws insults at her, trying to provoke a quick response. Soon enough, *Claire* gets to the emotional place she needs to take over the reins of the insulting. Claire breaks character, pleading with Solange. Solange has taken over though, and using a riding whip, forces Claire to her knees. She hurls insults at her whilst striking her with the whip. Things seem to be spiralling, and it is unclear whether Claire is playing the game or not, as she pleads with her sister to stop. This is an example of the lines between reality and fantasy being blurred. Solange leads Claire into the kitchen, promising to 'have sure ways of putting an end to all suffering'.

The stage is left bare for a few moments. The tension in this moment should be extreme, as we wonder whether Solange is killing her sister. Solange then returns and goes into an absurd monologue, addressing numerous characters who aren't there. She talks of having strangled *Madame* with the dish-gloves. She blurs the lines further, as she imitates Madame's voice complaining about having to wear a mourning dress for her maid. She smokes a cigarette at the window, and imagines seeing Claire's funeral procession on the street below.

In a surprise for the audience, Claire emerges from the kitchen alive and leans against the door, listening. Eventually she enters the room and assumes the role of *Madame*, ordering *Claire* to tidy up and to make her a cup of tea. Solange now breaks character and argues that they are tired and must stop. *Madame* will not allow her to, and ploughs on, despite Solange calling her Claire. She forces Solange to bring her the cold poisoned tea, and drinks it while Solange delivers a final speech.

In the final meta-monologue, Solange talks of the end of a theatrical production. Her speech is rife with double meanings. She talks of Monsieur coming home to find Madame killed by the two maids, who are triumphant and free. She also talks of the red velvet curtain, which could be a reference to the curtain of the stage, but also the red velvet dress. The style in which the play to this point has been presented will inform exactly how this final monologue is performed.

Characters

Solange

The oldest of the two sisters. A maid in her mid-thirties. In the fantasies, she tends to play the role of maid. Of the two, she is the more resentful toward Madame, and seems to gain satisfaction from the abuse thrown at her by Claire, as Madame. She wants to be worked up to a point of explosion by the game. She shows her propensity for violence in the scene with the riding whip. She was too cowardly herself to kill Madame when she had the chance. She shows a maternal, softer side at points when she is trying to soothe her sister.

Claire

Solange's younger sister, in her early thirties. She also hates Madame, but is also drawn in by her occasional kindness. She is Madame's favourite. Claire seems to enjoy playing the role of Madame, and aspires to her status. She likes to dress up as Madame, and is even caught wearing her make-up.

Madame

Employer to Claire and Solange, she is very wealthy and older than the maids. Her husband, Monsieur, has been reported anonymously to the police by Claire. She leads a life of decadence, and is blissfully unaware of the suffering of her two maids. She shows fleeting moments of kindness to them, but this appears to be born from a fear that they too will leave her, having lost her husband to prison. In the moments when she lashes out cruelly at the sisters, we see where their motivation for their fantasy game comes from.

Social, cultural and historical background

Born in Paris in 1910, Jean Genet was a novelist, playwright, political activist, and poet. He was the son of a prostitute, who gave him away to an orphanage, and he never saw her again. Living in foster homes, he soon ran into trouble, and at the age of ten he was accused of stealing. He was innocent, but he later said that as society had labelled him a thief, he decided to devote himself to a life of crime. He eventually spent two years in prison.

In 1929, he joined the French army as a way of getting out of prison. He was a homosexual, and as such, felt sympathy for sections of society that were victimised by the French bourgeois. He was released from the army in 1933 and spent many years travelling across Europe as a prostitute and a thief.

He then went on to write *Our Lady of the Flowers*, his first novel. Due to its controversial subject matter, homosexuality, the original manuscript was destroyed, but Genet wrote another from memory and managed to smuggle it into circulation.

He was caught stealing again and given a life sentence. Other writers such as Cocteau and Sartre lobbied on his behalf and managed to have him freed after three months. Genet turned his back on crime and focused on writing, though criminality featured heavily in much of his work.

The Maids was first performed in 1947 at the Théâtre de l'Athénée in Paris. It was directed by Louis Jouvet. It has since been revived in France, England and the US. There is also a film adaptation from 1974, and an opera by Swedish composer Peter Bengtson written in 1994.

The Maids is loosely based on the infamous sisters Léa and Christine Papin, who, in 1933, were found to have brutally murdered their employer and her daughter in Le Mans, France.

Allusion to crime was a common motif for Genet, having led a life of crime himself. His works usually contain a feeling of 'otherness'. Having been abandoned by his own mother, persecuted for his sexuality and marginalised as a criminal, Genet felt an affinity to those in society who were oppressed: the 'others'.

Themes

Fantasy

The absurd fantasy of maid and Madame that Solange and Claire play out is so profound that it is hard to tell when they are in or out of character. They have built a fantasy that they can both slip into to escape their reality. Ultimately, Claire uses the fantasy to enable herself to commit suicide.

Authority

It is Madame's oppressive authority that has led the maids to their crazed and depressed state. They are trapped in a reality of servitude, and to escape it they play out a fantasy that involves one of them playing an authority figure. At first it could be seen that this is for one of them to experience what it is like to be in the position of authority, but it transpires that the overriding desire is to play out the fantasy of railing against the authority figure, without the real-life consequences.

Suffering

From the beginning we see that the maids are suffering terribly. Their lack of freedom has caused great emotional turmoil, in which they are both filled with hatred, both for Madame and the situation they are in, and even for each other. When Madame enters and complains about the trivialities of her life, it presents a direct contrast against the struggles of Solange and Claire. Claire's eventual suicide is the only way she can see to escape the suffering.

Theatre

As with the theme of fantasy, so is the theatre not reality, but an imitation of it. Genet plays with this meta-meaning throughout. If the audience takes a step back to look at the big picture, we have two actresses, pretending to be maids, who are pretending to be maid and Madame. The final monologue even talks of the events at the end of a theatrical production.

Murder/Suicide

There are two moments when we think someone is going to be killed before the actual death at the end. The scene with Madame is fizzing throughout as Claire attempts to poison her with the tea, but is foiled. The next is when Solange assumes the role of oppressor and forces Claire into the other room with the riding whip. When she returns and talks of having committed murder, we assume that the murder has taken place. However, this proves to be false. As this comes so close to the end of the play, the tension relaxes when we see Claire alive, but this is only a brief hiatus, as Claire commits suicide only moments later.

Resources

Recommended edition

The Maids by Jean Genet. Faber Finds, Faber & Faber. ISBN: 978-0-571-25114-8

Further reading

Brooks, Peter, and Joseph Halpern, eds. *Genet, a Collection of Critical Essays*. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979.)

Genet, J. *The Thief's Journal*. Trans. Bernard Frechtman. Foreword by Jean-Paul Sartre. (New York: Grove Press, 1964.)

McMahon, Joseph H. *The Imagination of Jean Genet*. (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980.)

Stewart, Harry E. and Rob Roy McGregor. *Jean Genet: A Biography of Deceit, 1910–1951*. (New York: P. Lang, 1989.)

Online resources

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/mar/01/the-maids-review-uzo-aduba-genet-laura-carmichael-zawe-ashton-trafalgar-studios-london>

<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/maids-pile-fake-flowers>

<http://theatrenotes.blogspot.co.uk/2005/05/maids.html>

Useful soundtracks to use in the classroom

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDVC06gwxKw>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j6Ise4vn1GE>

Practical exploration activities

Actors

The following exercises are designed to help theatre makers practically explore some of the key characters, themes and ideas that are central to *The Maids*. Some of the exercises may help actors to consider how key roles might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'.

Being set in one room with only three actors, *The Maids* demands greatly detailed work to communicate the complicated switches between fantasy and reality. It is one thing for the actors to learn their lines, but another for them to learn their characters' thoughts. For the actors playing Solange and Claire, it is worth going through the text and painstakingly choosing whether each line or thought is as themselves or in role-play. There will be moments where either choice could work, but the important thing is that the actors make a bold and clear choice and stick to it.

Off-text improvisation is a useful explorative technique to consider the 'before and after' life of the play. You might explore moments that are alluded to but not seen, for example:

- Was there a time when Solange and Claire were happy?
- The moment in which Claire writes and sends the letter to the police
- The moment when Monsieur is arrested
- Madame and Monsieur arriving back to discover Claire is dead
- The moment after Solange delivers the final monologue. What does she do?

Hot-seating is a valuable and exciting method to develop characterisation. It helps actors to 'flesh out' their understanding of the characters. Using their imagination and the information provided in the given circumstances will allow the actors to consider the voice, attitude, and physicality of the character they are exploring.

A more theatrical way to explore hot-seating might be to combine this exercise with an off-text improvisation. For example, following on from the examples above, after we have watched a scene play out, we could immediately interview the character and ask them probing questions to discover thoughts the actor may not have considered.

Exploring accent and dialect can help actors to consider character choices. Though the play was originally written in French, the location is non-specific. This allows for total freedom of choice in terms of accent and dialect. Be aware that accent and dialect do contribute to an audience's understanding of characters though, so make decisions and stick to them.

Non-verbal communication is often a highly effective way to explore character, subtext, tension and silence. How does each character behave in moments of silence? For example, you might see how characters behave when they are on their own. How does this differ, if it does, from how they behave when they are around other characters?

Key scene work / alternative viewpoints

Another useful exercise to consider involves **staging and rehearsing a key scene with a particular focus** and then trying it in an alternative style. For example, the actors might explore status in conjunction with the director. The director calls out numbers from 1 to 20 for the actors in the space: 1 is the lowest status, that of a slug, if you will; 20 is the highest status, the king, perhaps. By playing this game we can begin to discover how bodies in space can signify status, and this might give a good indication of how to stage certain pivotal moments in the play where status plays a crucial role. It would be valuable for the cast to practise this exercise in rehearsals and possibly as a warm-up to performance, as the shifts in status and power happen so often and so quickly through the play. Madame will assume a high status, but it is worth exploring whether this can

shift. It may not go below another character's status, but may still increase or decrease depending on the action.

Designers

The following exercises and ideas are designed to help theatre makers explore some of the opportunities, themes and ideas that are central to *The Maids*. Some of the suggestions may help designers to consider how key aspects of the play might be communicated and realised and from 'page to stage'.

It might be useful to set up a **production meeting and pitch** for your student designers, as this will help them to consider the play as a whole and root their practical ideas in aims and intentions. Remember that audience impact is key, and that setting up small groups of potential theatre makers might help students to consider the text in a holistic way. For example, a group could consist of a set, costume, sound and lighting designer. Smaller groups simply take on more than one area of responsibility. It is important that each designer questions the aims and intentions of the others, so that each member of the production team is able to think in a holistic and collaborative way. The design 'pitch' could then be offered to the teacher (producer). This is a useful discussion exercise that also lends itself to research, images and presentations. It can work at the start of a scheme of work to initiate ideas/contextualise themes and key moments, or at the end of a scheme of work as a way of ensuring all aspects of production are considered. It would also make an excellent 'active' revision session in time for the exam. TIP – each member of the production team should justify their ideas with key moments from the play.

Creating a model box of a potential set design is a useful exercise and can be as simple or as elaborate as required. It is often useful for students to see how each scene will be played in a potential space, and by creating a model box they will be able to refer more easily to their ideas in a specific space. Though the setting is laid out quite clearly in the stage directions at the beginning, there is only one space, so a designer can give all their attention to this. When an audience are faced with one space for the duration of a play, they will often notice the details increasingly as the play develops. A designer might challenge themselves to see how much detail they can get into the single space.

Exploring different music and sound effects for key scenes is another effective way of considering how design can play an important role in the development of a key idea or theme. Though there is not explicitly music in the play, this doesn't mean that sound effects and underscoring can't be used to add to the tension or to help tell the story. The practical sounds of the telephone and the doorbell may seem mundane, but do not let this put a sound designer off exploring the potential for a creative sound design.

How can lighting help to create shadow and suspense? Have a **look at previous productions and lighting designs** to see how other theatre makers have used lighting to create impact. If you don't have access to lighting, you might want to consider the effect of torches or candles. (Safety first!) Lighting can help signify the passing of time, or in this case, time standing still. Though the action takes place in real time and in one room, there is a moment when the lights are turned off. It is important to explore practically how the actors' faces can be semi-lit in this moment, whilst still making clear that the lights are off. We know that it is late, so might there be some moonlight coming in through the window? Get exploring and get creative!

Another useful exercise that helps to build the world of the play and develop ideas for performance is **sourcing and designing potential costumes**. Research is key, and will help students who are initially daunted about the thought of 'designing'. They don't have to be great artists to create great designs. The main thing is that they approach the design of the production in a holistic way. Is their costume design expressionistic, representational, or more naturalistic? What is their aim and intention? Does their costume design root the production and performance in a particular time period or style? The red dress is a significant article of clothing, as are the maids' uniforms. Though the play was written in the 1940s, there is nothing to say that the costumes and style must fit that period. The most important aspect of any design is that it helps to tell the story.

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