

**The Goodman Theatre
Student Subscription Series
2005-2006 Season**

Student Guide

The Clean House

By Sarah Ruhl

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Jessica Thebus**

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*Exploring
the
Production*

Sarah Ruhl

Sarah Ruhl grew up in a house full of laughter in Chicago; her mother's interest in acting introduced her to the world of theater early in childhood. She studied playwriting at Brown University in Rhode Island and received her Master of Fine Arts degree in 2001. Ms. Ruhl spent her years at Brown developing new works, including *Passion Play: a Cycle*, through staged readings and workshops (*Passion Play* did not receive its first full production until 2005). The success of her 2003 play, *Eurydice*, earned national attention; and when *The Clean House* premiered in 2004, theaters around the country began to vie for production rights. The play was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 2004 and has been on stage throughout the United States and Europe almost continuously since its debut. Ms. Ruhl's other plays include *Melancholy Play*, *Late: a cowboy song*, *Orlando*, and the forthcoming *Dead Man's Cell Phone*. Her characteristic blend of humor and personal tragedy is often attributed to her happy childhood and the loss of her father when she was 20 years old. Today, she lives in Los Angeles with her husband and newborn baby. This is the first of her plays to be performed at the Goodman.

Jessica Thebus is also the daughter of an accomplished Chicago actor. She has worked as an adaptor, director, and writer in and around Chicago since earning her PhD from Northwestern University. She has contributed works to Lookingglass Theatre, About Face, Steppenwolf, Redmoon Theatre Company, and the Piven Theatre Workshop (where she first met Sarah Ruhl). She has taught at The University of Chicago, DePaul University, Columbia College, and Roosevelt University, and she currently teaches directing at Northwestern. In 2004 Ms. Thebus's works *Pulp* and *Winesburg, Ohio* (both at About Face) earned Joseph Jefferson Nominations for best direction of a play and best direction of a musical, respectively. Her striking visual style has garnered comparisons to that of Mary Zimmerman. Jessica Thebus resides in Chicago with her husband and daughter. This is her directorial debut at the Goodman and her third collaboration with Sarah Ruhl.

Jessica Thebus

Directions & Designs

Stage directions are the actions and descriptions given by the playwright in a script. They appear inside parentheses and are *italicized* to distinguish them from the play's dialogue. Some directors and actors place a high value on these directions, while others ignore them completely. In *The Clean House* the stage directions are written in Sarah Ruhl's characteristic lyrical style. Ms. Ruhl explains that her stage directions are "usually something I want to see and feel atmospherically" rather than hard and fast rules about how everything must be done. In *The Clean House*, as in Ms. Ruhl's other plays the stage directions serve as poetic suggestions for the tone of the scene or the desired effect of the imagery.

THINK ABOUT IT

*Stage directions can sometimes have a significant impact on the way a production looks. Shakespeare gave no indication of how a set should look (mostly because there was very little set design on the Elizabethan stage). On the other hand, Sarah Ruhl gives very specific instructions regarding the set and costumes for *The Clean House*. Take a look at the stage directions at the beginning of the play. What are the color requirements for set and costumes? Why do you think Sarah Ruhl included such specific design instructions? If you were a director, how helpful do you think such directions would be? Would you try to honor the playwright's wishes or would you attempt to create an entirely new concept for the play?*

ACTIVITY

In Act Two, Scene 9, the stage directions say, "Virginia makes a giant operatic mess in the living room." Have you ever made a giant mess? What about an operatic one? What do you think such a mess would look like? Does "operatic" describe the scale of destruction or Virginia's behavior?

As you think about the mess, try to remember Sarah Ruhl's directions about the color of the set. Remember that the set must begin completely white every night; the mess must be made and cleaned up so that it can be white again for the next performance.

Do some research or be creative. If you were in charge of the set and technical aspects of the show, what would you do to make sure Virginia's "operatic mess" didn't mess up the set permanently?

If you can find a space in which to do it, try out your ideas for making a temporary mess. What worked and what didn't? Can you think of any other examples from plays that you have read in which damage must be reversed each night? How might those challenges be met?

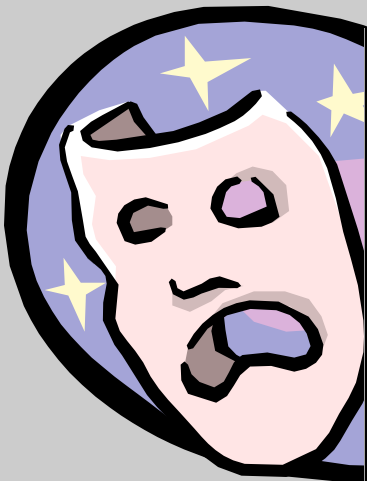


Don't you take that *TONE* with me!

Establishing Tone and Defining Style

Have you ever gotten in trouble for using the wrong tone of voice? A teacher or parent assigns a task and you respond sarcastically, "Thanks a lot." There's nothing wrong with *what* you said—after all, "thanks a lot" can actually be a very polite thing to say—the problem is *how* you said it. Tone is also very important in literature and theater. When working with scripts that mix humor and tragedy and blur the line between magical and everyday events, one of the most important jobs for actors and directors is finding the play's tone. Literary critics define tone as the writer's attitude toward his or her material; but in the theater, tone is more closely associated with the style of the production and its individual performances. In theatre finding the appropriate tone can make the difference between forging emotional connections with the audience and alienating the people watching. Directors and actors can establish the tone by determining a clear style in which to perform or by blending styles to create a unique way to tell their specific story. If the artists are working from an existing script, the *WHAT* of the play will always be the same, but by tweaking the play's tone and style, the *HOW* of the story can change drastically.

ACTIVITY:

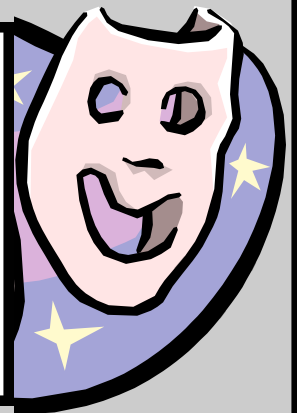


Group 1:
Try presenting the scene with a tragic or melodramatic tone. Think about using Shakespeare or a soap opera as your style guide.

For a better sense of how style and tone can affect a play, divide into three groups and work on the fifth scene in Act Two of *The Clean House*. For each group there is a tone suggestion on this page. After each group has presented its work, discuss which tone worked best and why. Also try to understand why the other options were less effective.

Group 3:
Work on finding a tone that is somewhere in between the two extremes presented above. Discuss as a group which aspects of the scene should be comic and which should be tragic. Be prepared to explain your choices.

Group 2:
Try presenting the scene with a comic or magical tone. Think about the style of cartoons and movie comedies.



THINK ABOUT IT:

Sarah Ruhl's play *The Clean House* provides many opportunities for actors and directors to make choices. When you come to see the show at the Goodman Theatre, try to think about the tone in which it is presented. Do you think the tone works? Why or why not?

Study Guide Questions

1. List a few things Sarah Ruhl and Jessica Thebus have in common.
2. Which do you think is more important in a collaboration: common ground or complementary strengths? Why?
3. Define tone and explain why understanding it is important when working on a play.
4. Select your favorite stage direction from *The Clean House* and explain why you like it.

*Exploring
the
Text*

The Perfect Idea: Where did Sarah Ruhl begin?

Just as Matilde in *The Clean House* is searching for the perfect joke, playwrights are always searching for the perfect idea on which to build a play. These ideas can be entirely created from imagination or based on existing stories from history, mythology, or fiction. Sarah Ruhl explains that the idea for *The Clean House* came to her when she overheard a woman at a cocktail party complaining, "My cleaning lady is depressed and won't clean my house. So I took her to the hospital and had her medicated. And she *still* won't clean!" . Ms. Ruhl created all of the characters and plot points you are studying from this eavesdropped fragment of a conversation.

ACTIVITY:

Listen to a stranger talking on his or her cell phone on the train or in a store or restaurant. When you hear something especially interesting, write it down. Imagine what might have happened to provoke this statement. Think about the person speaking; guess whom he or she might be addressing. What are these people like? What is their relationship to each other? What do they do? Where do they live? Most plays involve some conflict between characters. (Examples of conflicts in *The Clean House* include: 1. Lane wants Matilde to clean, but Matilde won't. 2. Charles wants to be with Ana, which upsets Lane. 3. Virginia wants to feel useful and important, but no one will make time for her.) What are some possible conflicts between the characters you've observed/created? Who else might be involved in the story? Fill out the chart below, then try to write a short story or one scene of a play based on what you overheard.

<p>I overheard these details or phrases:</p>	
<p>These 2-4 characters (include any names and details you have imagined) are involved with each other and the story in some way:</p>	
<p>These conflicts affect the relationships and the story:</p>	

Speaking SOLO

MONOLOGUE and SOLILOQUY

Both monologues and soliloquies are extended speeches delivered by one person. The person or people to whom the speech is addressed determine which term is used to describe it. According to the *Encyclopedia of Literature*:

- a monologue is "any speech of some duration addressed by a character to a second person [on stage]."
- a soliloquy is speech "in which a character addresses an audience or speaks thoughts"

The first four scenes in *The Clean House* each involve a single character speaking. Decide whether these scenes are monologues or soliloquies and explain your answer. Why do you think Sarah Ruhl decided to open the play in this way? What effect does it have on you as you read the script? What effect of monologue or soliloquy in this play? Can you think of any examples from other plays, movies, or TV shows? Is there anything that all of the monologues and/or soliloquies have in common?

There is a lot to learn about characters in a play's monologues and soliloquies. A character's feelings about others and about her world are often expressed. Her word choice and tone can tell us about her background. AND occasionally we can find out about other characters in her speeches. Fill out the table below using the first four scenes from *The Clean House*. Make notes as you read that describe what you have learned about each character through her word choice, tone, and what the other characters have said about her during their monologues.

THINK ABOUT IT:

Monologues and soliloquies can be one important aspect of an actor's performance, but a stand-up performance is almost always just the comedian onstage alone. What do you think would be most difficult about delivering a monologue or a soliloquy as an actor? What do you think would be most difficult about delivering a stand-up comedy routine? What are a few of the considerations a playwright or a stand-up comedian might need to make when preparing a monologue or soliloquy?

Activity: Now that you have read and thought about the speeches in *The Clean House*, it is time to write a monologue or soliloquy of your own. If you would like, use the characters and situations you created in the activities on page 12. Try to think about where your speech would be placed within a larger play. Perform it for your class.

	What she says:	How she says it:	What others say about her:
Matilde			
Lane			
Virginia			

WORD WORK

Sarah Ruhl's script contains words from at least three different languages. Before you start to consider the meaning of the Portuguese and Spanish passages, ask yourself if you are comfortable with all of the English words in *The Clean House*. Below is a list of vocabulary words for you to define and use in an appropriate context. Form a group of three or more, divide the list so that each person in your group has an equal number of words to define. Once you have finished looking each word up, switch definition sheets and write a sentence for each of the words one of your group members defined. If you do not understand the word or your classmate's definition, look it up yourself. The entire group should check each member's sentences to see if he or she used the words properly.

absurd	deadpan	morbid	retain
accumulate	deposited	motive	ritual
acquire	digest	mourning	rival
anesthetic	dissolved	objective	sacred
bankrupt	ethereal	ottoman	scholar
barren	fetish	palpates	solidarity
bourgeois	free agent	perverse	sublime
capable	genetic	poise	temperament
cliché	impulse	possession	time signatures
colleagues	lumpectomy	primal	trample
condiments	mastectomy	privilege	transform
condition	menopause	qualified	unorthodox
context	medieval	rational	veil
dashing	metaphysical	respectively	wheeze

VOCABULARY BUILDERS

As you read *The Clean House* script you will probably encounter plenty of new words, but many of them come from familiar roots. The list below contains words from the play that might be new to you. Many of them can either be built up (by adding prefixes and suffixes to the root word) or stripped down (by taking prefixes and suffixes away) into words that you'll have no trouble recognizing. Follow the examples below to fill in the chart and build as many new words as you can. You won't be able to convert every word into each part of speech, so don't worry about filling in all of the squares; instead, concentrate on understanding the relationship between the words you are given and the words that you build. Knowing what each word means will really help with this activity, so don't hesitate to look up these words.

Identify Part of Speech	Verb Form	Noun Form	Adjective / Adverb Form
admiration (noun)	admire		admirable / admirably
approximately			
charismatic			
compassionate			
composure			
disbelief			unbelievable
functional			
immeasurable			
incomprehensible		comprehension	
indicate			
obsessive			
pronunciation			
radiation			
revelation	reveal		
uncontrollable			
uninspired			
untranslatable			

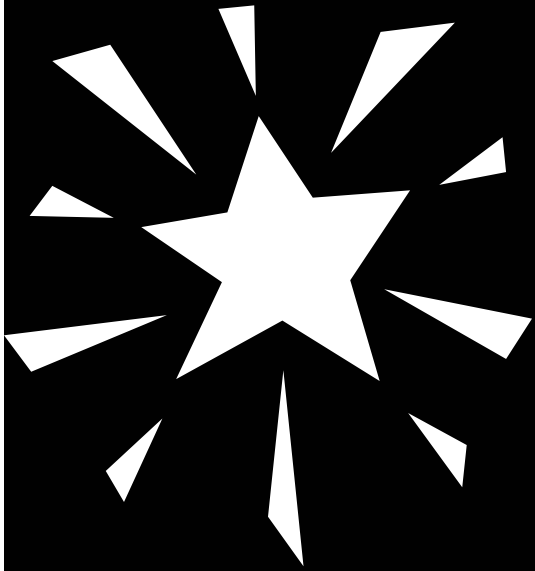
TOOLS OF THE TRADE Prefixes and suffixes like the ones used above can help turn a simple root word into a variety of vocabulary options. Here are a few types of prefixes and suffixes categorized by the type of work they can do:

To negate the root:	To make a verb:	To make the root an adjective:	To make the root an adverb:	To make the root a noun:
ADD: im-, in-, non-, un-	REMOVE all the prefixes and suffixes	ADD: -able, -al, -ment	ADD: -ly	ADD: -ation, -ity

Study Guide Questions

1. Sarah Ruhl got the idea for *The Clean House* from a statement she overheard at a party. Based on the play, how do you think Ms. Ruhl felt about that statement and the person who made it?
2. What is the difference between a soliloquy and a monologue? Which do you think would be a bigger challenge to deliver?
3. Why do you think Sarah Ruhl begins the play the way that she does?
4. Compare the beginning of the play to the beginning of one of your favorite movies. How are they alike? How are they different?

*Exploring
the
Context*



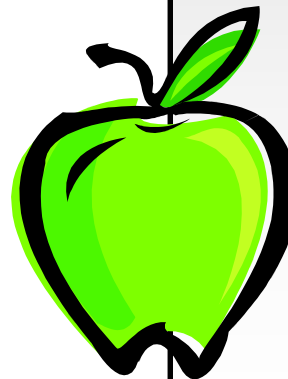
The Magic of Theater

All theatrical performances involve an agreement between the artists and the audience: actors promise to pretend they are people other than themselves, and audience members agree to try to believe them. Theater professionals often call this agreement the “suspension of disbelief.” Audience members know that the woman playing Lane is not actually a doctor whose husband has left her, but we agree to put that knowledge aside for the span of the play. As a part of this agreement, an actor tries to put his or her personal life on hold for the evening, and you try to ignore the stranger coughing next to you. Part of the magic of live theater is that it gives grown-ups a place to play make-believe. And just as we know that the stage is not actually a living room—but we pretend that it is for the length of the play—we accept that a new kind of reality is created on stage, and we accept that reality as our own during the time we spend in the theatre.

Sarah Ruhl's unique writing style is not easily categorized, but it has been linked to a literary movement called **Magic Realism**. Magic Realism is a literature of transformation: mundane objects are transformed into mystical ones, supernatural happenings become commonplace, and the usual constraints of time and space are obsolete. Prominent magic realist authors include Nobel Prize-winner Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende. Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Tony Kushner's style is often associated with magic realism.

THINK ABOUT IT:

The apples thrown from Ana's balcony in the second act form one of the play's most powerful and best-known images. That the apples land in Lane's living room is an example of magic realism (because the play and its characters are not constrained by time and space). Find other examples of magic realism in the play. Which of the three criteria for magic realism listed above applies to the moment you have selected? What statement do you think Sarah Ruhl is trying to make by blending fantasy and reality? Is the moment you have selected effective? Why or why not?



Relax! You already know about this stuff!

Every time you've been to see a play, you have suspended your disbelief. And every time you watch *South Park* or *The Family Guy*, you've experienced magical realism. For the most part the cartoon characters and their worlds follow the same rules we do, but at least one thing in each episode is a bit beyond our belief. For example, Brian, the dog in *The Family Guy*, talks and drinks martinis and every other character responds as though that isn't unusual. Viewers also treat this as an everyday occurrence. They are suspending their disbelief to accept the show's magical realism.



Just Kidding?

Comedy as Commentary in Modern America

Comedy is always meant to be funny, but rarely is humor a comedian or a playwright's only aim. Often comedy, even comedy that seems to be about nothing important, is written to make its audience think about big issues. About 2400 years ago, the Greek poet Aristophanes wrote the comedy *Lysistrata* as a political statement against war. Can you think of any performers making similar statements through comedy in 2006?

Read the info about a few influential comics whose work has challenged the way Americans think about society, human nature, government, and gun control.

Chris Rock

Chris Rock had two role models when he was growing up in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood: boxer Sugar Ray Leonard and comedian Eddie Murphy. He became a comedian because, as he says, "I can't fight, so . . ." He has had a successful career as an actor in film and television, and he continues to write and perform his own stand-up. In 2004 Chris Rock was named the funniest person in America by *Entertainment Weekly*. His stand-up act focuses primarily on issues of race and class.

THINK ABOUT IT Consider the following bit from his show *Bigger and Blacker*:

Everybody's talking about gun control, got to get rid of the guns. . . . You don't need no gun control. We need some bullet control. Man, we need to control the bullets. I think all bullets should cost \$5000. You know why? Cause if a bullet costs \$5000 there'd be no more innocent bystanders. People would think before they killed somebody if a bullet cost \$5000.

What are the social implications of this kind of act? Can you think of any other examples of this type of humor?

Margaret Cho

The daughter of Korean immigrants, Margaret Cho explains that during her childhood in San Francisco, she often felt out of place; "In the magazines that I loved so much and the television and movies I loved so much, I never felt a sense of belonging." She performed her first stand-up act at the age of sixteen and has been crafting a unique and powerful message ever since. As an Asian-American woman, Cho offers a perspective from two wildly underrepresented groups in the comedy world, but she refuses to allow her comedy to be pigeonholed as "girly" or "ethnic":

I want to make the political statement [that] I'm not going to put the power of my self-worth into the hands of advertisers and television executives . . . I want to put that power in my hands. That's what [my work is] about. . . . trying to find happiness and satisfaction in yourself, which is a revolutionary idea.

Cho's message is a personal one, but it has universal implications. While making people laugh, she is also able to make them think about the power dynamics of society and the capacity each person has to make herself happy.

Jon Stewart

Jon Stewart was born and raised in New Jersey and moved to New York City in 1986 to pursue a career in comedy. For over a decade he performed in local comedy clubs, took bit parts in film and television, and cultivated his comedic voice. In 1999, he was named host of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*. His interest in news and politics have made him one of cable television's most successful personalities as he confronts the hypocrisies and inadequacies of the American media, government, and popular culture.

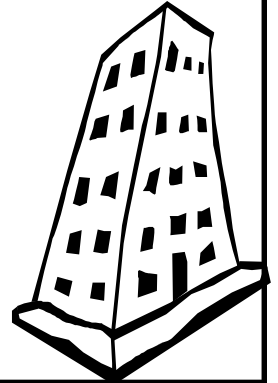
When asked whether he's a journalist or a comedian, Stewart replies, "I think of myself as a comedian who has the pleasure of writing jokes about things that I actually care about. And that's really it. You know, if I really wanted to enact social change . . . I have great respect for people who are in the front lines and the trenches of trying to enact social change. I am far lazier than that." Critics and audiences of Stewart's show disagree with the comedian's self-deprecation; according to Bill Moyers of PBS, "You simply can't understand American politics in the new millennium without *The Daily Show*."

ACTIVITY:

Chris Rock has said that "Comedy is the blues for people who can't sing." What do you think he means? Is there anything in the script of *The Clean House* that reflects the idea of sadness turned to laughter? Select an issue that concerns you and try to write a humorous paragraph, scene, or poem about it.



What makes a house a HOME?

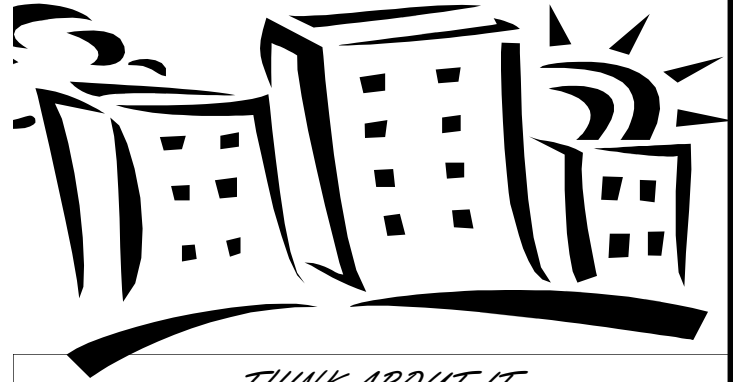


ACTIVITY:

Think about the different houses in *The Clean House*. Draw or find magazine pictures that resemble the play's houses as you imagine them. Remember to include Ana's house by the sea and Virginia's house (that we never see). Also try to imagine what Matilde's home in Brazil might have looked like.

As you work on this activity, try to think the way a play's designer would think: the physical spaces in the play should be a reflection of a character's personality, relationships, or emotional state. Consider why and how the each of the houses you selected reflects the character who lives in it.

Now try to draw or find a picture that resembles a house you'd like to live in when you are older. Where is it? How big is it? Who lives there with you? How is it decorated? Do you keep it neat or is there usually a mess? How similar is your future house to the place you live now? Do you think your home will be a reflection of you or will your house be just a house? How will you try to make your house a home?



THINK ABOUT IT:

*Dictionary.com defines "house" as "A structure serving as a dwelling for one or more persons, especially for a family" and "home" as "An environment offering security and happiness." In *The Clean House*, which characters do you think live in houses and which live in homes? Why did you give that answer? What do you think is the difference between a house and a home? Where do you feel most at home? What about that place offers security and happiness?*



Study Guide Questions

1. Explain what it means to suspend disbelief.
2. Define magic realism and give a few examples from things you like to read or watch.
3. List a few functions of comedy. What does Chris Rock say comedy is?
4. Describe the difference between a house and a home.

*Exploring
the
Social Issues*

Class, Profession and Status:

“I’m sorry, but I did not go to medical school to clean my own house.”

—Lane, The Clean House, Act one, Scene two

People often say that money isn’t everything, but do you think that is true? Does a person’s capacity to earn and spend money affect his or her status in society? Do some research and fill in the chart below. Think about the ways that wealth affects perception. Think about Lane and Charles’s marriage; is their status affected by the fact that they are both doctors?



THINK ABOUT IT:

Matilde left Brazil to become a stand-up comedian in the United States, but instead she took a job as Lane’s cleaning lady. Do you know anyone who is qualified (has the education and/or experience) to do a job other than the one he or she is doing? Why do you think that person is not working in his or her field? How do you think you would feel if you were unable to use your skills and training because of financial difficulties, a family situation, or some other reason?



Career	Median Salary or Annual Earnings
Surgeon	
Family practice Doctor	
High-powered Attorney	
Public Defender	
Movie Star	
Working Stage Actor	
Housekeeper	



According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, housekeeping professionals (like Matilde) earn \$16,900 on average per year. Homemakers (like Virginia) earn nothing. Think about the way that Lane treats Matilde and Virginia. The quotation above indicates that Lane feels she is too important to clean her own house. How does Virginia feel about cleaning? How does she feel about not being employed outside the home? Find a line from the play to support your answer. In what ways does income command the respect of others? In what ways does income (or lack thereof) affect the one’s own sense of self-worth?

The Color of the Collar



Blue-collar workers generally hold jobs that require semi-skilled labor, but provide on-the-job training. Jobs in factories, construction, and maintenance are usually considered blue-collar work, as are jobs as landscapers, auto mechanics, and utility technicians. The name "blue-collar" refers to light blue work shirts that are popular for their durability. Workers typically perform manual labor, are paid by the hour, and may or may not receive benefits like health-care coverage and retirement savings plans.

In blue-collar fields, direct supervisors (often called "foremen" or "forewomen") are most often workers who have been promoted to oversight positions and who may or may not continue to work as members of the crew. Seniority is rewarded with raises in hourly pay and either vacation time or scheduling flexibility. Shifts can be long and strenuous, but blue-collar workers are generally able to leave all job-related responsibilities at work. As American manufacturing becomes less dependent on human productivity and more reliant on computers and machines, blue-collar workers may be expected to prepare for work that demands more technical skill and expertise.

THINK ABOUT IT:
 Try to think of some blue and white-collar jobs other than the ones listed here. Think about the advantages and disadvantages of each type of work. Which kind of job would you prefer? Why? Is there any kind of work that you would never want to try? What about that work is so unappealing?

White-collar workers generally hold jobs that require skilled or highly skilled labor, for which pre-employment education is necessary. Doctors, lawyers, architects, accountants (and other financial services providers), and office workers are all considered white-collar workers. The name "white-collar" refers to the white dress shirts that business men wore, because they did not have to worry about dirtying their clothes. White-collar workers are not often called on to perform physical labor or "get their hands dirty." They are typically paid an annual salary and receive some form of health care and retirement benefits.

In white-collar jobs, seniority and performance can be rewarded with promotions and raises. Most white collar workers spend their days in offices (from 9 am to 5 pm), but many white-collar professionals work longer hours and bring projects home with them. As offices become more dependent on technology, computer skills are becoming an integral part of a white-collar career.

Blue-Collar

White-Collar Jobs

Activity:

Try to think of one blue-collar and one-white collar job that you think you might like to do. Do a little research and find out more about each occupation. Consider aspects of the job like pay and benefits, workplace attire, required education/training, opportunities for advancement, industry future, and flexibility. If you think you'd like to travel when you get older, which job will allow you to do that? Is one job more conducive to having a family than the other? Present your findings to the class.



Emotional Responses

Think About It:

In *The Clean House* Ana speaks to Virginia and Matilde about Charles, saying, "I want him to be a nurse and he wants to be an explorer." Ana and Charles are responding to Ana's illness differently, but both are suffering from grief. In her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross explains the five stages of grief that a terminally ill patient will likely experience. They are:

- DENIAL ("This is not happening!")
- ANGER ("Why is this happening?")
- BARGAINING ("I'll be a better person, if . . .")
- DEPRESSION ("I don't care anymore.")
- ACCEPTANCE ("I'm ready for what is going to happen")

While Ms. Kubler-Ross was focused on the emotional responses of terminally ill patients, these stages of grief can also be applied to the reactions people have when they lose a loved one or undergo any significant life changes. Other than Ana, who in *The Clean House* is grieving? Why? Which stages of grief do you think each character experiences throughout the play?

Grieving in Groups:

Each of the characters in *The Clean House* must deal with loss, and this collective suffering leads to plenty of anger and misunderstandings, but also to some unexpected friendships (for example, Lane's relationship with her husband's mistress). Read Margaret Atwood's poem "IS / NOT" and think about the particular challenges and benefits of having a partner in grief. Think about the people in your life on whom you can depend for comfort and understanding during difficult times.

ACTIVITY:

Emotional Emergency Response Plan

From early childhood, kids are taught how to plan for a physical disaster. You have probably practiced what to do in a fire or tornado, and you know who to call if there is a medical emergency. Are you prepared for an emotional emergency? Try to imagine the worst loss you could suffer or the scariest change that could be forced on you. Write it down. Now try to imagine how you would actually deal with it. Would you deny the problem and bottle up your emotions? Would you react with anger and harm yourself or someone else? In times of extreme stress, we often react without thinking (which is why they make you do fire drills so often—so that it becomes second nature). Write out an emotional emergency plan now; remember your plan should be specific to you. In a crisis, is there a specific person whom you could call or a place to which you could go for help? Is there an activity (like writing, painting, or exercising) that helps you focus and compose yourself? Look at your list of actual reactions, if you notice anything that worries you, try to plan ways to react in ways that feel healthier. Thinking about how you handle stress and being aware of your emotional responses can really help in an emergency.

Study Guide Questions

1. What—other than salary—can affect a person's status in society?
2. We know how Lane, Virginia, and Matilde feel about cleaning, but how do you feel about it? Would you feel comfortable hiring someone to clean for you?
3. Apart from income, what are the major differences between blue-collar and white-collar jobs?
4. Do you think society values one kind of work over another? Do you value one kind of work over another? Why or why not?



TEXT QUESTIONS

The following are text questions designed to assess basic understanding of the plot and character relationships.

1. How many characters are there in this play?
2. How old is the oldest character? The youngest?
3. What should everyone in the play be able to do?
4. What does the author suggest might be projected during the play? When?
5. What does the author say about the jokes in the play? Does she want every production to use the same ones?
6. Which characters in the play use the correct Brazilian pronunciation of Matilde's name?
7. Other than English, what two languages are spoken in the play?
8. To whom does the author dedicate this play?

ACT ONE

1. Matilde

1. Who appears in this scene?
2. In what language does she speak?
3. What does she do?

2. Lane

1. To whom does Lane speak?
2. What is she upset about?
3. Who is depressed?
4. What did Lane do to try to fix the situation?
5. What didn't she go to medical school to do?

3. Virginia

1. Who does Virginia think are insane?
2. What does she love?
3. Why does she love it?
4. What might Virginia do with too much leisure time?
5. Who is Virginia's sister? Where does she work? What are those places, according to Virginia?
6. What does Virginia's sister not know? Why does she not know these things?
7. If Virginia were to die at any moment, what would no one have to do?

4. Matilde

1. Who was Matilde's father?
2. How old was her father when he married? Why did he wait so long?
3. What would her father say about Matilde's mother?
4. Why were they never apart?
5. What did Matilde's parents laugh like?
6. Why does Matilde wear black?
7. What couldn't doctors explain?
8. How long did it take Matilde's father to make up the joke? Why did he make it up?
9. What happened after Matilde's mother died?

5. Lane and Matilde

1. What is Matilde doing when Lane enters?
2. What does Lane ask Matilde to do?
3. What doesn't Lane like to do?
4. What did Matilde do before she came to the United States?
5. What doesn't Lane always understand?
6. To Lane, what is life about?



Text Questions

1. How does giving orders in her own home make Lane feel?
2. What does Matilde suggest Lane should pretend?

6. Matilde

1. What does Matilde imagine in this scene?
2. As Matilde watches, what else does she do?

7. Virginia and Matilde

1. What stops when the doorbell rings at the top of this scene?
2. What do Matilde's parents do as they exit?
3. How does Matilde know that Virginia is Lane's sister?
4. What's different about the way Matilde and Virginia say Matilde's name?
5. Where is Lane during this scene?
6. Why is Matilde sad?
7. What would Matilde think as a child when the floor was dirty?
8. What does Virginia say she likes?
9. How does cleaning her house make Virginia feel?
10. What does Matilde try to think of while she is cleaning?
11. How old is Matilde according to the script?
12. What is Virginia's proposition to Matilde?
13. By what time does Virginia have her house cleaned each day?
14. What has Virginia thought the world wasn't quite good enough for?
15. Why hasn't Virginia done volunteer work?
16. What does Virginia think about her life since age 22?
17. What did Virginia study?
18. Where does she have trouble relaxing?
19. How did she feel about the Greek ruins?
20. Why can't Matilde tell Lane about Virginia's proposition?
21. What room does Virginia want to start in? Why?

8. Lane and Matilde

1. What is Matilde reading?
2. What does Matilde do with her medication?

9. Matilde

1. What does the perfect joke do? What is the perfect joke somewhere between?
2. Who appears? Where are they?
3. What will Matilde never know?

10. Virginia and Matilde

1. What is Virginia doing? What is Matilde doing?
2. Why doesn't Virginia want to hear a joke?
3. To what does Virginia compare her husband?
4. According to Virginia, what should a man be?
5. What does Matilde feel a good joke does?
6. In order to tell a good joke, what must you believe?
7. If more women knew more jokes, according to Matilde's mother, what would there be more of?
8. How does Virginia describe her brother-in-law? What does he do for a living?
9. Why is it better to have a husband who's not too handsome?
10. What does Virginia come across? Why don't they look like Lane's?



Text Questions

11. Lane and Virginia have coffee

1. What is Lane sure Matilde would tell her?
2. Who is Charles? When was the last time Virginia saw him?
3. How many surgeries does Charles perform a day?
4. What does Matilde do when Virginia tries to help clear the dishes?
5. How does Virginia respond when Lane calls her “the company?”
6. What can’t Lane get used to?
7. How do most people in the country function? What do these people have?
8. What happens in silence between the two sisters? What do they become?

12. Lane and Matilde

1. What is Matilde trying to do? What is she doing physically as she does this?
2. Where is Charles (probably)?
3. What used to happen when Lane and Charles were younger? How have things changed?
4. What happens around Matilde at the end of the scene?

13. Virginia and Matilde. Then Lane.

1. What is Virginia doing? What does Matilde do?
2. What didn’t Virginia know jokes had?
3. What is Matilde afraid of?
4. What does Virginia come across?
5. What are Virginia and Matilde talking about? Why don’t they ever really say it?
6. What’s unsanitary?
7. After Lane enters, Virginia has a deep impulse to do what? What does she do about it?
8. How does Lane cut her hand? What is she trying to make?
9. Who’s gone off with his patient? What is she being treated for?
10. How old is this other woman? What must she have?
11. Why did Lane think it would be absurd for him to look at another woman?
12. What didn’t he want? What did he want?
13. Of what does Lane accuse Virginia? What is her evidence?
14. What does Matilde say she’s going to do?
15. What does Virginia wish when she wakes up in the morning? What does she do instead? What was it that she wanted?
16. What does Matilde wish Lane and Virginia luck on finding?

14. Lane. Then Matilde.

1. What does Lane imagine her husband and his lover doing? Who shows us what she imagines?
2. What do people imagine about people in love?
3. What happens to Lane when she tries to laugh?
4. Who comes to the door?
5. How does Virginia describe the woman?

Between Acts

1. What does the living room become?
2. Who do the Man and Woman become?



Text Questions

ACT TWO

1. Charles Performs Surgery on the Woman He Loves

1. What does the author suggest would be nice in this scene if both actors are capable?
2. Is there any dialogue written in this scene? Why do you think the author chose to do this?

2. Ana

1. What has Ana always avoided? Why? What doesn't she like about them?
2. What does Ana think Charles left inside her during surgery?

3. Charles

1. According to Charles, what did he believe would happen if a person were good enough?
2. Who invented rubber gloves? Why?
3. What is the difference between inspired and uninspired medicine?

4. Charles and Ana

1. What disease does Ana have?
2. What does Charles tell her is a normal reaction? Does she react this way?
3. What does Ana want Charles to do tomorrow?
4. What do the stage directions in this scene tell us happens between Charles and Ana?

5. Lane, Virginia, Matilde, Charles, and Ana

1. This scene is a continuation of which previous scene?
2. Who does Charles want to know each other? Why?
3. What do Matilde and Ana do as soon as they meet?
4. What does Virginia get for the rest of the group?
5. What does Ana say Lane is very generous to do? How does Lane respond?
6. Who was the last man Ana fell in love with? What was he like?
7. What is a *basheret*?
8. What does Jewish law say must happen when someone meets his or her *basheret*?
9. Where did Charles learn about this concept? Who else learns about it from the same source?
10. According to Jewish law, what happens when a baby is forty days old?
11. Matilde's employment status changes in this scene: who hires her? What is she hired to do?
12. How does this change Lane? What does she offer Matilde if she'll stay?
13. Ana says she will not be Charles's what?
14. What is the compromise that Matilde proposes?
15. What are Ana and Charles going to do that afternoon? What is Lane's response?
16. To what does Matilde compare this interaction?
17. Who stays with Lane at the end of this scene?

6. Ana's balcony

1. What are Ana and Matilde surrounded by?
2. What does Matilde suggest they do with apples that aren't the really, really good ones?
3. Where do the apples go when they throw them? Who is in that space? What is her reaction?
4. How many jokes has Matilde made up since coming to live with Ana? How many did she make up at Lane's?
5. According to Matilde, how many times in your life do you want to hear the perfect joke?

7. Matilde, Virginia, and Lane

1. What are Lane and Matilde doing at the top of this scene? What is Virginia? What are Charles and Ana?
2. What does Lane question Matilde about?
3. How can Matilde tell that Charles and Ana are very much in love?
4. What does Matilde reveal about Ana? What does she say Ana won't do?
5. What word does Lane think sounds funny if you say it lots of times in a row?



Text Questions

8. Ana and Charles try to read one another's mind

1. Why does Charles want to learn to read Ana's mind? Where did he get this idea?
2. What does Ana leave to do?
3. What does Charles want Ana to do while she's swimming? What is he going to try to do?
4. What does Matilde do in this scene? Does what she was afraid would happen actually happen?

9. Lane, Virginia. Then Matilde

1. What is Lane holding at the top of this scene?
2. What does she want Virginia to stop doing? Why?
3. What does Virginia finally call her sister? How long has she thought of her like that?
4. Virginia says that Lane thinks all people with problems have what?
5. What did Virginia think might change about her and Lane's relationship when things started to fall apart? Was she right?
6. What is Virginia going to do instead of helping her sister?
7. Why does Virginia think Charles left?
8. What does Virginia do to the living room?
9. Where has Charles gone? Why has he gone there?
10. What is the yew tree bark supposed to do that would help Ana?
11. What does Matilde want Lane to do? How does Virginia suggest Lane view the situation?

10. Lane Makes a House call to her Husband's Soul Mate

1. When Ana leaves to get iced tea, what does Lane do?
2. According to Lane, what happens to Charles when he looks at Ana?
3. What does Lane say is the reason people say, "I'm sorry?"
4. How did Lane and Charles fall in love?
5. What do the stage directions tell us Lane does with regard to Ana?

11. Lane calls Virginia

1. What does Lane tell Virginia Ana is going to do? Why is this happening?
2. Why won't Virginia be around during the day? What does she like about what she says she's doing?
3. Under what condition will Virginia help Lane?

12. Ana and Virginia. Then Matilde. Then Lane.

1. What's different about Lane's living room in this scene?
2. What does Ana want to have a relationship with? What doesn't she want a relationship with?
3. What does Virginia give Ana to eat? What is she not used to people doing?
4. How does Charles send the message that he can't get on the plane with the tree?
5. What do the women eat from the same container?
6. Lane and Virginia leave to get what for Ana?
7. What does Ana ask Matilde to do? When does she want her to do it?
8. The text says Lane guards Ana in a specific way - like what does she guard Ana?

13. Matilde tells Ana a joke

1. Why does Ana think Lane will take care of Charles?
2. How does Ana say she wants to die?
3. What do we hear instead of the joke? What does the author suggest is projected?
4. What does Matilde say a prayer does? Who does she say should say a prayer?
5. What does Charles carry with him when he enters?

14. Matilde

1. Who do Ana and Charles transform into?
2. What was Matilde the only baby to do, according to her mother?
3. What does Matilde think heaven is?