

PHOTO BY MIKKI SCHAFFNER



**STUDY
GUIDE**

PATRICK HAMILTON'S



GASLIGHT

A NEW VERSION FOR THE STAGE BY **STEVEN DIETZ**

DIRECTED BY **COURTNEY SALE**

PRODUCED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH CINCINNATI SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

STUDY GUIDE BY **ALLISON BACKUS**

DESIGNED BY **EMILY BOYER**

OCTOBER 18 - NOVEMBER 5



MERRIMACK REPERTORY THEATRE

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PRESENTS

GASLIGHT

FEATURING

TOM COINER*
CANDICE HANDY*
JIM HOPKINS*
KAREN MACDONALD*
KRISTIN YANCY*

SCENIC DESIGNER
SAMANTHA RENO

COSTUME DESIGNER
RAINY EDWARDS

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SOUND DESIGNER
ROBERT CARLTON STIMMEL

PROPERTIES DESIGNER
KARA EBLE TRUSTY

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DIRECTED BY
COURTNEY SALE+

OCTOBER 18-NOVEMBER 5, 2023

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LEARNING STANDARDS

FOR GRADES 9-12

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PATRICK HAMILTON'S BIOGRAPHY

Theatre Arts – *Responding*
T.R.07, T.R.08, T.R.09

AFTER THE SHOW: JOURNAL PROMPTS

Theatre Arts – *Responding*
T.R.07, T.R.08, T.R.09
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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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WRITE: BELLA'S DIARY

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BACK IN TIME: BRITAIN AND EUROPE IN THE 1930S, FASCISM, POLITICAL GASLIGHTING, AND THE BIG LIE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

INTERWAR TIMELINE

History and Social Science – *US History II, World History II*
HSS.USII.T3.02, HSS.USII.T3.05,
HSS.WHII.T4.08

TOPICS AND THEME STATEMENTS

English Language Arts – *Writing, Reading*
W.1, R.1, R.2, R.6

GASLIGHTING IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CONTEMPORARY TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

English Language Arts – *Reading, Speaking and Listening*
R.1, R.2, R.7, R.8, R.9, SL.3, SL.4

GASLIGHT SYNOPSIS

It is evening in the Manningham home in New York City. Mr. Jack Manningham sits reading his newspaper while Mrs. Bella Manningham knits. Bella leaves her seat to slip the maid, Elizabeth, some money. Jack inquires about his wife's actions, and after being pressed, she admits to sending Elizabeth for sweet rolls so that they can have them with their tea. Jack notices the fire is dwindling and tells his wife to ring the maid's bell, but Bella says she can see to the fire herself. Jack berates his wife for not using the servants, and she finally relents, ringing the bell for their younger maid, Nancy.

Nancy enters to tend to the fire, and Jack flirtatiously teases her, complimenting her complexion. When Nancy exits, Bella tells her husband that she feels humiliated by his words, especially since she feels that Nancy often sneers at her. Jack tells his wife that she must be imagining it, that her "little mind" simply "blinds" her to what is "real." Bella softens when Jack begins to sing a pet song to her. Jack tells her he has purchased tickets

to see the great actor Edwin Booth perform on stage and an opportunity to meet the actor backstage.

However, Jack's mood turns sour when he notices that the portrait of his father has been removed from the wall. He tells Bella to

retrieve and return the picture, even though Bella insists she did not move

it. Jack calls in Elizabeth and Nancy and has each swear on a Bible that they did not move the portrait. When the maids leave, Bella swears on the Bible herself. Jack tells her that she must not remember moving it and that she is mad like her mother once was. Jack threatens Bella with doctors and medical treatment centers, saying he has "done all [he] can" for her despite the many items that have "disappeared" throughout their marriage. Panicked and desperate, Bella begins to search for the painting. When she finds it behind a bookcase, Jack tells her that her discovery of the picture proves that she hid it in the first place.

Jack brings Bella her "medicine" and tells her he is going out for the evening. He tells her he will stop at the grocer on his way home and asks Bella for the shopping list. When Jack tells her that the list is not where Bella remembers leaving it, she panics again, and Jack again threatens to have her admitted to an asylum. He tells her they can't possibly attend the theatre when she is in such a state, much to Bella's despair.

Jack leaves for the evening, and Elizabeth informs Bella that someone

is at the door to see her. Bella protests, but Elizabeth insists that she see the visitor, Sergeant Rough, who enters the living room shortly after Elizabeth leaves. To gain Bella's trust, Rough tells her that Elizabeth is stationed outside the door should she need her and that he is there to help.

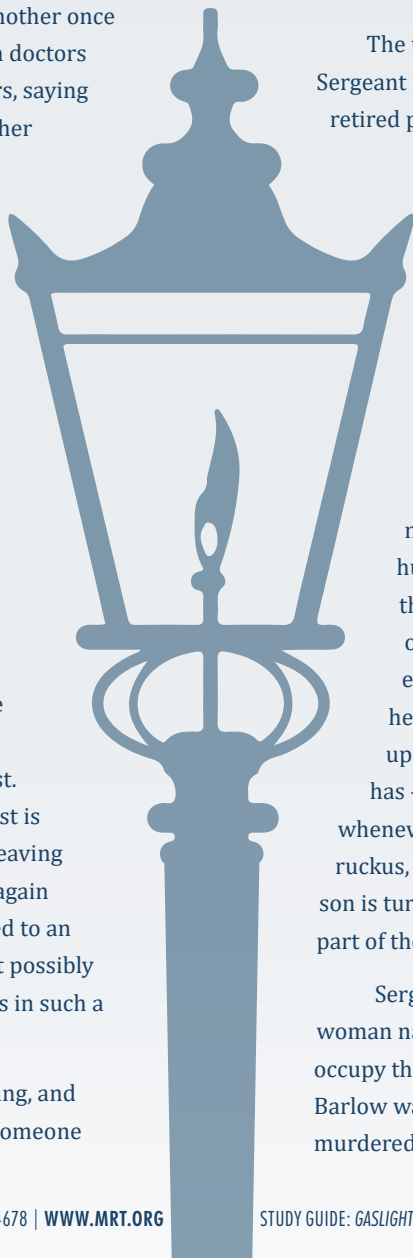
The two begin to chat, and Sergeant Rough explains that he is a retired police sergeant searching for the truth. Bella reveals that she is estranged from her extended family and that the house she lives in with Jack was bought with her inheritance. Bella confesses that she hates the house, and when Rough asks why, Bella explains that she often hears noises from upstairs when her husband is gone, even though that part of the house is closed off. Rough asks Bella if she has ever thought that it might be her husband walking around upstairs, and she admits that she has – because the gas lamps lower whenever she hears the upstairs ruckus, indicating that another person is turning on the lights in another part of the house.

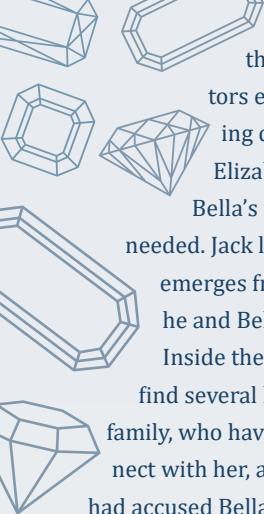
Sergeant Rough explains that a woman named Alice Barlow used to occupy the Manningham's house. Alice Barlow was a wealthy widow who was murdered for possessing the valuable

Barlow Rubies. Rough was an investigator on the case, and he tells Bella that the rubies were never found. He admits that the case has never left his mind and that he has returned to the crime scene 25 years later to solve it. Rough remembers interviewing a man named Sydney Power, a supposed nephew of Barlow. He became suspicious when he recently saw a man who looked just like Power return to the house where Alice Barlow had been murdered so many years before. Rough has been watching Jack, the man he recognizes as Sydney Power for weeks, only to discover that after he leaves the house, he turns into the alley and enters the back of the house through a skylight. Rough believes that Jack intends to make Bella lose her mind so that he may search for the missing rubies without her in the way. Bella begins to panic and tries to defend her husband, but Rough calms her by telling her that she is sane and has the power to set things right.

Rough and Bella try to break into Jack's desk, but before they can, the lights in the parlor brighten, indicating that Jack is leaving the upstairs and will soon return "home." Elizabeth helps to hide Sergeant Rough in a closet. Jack enters through the front door.

Elizabeth tells Jack that Bella has retired to her room with a headache. While Jack dresses for dinner, he tells Elizabeth about how "unwell" his wife is and admits





that he plans to have doctors examine her the following day. He is eager to have Elizabeth testify and confirm Bella's madness in court if needed. Jack leaves, and Rough re-emerges from the closet. Together, he and Bella force the desk open. Inside the desk, Bella and Rough find several letters to Bella from her family, who have been trying to reconnect with her, and some items that Jack had accused Bella of "losing" and "stealing," including a second-hand brooch. When Rough asks Bella how she knows the brooch from her husband was second-hand, Bella shows him the inscription that becomes visible after the pin is removed. Bella says there used to be beads inside the small space but that she removed them because they kept falling out. Rough finds that the inscription in the brooch reads A.B. – for Alice Barlow – just as Elizabeth fetches the beads mentioned by Bella. The beads are the famous Barlow Rubies, which Bella had safely tucked away in a vase. Rough leaves with the rubies, intent on going to the police station to get officers to arrest Jack, and he instructs Bella to go to her bed, where Jack still believes her to be.

Jack reenters and finds Nancy. They flirt with each other before Nancy tells him that she knows all about his "double life." Jack tells her it won't matter since Bella will be taken to the asylum in the morning. Despite her desire for Jack, Nancy tells him she knows

that Bella is not mad, that Jack has only made her believe she is. She promises Jack that she will testify against Bella at a price.

Jack "smokes" Bella out of her room by telling her he has letters from her family. But when she enters the parlor, he interrogates and insults her – questioning her for breaking into his desk, which is noticeably in disarray. Jack tells her she must have done it while sleep-walking, and Bella begins to doubt herself, worrying that everything that happened with Sergeant Rough was a dream.

Rough reenters, antagonizing and accusing Jack, before revealing that the rubies he had been searching for had been in the brooch he had gifted his wife. The other officers arrive and arrest Jack for the murder of Alice Barlow.

Before her husband is taken away, Bella asks to speak to Jack alone. Tied to a chair, Jack tries to charm and gaslight Bella again, trying desperately to get her to free him with a razor to cut the ropes. Bella tells him she sees no razor, that it must be her husband's "overactive imagination." She then tells him that she is too mad to help him, useless and silly, a perfect reiteration of many of Jack's manipulative words. Rough reenters to take Jack away. Jack begs Nancy and Elizabeth for help in a last attempt, but both promise to testify against him. Finally alone in the parlor again, Bella and Sargeant Rough toast to their success.



FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT: AN INTERVIEW WITH STEVEN DIETZ

Steven Dietz is an award-winning playwright and adapter based in Seattle and Austin. In 2019, *American Theatre Magazine* named him one of the top 20 most frequently produced American playwrights. His original plays include *Bloomsday*, *Lonely Planet*, *Fiction*, *Private Eyes*, *Becky's New Car*, and *Last of the Boys*. His theatrical adaptations include *Dracula*, *Silence*, *Paragon Springs*, and *Sherlock Holmes: The Final Adventure*.

WHEN/WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST INTRODUCTION TO THE STORY OF GASLIGHT?

I think of the original 1938 play (titled "Angel Street" in America) as the gold standard for theatrical thrillers. That play's psychological twists and turns have inspired thousands of other plays, television shows, and movies. I read it years ago and then re-

read it in 2018 while writing several of my own thrillers. I reached out to the Patrick Hamilton estate, wishing to give the original play a more up-to-date theatrical feel. They agreed to let me make this new version.

FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT: AN INTERVIEW WITH STEVEN DIETZ

WHAT WAS YOUR WRITING PROCESS LIKE? WHAT WAS THE GREATEST CHALLENGE IN ADAPTING *GASLIGHT*?

Like most of the well-known literature I've adapted, I read the source material twice: once for pleasure (letting myself be surprised); and once for narrative structure (how did the story manufacture those surprises?). Then I don't lift or open the source material again. I write towards the narrative "turns" that compelled me; I invent the others that I need. In this way, my voice can assert itself in tandem with the voice of the original.

Though very few people know the actual story, the title alone (in 2023) tells them what will happen. Therefore, the play – which likely began as a "What?" thriller (what is happening to her?) – becomes, in our day and age, a "How?" thriller: how will this woman break the psychological grip of her husband? My job was to situate the play's surprises in Bella's actions, not her dilemma.

HOW DO YOU FEEL YOUR ADAPTATION DIFFERS FROM HAMILTON'S ORIGINAL SCRIPT?

In my adapted script, Bella has a stronger and larger role in helping Detective Rough solve the case against Jack Manningham. Also, the two maids – Elizabeth and Nancy – have a more substantial impact on Bella and the play's events. Finally, I have inserted additional moments of humor and levity to balance the underlying terror of the play's events.

WHAT DO YOU THINK THIS PLAY SAYS ABOUT TRUTH? WHAT DO YOU THINK IT SAYS ABOUT POWER?

Though I don't believe a play is trying to "say" anything, spending five years and counting with this story has taught me that personal "truth" is an invention. Although an

outside observer (like the audience watching Bella) may have access to a sort of empirical truth, knowing what is "really" happening – the characters themselves are trapped within the life they have invented or that someone has invented for them. Jack's power is that he has invented Bella's truth. He will hold that power until Bella can overturn his invention.

HAMILTON WROTE *GASLIGHT* OVER 80 YEARS AGO. SINCE THEN, THE TERM "GASLIGHTING" HAS BECOME A PART OF THE ENGLISH LEXICON. MERRIAM-WEBSTER EVEN DUBBED "GASLIGHTING" THE WORD OF THE YEAR IN 2022. DO YOU THINK GASLIGHTING IS MORE PREVALENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY THAN IT WAS WHEN HAMILTON WAS WRITING? WHY OR WHY NOT?

History has shown us that once a condition is "named," it is perceived to be more common. I can't imagine what we now call "gaslighting" is any more common now than it was before Patrick Hamilton gave us a metaphorical signifier. If anything, I would guess the term is likely used now as a more general catch-all about "power," meant to encompass modes of behavior far removed from Hamilton's original intent.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE AUDIENCES TAKE AWAY FROM THIS PRODUCTION OF *GASLIGHT*?

I get asked this question regularly. To which I respectfully respond: I have no control over how an audience responds to the work. To do that, I'd have to believe in a "universal response" to this story, which I don't think exists. Instead, I expect – and hope – that the responses are wide-ranging, individual, contradictory, and complex. *Gaslight* is a thriller, and it is a mystery, and it is entertainment. I'm eager to see the impact of all these narrative qualities on the MRT audiences.



FROM THE DIRECTOR: AN INTERVIEW WITH COURTNEY SALE

Courtney Sale is the Director of Steven Dietz's adaption of *Gaslight*. She has served as the Nancy L. Donahue Artistic Director of Merrimack Repertory Theatre since 2020. Her directing credits include *A Christmas Carol*, at MRT, *Tiny Beautiful Things*, at Seattle Repertory Theatre, *Wild Horses*, and *Not Medea* at the Contemporary American Theatre Festival, and *Black Beauty* and *The Little Prince* at Seattle Children's Theatre.

GASLIGHT IS CONSIDERED A CLASSIC STORY ON BOTH STAGE AND SCREEN -- HOW DID YOU FIND YOUR OWN WAY INTO THIS STORY? HOW DO YOU FOCUS YOUR OWN DIRECTORIAL VISION WHEN DIRECTING A STORY THAT HAS BEEN PRODUCED AND IMAGINED SO OFTEN ON BOTH STAGE AND SCREEN?

Steven's adaptation and approach give the creative team incredible guidance. It's a

juggernaut of an iteration. The writing asks for an emotional velocity of production. This

FROM THE DIRECTOR: AN INTERVIEW WITH COURTNEY SALE

energy highlights Bella's journeys, the stories' turns, and ways perception constantly shifts. As creators, we have to make our version of this play now. For those who are fans of the film and original play, I hope they'll find this version fresh, powerful, and engrossing.

THIS PLAY DEALS WITH HEAVY TOPICS OF SPOUSAL ABUSE AND MANIPULATION. HOW DO YOU CREATE A REHEARSAL ENVIRONMENT THAT ENCOURAGES POIGNANT PERFORMANCES AND ALSO OFFERS A SAFE SPACE FOR THE PERFORMERS?

Actors are extraordinary artists who show up to rehearsal rooms with implicit trust. The first job of a director is not taking that for granted. I have immense respect for the actor's craft to throw themselves emotionally and physically into difficult circumstances. So there is a collective awareness of the "cost" of working on a piece like *Gaslight*. Comedies in the rehearsal room are energy-producing—they give back over and over. When working on a psychological thriller, the pace of a process is important. It's my job to tune into each individual actor to know where the work is each day. Finally, I will say we spend a considerable amount of rehearsal talking about each moment. There's an intellectual understanding of what we are trying to accomplish that can be a real safety net for tough moments. Ultimately, we have to deliver on the story. We accomplish that through high levels of trust.

WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE WHEN DIRECTING A THRILLER? HAVE YOU DIRECTED OTHER THRILLERS? HOW DOES *GASLIGHT* DIFFER?

I have done a few other thrillers—most notably Steven Dietz's *On Clover Road*, which has many story turns, surprises, and major

reveals. *On Clover Road* is about what is happening, and in some ways, *Gaslight* is about how this happened. I think the challenge lives in making sure that by the end of the story, every moment felt inevitable.

***GASLIGHT* IS A FEMALE-CENTERED NARRATIVE. BELLA'S STRUGGLES, FEARS, AND STRENGTHS ARE AT THE HEART OF THE DRAMA. WHAT DO YOU FEEL IS MOST CRUCIAL WHEN DIRECTING FEMALE-CENTERED DRAMA?**

I will answer by saying *Gaslight* will feel pretty boring if Bella is just a damsel in distress. We have seen that narrative over and over. It's not very interesting to me and I suspect others. What I dig about Steven's version is that Bella has agency, vulnerability, and moxie. Part of her journey is learning who to trust and making bold moves fast. It's extraordinary that the literal time in the play is rather short but over the course of it, Bella is able to bust out of a harmful, abusive relationship. That takes courage and that's the story I am excited to tell.

WHY THIS PLAY NOW? WHAT DOES DIETZ'S *GASLIGHT* OFFER CONTEMPORARY AUDIENCES?

History refracts very real social dynamics that are alive and well in our time. It's a safe way to examine frightening topics. And I think that's the meat on the bones for why we should do this now. While Bella's situation is extreme, it can be a container for the ways gaslighting plays out in today's world in both large and small ways.

AFTER THE SHOW:

JOURNAL PROMPTS

The following questions can be assigned as a warm-up writing exercise for the class's first 10-15 minutes. These questions are designed to encourage students to think critically and creatively about Merrimack Repertory Theatre's production of *Gaslight*. If desired, these prompts can also be used as discussion questions.

1. Consider the setting of *Gaslight*.
 - a. Why do you think Patrick Hamilton chose to set the play in the 1880s?
 - b. How might the story be different if it occurred during another time?
 - c. How does the setting affect the narrative?
2. Steven Dietz's *Gaslight* adapts a 1938 play by Patrick Hamilton. Dietz states that in his adaption, "the two maids – Elizabeth and Nancy – have a stronger impact on Bella and the events of the play."
 - a. Why do you think Dietz made this change?
 - b. How do you think this change affects the story?
3. *Gaslight* is a thriller. Consider other media types in the thriller genre: movies, plays, books, short stories, TV shows, etc.
 - a. What is crucial in creating a solid thriller?
 - b. What is the effect of experiencing a thriller live on stage versus on a page or screen?
4. An epigraph is a short quotation at the start of a book, play, or poem that helps to set the mood or evoke a theme for a particular work of art. Steven Dietz chose a quote from the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche as an epigraph for his adaption of *Gaslight*: "There are no beautiful surfaces without a terrible depth."
 - a. What does this quote mean?
 - b. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
 - c. How does this epigraph invoke a feeling or theme for the play *Gaslight*?
5. What literary devices did you recognize in *Gaslight*?
 - a. Symbolism? Foreshadowing? Metaphor? Motifs? Irony? Suspense?
 - b. How are literary devices used differently in plays than in, say, novels, poems, or short stories? Why might this be?
6. Steven Dietz hopes the audience's responses to *Gaslight* are "wide-ranging, individual, contradictory and complex."
 - a. How can a work of art inspire different responses and emotions in different people?
 - b. What did you personally take away from *Gaslight* at Merrimack Repertory Theater? Why?



A YOUNG PATRICK HAMILTON, AROUND THE TIME HE WROTE *GASLIGHT*.

PATRICK HAMILTON'S BIOGRAPHY

Anthony Walter Patrick Hamilton, known professionally as Patrick Hamilton, was a prolific novelist and playwright of the 20th century. Hamilton was born in 1904 in Sussex, England, to Walter Bernard Hamilton and Ellen Adèle Hamilton, both writers who saw little success. While Bernard Hamilton had received a large inheritance as a young man, this was soon squandered by the patriarch's alcoholism and elaborate spending on travel and extramarital affairs. Thus, Patrick Hamilton and his two siblings grew up in several English boarding houses and received inconsistent education. Patrick left school at the age of fifteen, and he sought work as an actor and began touring with a theatrical company.

By 1921, Patrick Hamilton had abandoned his acting career in favor of writing. His first novel, *Monday Morning*, was published in 1925 and was followed by the moderately successful *Craven House* in 1926. Soon after, Hamilton penned his first play, *Rope*, a thriller that followed the murder of a college student by two elitist classmates. First staged in 1929, *Rope* became a roaring success on both the West End and Broadway.

In 1930, Hamilton married Lois Martin, who tried to manage both her husband's finances and his alcoholism. The rest of the early 1930s were a difficult time in Hamilton's life. He was left permanently disabled and disfigured after being hit and dragged

by a car in London. His mother died of suicide in 1934, and Hamilton's drinking worsened. Hamilton penned the trilogy *20,000 Streets Under the Sky*, which followed the inter-connected lives of three people who regularly drink at the Midnight Bell Pub in London. The first novel in the trilogy was semi-autobiographical for Hamilton, who, like his father, had fallen in love with a prostitute as a young man.

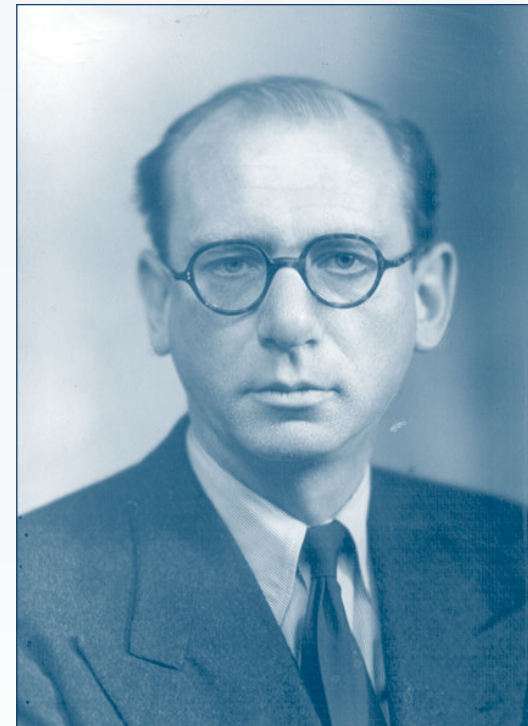
In 1938, Hamilton returned to writing plays. His play *Gaslight* (re-named *Angel Street* in the United States) saw even greater success than *Rope*. On Broadway, it played over 1,000 performances, today remaining one the longest-running non-musical plays in the history of Broadway theatre. Film adaptations of the play were released in 1940 and 1944. While the British Thorold Dickenson film is a more faithful adaptation to Hamilton's original, the American 1944 George Cukor film became a larger hit, featuring big Hollywood names, Ingrid Bergman, Charles Boyer, and Joseph Cotton.

Throughout the 1940s, Hamilton continued to struggle often debilitating depression and alcohol addiction. He published what are today regarded as his best novels in the 1940s, *Hangover Square* in 1941, and *The Slaves of Solitude* in 1947. By 1950, Hamilton's greatest successes were behind him. He divorced his wife in 1952 and married his mistress, Lady Ursula Stewart. By 1955, Hamilton had begun writing his final novel, a thriller titled *Unknown*

Assailant. By this time, Hamilton was too ill to write physically, and he dictated his words to his wife. In 1961, Hamilton was diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver. He died in 1962.

Today, Patrick Hamilton is celebrated as a defining literary voice of the interwar period. While Hamilton is best known for his contribution to the thriller genre, his plays and novels also celebrated the ordinary lives of the English working class. Hamilton's literary works are imbued with humor, hope, and disillusionment. They have stood the test of time on stage, page, and screen.

AN OLDER PATRICK HAMILTON | SOURCE: [A.M. HEATH LITERARY AGENTS](#)



SO, WHAT IS GASLIGHTING?

Merriam-Webster defines the term gaslighting as follows:

“Psychological manipulation of a person usually over an extended period of time that causes the victim to question the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality, or memories and typically leads to confusion, loss of confidence and self-esteem, uncertainty of one’s emotional or mental stability, and a dependency on the perpetrator.”

Gaslighting is not simply lying—the motivation behind lying is to hide the truth. Gaslighting is a more nuanced form of manipulation. Abusers who gaslight others want to shift blame away from themselves by planting psychological and emotional doubt in their victims. While gaslighting is often associated with abusive romantic relationships, it can also happen in parent-child relationships, workplace relationships, and medical settings. Gaslighting can even occur on a larger political scale – when authoritarian leaders seek to deceive and manipulate the masses for personal benefit.

SERGEANT ROUGH

Did it ever strike you, Mrs. Manningham, that it might be your own husband walking around up there?

(BELLA stares at him, putting her hand to her mouth.)

BELLA

Yes. I had that very thought. It seemed impossible ...but I thought that maybe when Jack leaves this house in the evenings ... he doesn’t go to his club. He comes back here. And somehow, without me seeing him, he enters the rooms on the upper floor. But how? And what is he doing up there?



IMAGE FROM MEDIUM.COM “ON GASLIGHTING.”

SERGEANT ROUGH

Tell me this: what made you first think it was him?

BELLA

The light. The gas light. In this house, I can tell everything by the light of the gas. You see the lamps there. Right now they are burning full. But if an extra light was turned on - anywhere in the house - that flame would become smaller. And it would remain that way ---

SERGEANT ROUGH

--- until the other light was turned off! ---

THE TACTICS OF GASLIGHTING

Gaslighting is a form of emotional abuse in which an abuser seeks to damage and undermine another person’s sense of reality. But how exactly is this achieved?¹

COUNTERING

When someone questions another person’s experience, memory, or credibility. Phrases like, “Are you sure that really happened?” or “You’re forgetting again” can make a person doubt themselves, causing poor self-esteem and reliance on the abuser.

TRIVIALIZING

When someone belittles another person’s emotions or experiences. Common phrases like, “you’re too sensitive,” or “you’re overreacting” invalidate a person’s emotions and opinions, and shift blame away from the abuser and onto their subject.

DENIAL

When someone lies or refuses to take responsibility for their actions. Abusers often blame someone else for their harmful behaviors.

STEREOTYPING

A stereotype is an unfair, untrue bias that depicts all people of a shared characteristic as the same. People of specific races, genders, nationalities, and identities are often the subject of harmful stereotypes. By stereotyping, a gaslighter invalidates a person’s complex sense of self, minimizing them to a single, negative, untrue characteristic. A classic example of stereotyping is saying that all women are “over-emotional” or “irrational,” something that Mr. Manningham implies many times about Bella.

¹“What is Gaslighting?” By Jennifer Huizen, Medical News Today, 14 July, 2022, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/gaslighting>.

HOW TO RESPOND TO GASLIGHTING

Victims of gaslighting often feel anxious and insecure. They may feel that they are irrational for feeling certain emotions, and as a result they may find

it difficult to trust themselves and their memories. So, how can you prevent and stop yourself from being gaslit?

1. TAKE SOME SPACE

If you're with someone who you think might be gaslighting you, take time and space to be away from them, so that you can get some perspective on your own.

2. FIND THOSE YOU CAN TRUST

Gaslighting is designed to keep a victim isolated. Even if you're lacking confidence, seek the company of people you trust, and people who know you well. Find a friend, a therapist, family member, or anyone else you can talk to openly about what you're experiencing.

3. CALL OUT GASLIGHTING BEHAVIOR WHEN YOU SEE IT

If someone is trying to make you doubt your version of events, simply say "I remember it differently." If someone is criticizing you for feeling a certain way, say "My feelings are valid," or "when you invalidate my feelings, I find it difficult to listen to you." If someone is making you feel doubtful of your experiences, say "I don't feel like you're hearing me, I'm going to take some space."

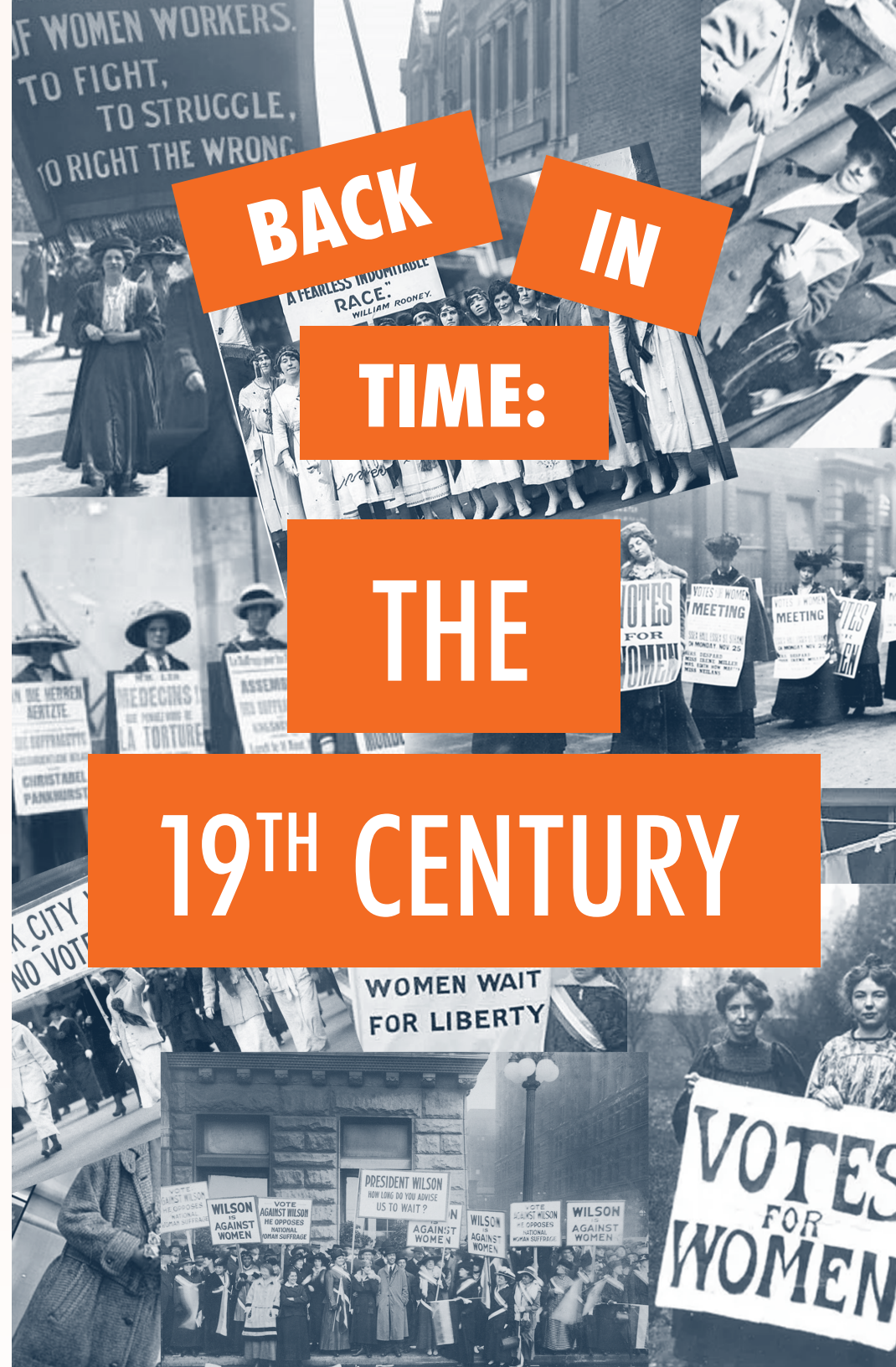
4. ASSERT YOURSELF AND COMMUNICATE

Clearly express your feelings and thoughts in a calm and firm voice, and make direct eye contact with the person to whom you are talking.

PHOTOS (RIGHT):

WWW.THECOLLECTOR.COM/FIRST-WAVE-FEMINISM-SOCIAL-NORMS/
LITERARINESS.ORG/2017/10/27/FIRST-WAVE-FEMINISM/
FEMINISMININDIA.COM/2018/04/24/SUMMARY-FIRST-WAVE-OF-FEMINISM/
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FIRST WAVE FEMINISM

Throughout the mid-late 19th century and into the early 20th century, several factors led to what is today described as “First Wave Feminism,” a period where women sought more power in society, namely the right to vote. First Wave Feminism in the United States began in 1848 when the first Women’s Rights Convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York. The conference concluded with over 100

individuals signing the “Declaration of Rights and Sentiments,” which argued that women should be able to vote, own property, work, and seek divorce just as men could. The document’s primary author, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, rhetorically modeled the document on Thomas Jefferson’s “Declaration of Independence,” hoping to irrevocably bind American freedoms and women’s freedoms together as one.

First Wave Feminism resulted from the tremendous social and economic changes that had occurred throughout the 19th century. Mass industrialization and urbanism in the United States and Europe allowed for a growing number of women in the workforce, blurring the lines between the “feminine” domestic sphere and the “masculine” public sphere. As a part of the workforce, many women organized themselves into labor unions for the first time, demanding better working conditions and fairer wages along with their male peers.

A 1917 CARTOON BY CHAMBERLAIN KENNETH RUSSEL. IMAGE FROM [WWW.LOC.GOV/RESOURCE/WWW.LOC.GOV/RESOURCE/CPH.3B49099/](http://WWW.LOC.GOV/RESOURCE/CPH.3B49099/)

Additionally, many individuals involved in the anti-slavery movements were similarly engaged in women’s rights. Both these social movements demanded that the American values of freedom and equality be offered not only to white men but to individuals who had been historically denied these values.

However, First-Wave Feminism was not as inclusive as the Second and Third Waves, which occurred in the 1960s-70s and the 1990s. First Wave Feminism was generally led by white, educated, middle and upper-class women.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What were the main goals of First Wave Feminism? How were these goals achieved?
2. How did the Abolitionist Movement spur the Women’s Rights Movement? Explore the role women played in the anti-slavery movement, and how this paved the way for First Wave Feminism.
3. How did the Labor Movements of the 19th Century spur the Women’s Right’s Movement? Explore the role of women in the Labor Movement and how this led to the Women’s Rights Movement.
4. What was the purpose of the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments? What was the public’s response to the document?
5. What were the main differences between the NWSA and the AWSA? While both of these organizations desired to see women gain the right to vote, their tactics and goals differed from each other.
6. How did First Wave Feminism differ from the subsequent Second and Third Waves?

TERMS TO KNOW

FIRST WAVE FEMINISM
SENECA FALLS CONVENTION
DECLARATION OF RIGHTS AND SENTIMENTS
ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT
DOMESTIC SPHERE
PUBLIC SPHERE

SUFFRAGETTE MOVEMENT
19TH AMENDMENT
SECOND WAVE FEMINISM
THIRD WAVE FEMINISM
HYSTERIA
REST CURE



WOMEN AND MADNESS IN THE 19TH CENTURY

The 19th century was a time of significant change in the Western world. Industrialism and capitalism were on the rise, the middle classes flourished, and scientific discoveries and medical advancements paved the way to a better life for many. The 19th century also saw a drastic change in the treatment of mental illness as doctors and lawmakers sought to cure and treat the mentally ill, not merely hide them away in workhouses. Larger and newer facilities were built throughout Europe and North America, and asylums saw a drastic increase in patients admitted. Records indicate that most patients admitted to mental health institutions during this time were female, and many of the women forced into these institutions were incorrectly considered mentally ill for not adhering to the strict social rules of traditional womanhood. Women were legally admitted to asylums for suffering from a myriad of physical maladies, for having affairs, or even seeking divorce.²

Many women treated for mental illness in the 19th century were diagnosed with “hysteria,” a condition now known to have no

medical basis. The famous neurologist and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud believed that hysteria was an inherently feminine disease, generally resulting from a woman’s disappointment and loss at being born a woman and not a man.³ The symptoms of hysteria ranged from fatigue, insomnia, loss of appetite, and infertility, to emotional outbursts, chronic pain, anxiety, and hearing and vision loss. For the heavily male-dominated field of 19th-century medicine, hysteria provided a convenient explanation for “everything that men found mysterious or unmanageable in women.”⁴ At the heart of this explanation was the harmful stereotype that women were inherently irrational and overemotional and the notion that women should be submissive, dutiful, composed, and complacent.

Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell was a 19th-century physician who made a name for himself by administering treatment to many patients believed to be suffering from hysteria. Mitchell became famous for the widely used “rest cure,” a treatment plan that included

bed rest and isolation from friends and family. Patients were additionally instructed to abstain from “emotionally exhausting” activities such as writing, reading, drawing, and conversing. The rest cure caused more harm than good – socially isolated, with little-to-no independence and intellectual stimulation, many women suffered from severe depression while following the instructions of the “rest cure.” They also suffered from increased fatigue and unhealthy loss of muscle mass, as well as becoming at risk for blood clots.

While contemporary medical knowledge has dispelled the myths surrounding hysteria and the rest cure, throughout the 19th century, perceived female madness was a topic that dominated both conversation and

literature. It makes sense, then, that Patrick Hamilton set his thriller, *Gaslight*, in the 1880s, when women were regularly admitted to asylums and put on harmful regimens such as the rest cure. To modern audiences, it may seem absurd for a husband to threaten to admit his wife to an asylum for moving a portrait off the wall or “forgetting” where she placed something; however, throughout the 19th century, women were often powerless in the face of a male-dominated society that sought to label them as “mad.” The 19th-century setting of *Gaslight* is crucial; the beliefs that permeated Victorian society make Jack’s manipulation of Bella easier, and his threats of doctors, treatments, and asylums all the more terrifying.

A 19TH CENTURY ILLUSTRATION DEPICTING A WOMAN ON THE REST CURE. IMAGE FROM WWW.ATLASOBSCURA.COM/ARTICLES/WHAT-WAS-THE-REST-CURE



THE INVALID. BY G. C. KILBURNE.

²Kate Moore, “Declared Insane for Speaking Up: The Dark American History of Silencing Women Throughout Psychiatry,” *Time Magazine*, Jun. 22, 2021, <https://time.com/6074783/psychiatry-history-women-mental-health/>.

³Ada McVean, “The History of Hysteria,” *McGill University*, Jul. 31, 2017, <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/history-quackery/history-hysteria>.

⁴Kamie Aran, “The Characterization of Hysteria Throughout History,” *Medium*, Mar. 20, 2021, [https://kamiearan.medium.com/the-characterization-of-hysteria-throughout-history-db05f3f3524af#:~:text=Throughout%20history%2C%20Hysteria%20was,women%E2%80%9D%20\(McVean\)](https://kamiearan.medium.com/the-characterization-of-hysteria-throughout-history-db05f3f3524af#:~:text=Throughout%20history%2C%20Hysteria%20was,women%E2%80%9D%20(McVean)).

CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S THE YELLOW WALLPAPER

American writer and feminist, Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote and published the now famous short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper* after being diagnosed with hysteria following the birth of her daughter. Gilman, who was likely suffering from what we today call post-partum depression, sought the advice of Dr. Mitchell, who told her to adhere to the rest cure. Gilman's mental health worsened under the rest cure, which demanded that she "live as domestic a life as possible." Gilman was told to "have [her] child with [her] all the time... Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours' intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as [she] lived." After a period of great emotional strife, Gilman chose to ignore Mitchell's treatment plan. She eventually chose to leave her husband, something exceptionally rare for woman of that time. On the end of her marriage, Gilman wrote that "It was not a choice

between going and staying, but between going, sane, and staying, insane."

She penned *The Yellow Wallpaper* in 1892 as a critique of Mitchell's methods. In her short story, a woman put on the rest cure by her physician husband is driven insane when she begins to hallucinate that a woman is trapped within the yellow wallpaper of her isolated room. Gilman's thriller is today celebrated as a classic short story within the genres of 19th century fiction and feminist literature.⁵



CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN. IMAGE FROM THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, WWW.BRITANNICA.COM/BIOGRAPHY/CHARLOTTE-PERKINS-GILMAN

READ

Have students read *The Yellow Wallpaper* before or after seeing *Gaslight* at Merrimack Repertory Theatre. The full short story can be found [HERE](#).⁶

DISCUSS

The following discussion questions are designed to help students hone their textual analysis and comparative literature skills. The questions can be discussed as a whole class or in small groups. They can also be given as short, informal writing prompts.

1. What similarities are there between the play *Gaslight* and the story *The Yellow Wallpaper*?
2. Consider the characters of Bella and the unnamed narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. One is driven mad, while the other believes that she is mad. How are these characters similar? Do they serve similar purposes in the larger narrative?
3. Both Bella and Gilman's protagonist are denied agency by their husbands. How do they take their agency back? What do *Gaslight* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* say about female agency in the face of patriarchal power?
4. Jack Manningham is emotionally abusive to Bella. He lies to her and manipulates her. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the protagonist's husband, John, places her under the rest cure in order to cure her "nervousness" (hysteria). What do these characters have in common? Why do you think the husband in *The Yellow Wallpaper* puts his wife on the rest cure? How are we meant to think of this character? Is he a villain? An abuser? A gaslighter? Are any of his actions similar to Jack Manningham's?
5. Consider the time period of the late 19th century. Given what you know about how women and "madness" were then perceived, who is to blame for the suffering of these two female protagonists? Their husbands, or society?
6. Consider how both John and Jack speak to their wives. What do they call their wives? What do they say about them? Why do they speak to their wives this way? Is this a gaslighting tactic? If yes, which one?
7. Examine the diary format of *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Why do you think Gilman chose to write in this format? How would the story be different if it was told in say, third-person limited or third-person omniscient?

⁵Amy Gagnon, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman," Connecticut History, <https://connecticuthistory.org/charlotte-perkins-gilman/>.

⁶Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper," 1982, <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/theliteratureofprescription/exhibitionAssets/digitalDocs/The-Yellow-Wall-Paper.pdf>.

BELLA'S DIARY

IMAGE: TITLE PAGE FOR THE YELLOW WALLPAPER

WHAT IT IS

A creative writing exercise designed to encourage students to consider the similarities between Bella Manningham and the protagonist in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. This exercise allows students to practice and examine narrative voice.

INSTRUCTIONS

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the unnamed narrator tells her story through a number of diary entries where she shares her inner-most thoughts and concerns. Throughout these entries, readers witness the protagonist's mental and emotional decline as she is slowly driven insane by her husband's mandated "rest cure." Have students consider what Gilman includes in the diary entries of the unnamed narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* (self-doubt, mentions of/reliance on her husband, her feelings, her delusions, her mental decline, etc.) Have students write a 1-2 page diary entry from the perspective of Bella from *Gaslight* based on what the narrator discusses in Gilman's short story.

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL READING

LATE 19TH CENTURY/EARLY 20TH CENTURY FEMINIST SHORT STORIES

1. "The Story of an Hour," by Kate Chopin
2. "Desiree's Baby," by Kate Chopin
3. "Jury of Her Peers," by Susan Glaspell (adapted from her one-act play, *Trifles*).
4. "I'll Just Have a Look at the Paper," by Richmal Crompton
5. "Sweat" by Zora Neale Hurston (TW for mentions of physical spousal abuse; suggested only for older high school students).



BRITAIN AND EUROPE IN THE 1930s

Patrick Hamilton penned *Gas Light* in 1938, during a period of worry and uncertainty in England. The Great Depression of the early 1930s had led to mass poverty and unemployment, and while the worst of the economic crisis was over by 1934, the economic recovery was slow and uneven throughout the rest of the decade. Fascist governments had taken control in Germany and Italy, and even England had fascist sympathizers who wanted to see a Britain similar to Hitler's Germany or Mussolini's Italy.

Eager to avoid another catastrophic war, England and France continually allowed Hitler to violate the Treaty of Versailles first when he built up Germany's military, and later when he expanded the German empire into the Rhineland and Austria. In 1938, England,

France, Germany, and Italy signed the Munich Agreement, which allowed Hitler to annex Czechoslovakia without interference from the French and British governments. In exchange, Hitler promised the other European powers that he would make no more territorial demands on the European continent. Hitler violated his promise within the year. By March, Hitler had annexed the Czech territories beyond the Sudetenland, and by August, Hitler and Stalin had signed a pact to divide Polish territory between Germany and the Soviet Union. On September 1st, Germany invaded western Poland. No longer willing to ignore Hitler's growing empire, France and Britain declared war on Germany, and World War II officially began.

BENITO MUSSOLINI, ADOLF HITLER, A GERMAN INTERPRETER, AND BRITISH PRIME MINISTER, NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN BEFORE SIGNING THE MUNICH AGREEMENT ON SEPTEMBER 29TH, 1939. IMAGE FROM THE GERMAN FEDERAL ARCHIVES.



FASCISM, POLITICAL GASLIGHTING, & THE BIG LIE

Fascism is defined as a political philosophy that prioritizes authoritarianism, ultra-nationalism, militarism, and the suppression of political opposition. Fascism rose throughout Germany, Italy, and other parts of Europe after World War I as a result of territorial losses, economic depression, and political instability. Longing for change and power, many Europeans found fascist ideology deeply appealing for its promises of national unity, economic security, and strong national leadership. The Fascist dictatorships in Europe, namely Benito Mussolini's Italy and Adolf Hitler's Germany, both utilized state issued violence to maintain power, and both advocated against democracy. Both government also favored racial and ethnic stereotyping, often for the purposes of scapegoating minorities for the country's problems. Hitler's Nazis are today infamous for their brutal scapegoating of Jews, Slavs, and other minorities, but Mussolini similarly believed that non-Jewish Western Europeans were the "master race."

Totalitarian, single-party political power is at the heart of fascist ideology. Propaganda was used widely to

control the public masses and limit the questioning of political authority. In his 1925 book, *Mein Kampf*, Hitler described a propaganda technique eerily similar to what we today often call political gaslighting. He called this technique "The Big Lie" or *große Lüge*. Hitler argued that great falsehoods and great fact distortion were more widely believed by the masses than smaller lies, because the public "would not believe others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously."⁷ Hitler and the Nazis used the theory of "The Big Lie" to blame the loss of World War I on Jews, to fuel stereotyping and antisemitism, and to eventually justify the genocide of millions.

TERMS TO KNOW

MUNICH AGREEMENT
TREATY OF VERSAILLES
ANNEXATION
FASCISM
BIG LIE
ANTISEMITISM
AUTHORITARIANISM
NATIONALISM
DICTATORSHIP
MILITARISM
PROPAGANDA
SCAPEGOATING
STEREOTYPING
BEER HALL PUTSCH
KRISTALLNACHT
THE NIGHT OF LONG KNIVES
GENOCIDE
HOLOCAUST

"IN THE BIG LIE THERE IS ALWAYS A CERTAIN FORCE OF CREDIBILITY; BECAUSE THE BROAD MASSES OF A NATION ARE ALWAYS MORE EASILY CORRUPTED IN THE DEEPER STRATA OF THEIR EMOTIONAL NATURE THAN CONSCIOUSLY OR VOLUNTARILY; AND THUS IN THE PRIMITIVE SIMPLICITY OF THEIR MINDS THEY MORE READILY FALL VICTIMS TO THE BIG LIE THAN THE SMALL LIE, SINCE THEY THEMSELVES OFTEN TELL SMALL LIES IN LITTLE MATTERS BUT WOULD BE ASHAMED TO RESORT TO LARGE-SCALE FALSEHOODS."

DISCUSS

- Examine Hitler's description of the "Big Lie" in box the above.
 - What is Hitler saying? Summarize the text and define any words that are unfamiliar.
 - What does he mean by "primitive simplicity?" What does this reveal about how he views the public masses?
 - According to the text, why are people more likely to believe a big lie as opposed to a smaller lie?
 - Based on the text, what do you think Hitler believed about power and truth?
- Re-consider the tactics of gaslighting (countering, trivializing, denial, and stereotyping). What do gaslighting and the "Big Lie" have in common? How are they different?
- What other ways did fascist governments and dictatorial leaders utilize political gaslighting and "Big Lies." (Consider: Mussolini, Stalin, Lenin, Mao).
- Are there any examples of political gaslighting or "Big Lies" in American history? (Consider: Slavery and Jim Crow, Cold War Politics, etc.).
- Given what we know of history, is there any truth to what Hitler says about the "Big Lie?" Why or why not?
- Are there times when people/masses are more susceptible to gaslighting and "Big Lies"? Why did so many Germans fall victim to Hitler's "Big Lies?"
- Why are "Big Lies" so dangerous? Are they ever ethically acceptable? Why or why not?
- How can people protect themselves from falling prey to "Big Lies" and political gaslighting?

⁷Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. James Murphy, <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0200601.txt>

INTERWAR TIMELINE

JUNE 28TH, 1919

Germany and the Allied Powers sign the Treaty of Versailles. Germany is forced to downsize their military and give up territory in Poland, France, Czechoslovakia, and Belgium. The German government is forced to pay war reparations to Britain and France.

NOVEMBER 21ST, 1921

Benito Mussolini founds the National Fascist Party in Italy.

JUNE 1923

Hyperinflation in the Weimar Republic causes the German mark to drastically lose value, leading to political and economic instability.

NOVEMBER 8TH, 1923

THE BEER HALL PUTSCH – Adolf Hitler and the Nazis try and fail to overthrow the German government.

APRIL 6TH, 1924

Mussolini's Fascist Party takes control in Italy.

OCTOBER 29TH, 1929

The Great Depression begins, causing economic despair in the United States and Europe.

SEPTEMBER 14TH, 1930

The Nazis become the second-largest party represented in the Reichstag.

JANUARY 30TH, 1933

Hitler is appointed chancellor of Germany by President Hindenburg.

MARCH 23RD, 1933

The Enabling Act is passed in Germany, making Hitler dictator.

MAY 15TH, 1933

Germany secretly forms the Luftwaffe, the German Air Force, in direct violation to the Treaty of Versailles.

JUNE 30TH, 1934

THE NIGHT OF LONG KNIVES – Hitler, worried that his “Brown Shirts” were becoming too powerful, purged the leaders of the Brown shirts along with opposing political leaders.

SEPTEMBER 15TH, 1935

Germany passes the **NUREMBERG LAWS** – laws that provided the legal framework for the discrimination, and later, execution of Jews.

MARCH 7TH, 1936

Hitler violates the Treaty of Versailles by invading the Rhineland.

DECEMBER 1ST, 1936

Hitler mandates that all male children must attend Hitler Youth.

MARCH 31ST, 1938

Germany invades Austria.

SEPTEMBER 20TH, 1938

THE MUNICH AGREEMENT – in an effort to appease Hitler and avoid war, Britain and France allow Hitler to annex Czechoslovakia.

NOVEMBER 9TH, 1938

Kristallnacht “**THE NIGHT OF BROKEN GLASS**” – Jewish businesses, homes, schools, and other establishments are trashed, robbed, and destroyed.

MARCH 22ND, 1939

Germany and Italy sign the “**PACT OF STEEL**” a signed agreement of alliance.

SEPTEMBER 1ST, 1939

Germany invades Poland. Britain and France declare war on Germany.

INTERWAR TIMELINE (CONT.)

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TOPICS & THEME STATEMENTS

WHAT IT IS

Analyzing topics and themes in a literary/ artistic work is an excellent way for students to ease their way into more complex literary analysis. A literary topic is the primary idea of a specific text. A theme is what a piece of literature or art says about that topic. This exercise helps students easily break down the steps required in writing a theme statement. It encourages critical thinking, literary analysis, and paves the way for students to write and support thesis statements and argumentative essays.

THE TOPICS OF *GASLIGHT*

TRUTH
POWER AND MANIPULATION
JUSTICE
THE POWER OF WORDS
ISOLATION
SELF-RELIANCE
GENDER ROLES AND FEMALE OPPRESSION

INSTRUCTIONS

After seeing *Gaslight* at Merrimack Repertory Theatre, have students reflect and discuss the topics they think are most relevant to the play.

Next, ask students to consider what the play suggests about this particular topic. Ask students to write three different theme statements for *Gaslight*, and then ask them to identify at least two pieces of evidence from the show that support their theme statement. Students can use the questions below to help them craft their theme statements.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What are the topics explored in *Gaslight*? List at least 3 topics.
2. What might the play imply about these topics?
3. What is the evidence? Reference at least two points in the play that support your argument.
4. Consider the context of the play, the setting, when the play was written, and what you know about Patrick Hamilton. Is there context to support your theme statement? If yes, what is it?

GASLIGHTING IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CONTEMPORARY TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

As the Merriam-Webster “word of the year” in 2022, the gerund *gaslighting* has appeared recently in numerous contexts and in numerous news and media publications. To help students understand the role of gaslighting in the 21st century, have them read and discuss the following two articles, “[Women Are Calling Out ‘Medical Gaslighting’](#)” by Melinda Wenner Moyer at the New York Times, and “[Why Women Aren’t Crazy](#)” by Yashar Ali from the Good Men Project.

Ali’s article explores the ways in which society’s use of common gaslighting phrases causes women to be continually “undermined and “dismissed.” Moyer’s article explores the issue of “medical gaslighting,” which predominantly affects women and people of color. By reading, comparing, and discussing these two articles, students will hone their skills at reading and analyzing non-fiction texts while thinking critically about 21st century social issues.

DISCUSS:

1. What is medical gaslighting?
2. According to Moyer’s article, why are women more frequent victims of medical gaslighting?
3. According to Moyer’s article, how can medical gaslighting be addressed? How can medical care be elevated for women and people of color? List three ways.
4. According to Ali, how does gaslighting differ from basic inconsiderate behavior?
5. Ali writes that society has “come to accept the idea that women are unbalanced, irrational individuals, especially in times of anger and frustration.” Where do you think this idea comes from? Have you witnessed women being invalidated for expressing anger and frustration in your own life?
6. What are two examples of gaslighting that were experienced by Ali’s female friends?
7. According to Ali, why are women more often gaslit than men?
8. Ali discusses the importance of “unlearning.” How is the unlearning of problematic behavior similarly addressed in Moyer’s article? Why is this important? Why is this difficult?