

Study Guide *for the*  
2009 *Chicago Tribune* Literary Prize:  
Tony Kushner

Chicago Humanities Festival  
Education Programs | 2009 Curriculum Collection  
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**TONY KUSHNER's** plays include *A Bright Room Called Day*; *Angels In America, Parts One and Two*; *Slavs!*; *Homebody/Kabul*; and *Caroline, or Change*. He has written adaptations of Pierre Corneille's *The Illusion*, S. Ansky's *The Dybbuk*, and Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Person of Sezuan* and *Mother Courage and Her Children*; as well as English-language libretti for the operas *Brundibar* by Hans Krasa and *The Comedy on the Bridge* by Bohuslav Martinu. He wrote the screenplays for Mike Nichols's film version of *Angels In America*, and for Steven Spielberg's film *Munich*. His books include *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness*; *Brundibar*, with illustrations by Maurice Sendak; *The Art of Maurice Sendak, 1980 to the Present*; and *Wrestling With Zion: Progressive Jewish-American Responses*

*to the Palestinian/Israeli Conflict*, co-edited with Alisa Solomon. His most recent play, *The Intelligent Homosexual's Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures*, received its world premiere at the Guthrie Theater in May 2009 and will open in New York in 2010.

Kushner, arguably the most acclaimed playwright of his generation, is the recipient of numerous accolades, including the Pulitzer Prize, an Emmy Award, an Oscar nomination, two Tony Awards, three Obie Awards, an Olivier Award, two Evening Standard Awards, a New York Drama Critics Circle Award, two London Drama Critics Circle Awards, a Whiting Writer's Fellowship, the PEN/Laura Pels Award for a Mid-Career Playwright, a Spirit of Justice Award from the Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, and a Cultural Achievement Award from The National Foundation for Jewish Culture. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 2008, he became the first recipient of the Harold and Mimi Steinberg Distinguished Playwright Award.



## GETTING TO THE CORE

Excerpt from Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Scene 7, Theatre Communications Group, 1993.

**PLEASE NOTE: This excerpt contains adult language and situations.**

*A week later. Mutual dream scene. Prior is at a fantastic makeup table, having a dream, applying the face. Harper is having a pill-induced hallucination. She has these from time to time. For some reason, Prior has appeared in this one. Or Harper has appeared in Prior's dream. It is bewildering.*

PRIOR (Alone, putting makeup, then examining the results in the mirror; to the audience):  
"I'm ready for my closeup, Mr. DeMille."

One wants to move through life with elegance and grace, blossoming infrequently but with exquisite taste, and perfect timing, like a rare bloom, a zebra orchid....One wants.... But one so seldom gets what one wants, does one? No. One does not. One gets fucked. Over. One...dies at thirty, robbed of...decades of majesty.  
Fuck this shit. Fuck this shit.

(He almost crumbles; he pulls himself together; he studies his handiwork in the mirror)

I look like a corpse. A corpsette. Oh my queen; you know you've hit rock-bottom when even drag is a drag.

(Harper appears).

HARPER: Are you...Who are you?

PRIOR: Who are you?

HARPER: What are you doing in my hallucination?

PRIOR: I'm not in your hallucination. You're in my dream.

HARPER: You're wearing makeup.

PRIOR: So are you.

HARPER: But you're a man.

PRIOR: (Feigning dismay, shock, he mimes slashing his throat with his lipstick and dies, fabulously tragic. Then): The hands and feet give it away.

HARPER: There must be some mistake here. I don't recognize you. You're not....Are you my...some sort of imaginary friend?

PRIOR: No. Aren't you too old to have imaginary friends?

HARPER: I have emotional problems. I took too many pills. Why are you wearing makeup?

PRIOR: I was in the process of applying the face, trying to make myself feel better—I swiped the new fall colors at the Clinique counter at Macy's. (*Showing her*)

HARPER: You stole these?

PRIOR: I was out of cash; it was an emotional emergency!

HARPER: Joe will be so angry; I promised him. No more pills.



PRIOR: These pills you keep alluding to?

HARPER: Valium. I take Valium. Lots of Valium.

PRIOR: And you're dancing as fast you can.

HARPER: I'm not *addicted*. I don't believe in addiction, and I never...well, I *never* drink. And I *never* take drugs.

PRIOR: Well, smell *you*, Nancy Drew.

HARPER: Except Valium.

PRIOR: Except Valium; in wee fistfuls.

HARPER: It's terrible. Mormons are not supposed to be addicted to anything. I'm a Mormon.

PRIOR: I'm a homosexual.

HARPER: Oh! In my church we don't believe in homosexuals.

PRIOR: In my church we don't believe in Mormons.

HARPER: What church do...oh! (*She laughs*) I get it.

I don't understand this. If I didn't ever see you before and I don't think I did then I don't think you should be here, in this hallucination, because in my experience the mind, which is where hallucinations come from, shouldn't be able to make up anything that wasn't there to start with, that didn't enter it from experience, from the real world. Imagination can't create anything new, can it? It only recycles bits and pieces from the world and reassembles them into visions....Am I making sense right now?

PRIOR: Given the circumstances, yes.

HARPER: So when we think we've escaped the unbearable ordinariness and, well, untruthfulness of our lives, it's really only the same old ordinariness and falseness rearranged into the appearance of novelty and truth. Nothing unknown is knowable. Don't you think it's depressing?

PRIOR: The limitations of the imagination?

HARPER: Yes.

PRIOR: It's something you learn after your second theme party: It's All Been Done Before.

HARPER: The world. Finite. Terribly, terribly....Well...This is the most depressing hallucination I've ever had.

PRIOR: Apologies, I do try to be amusing.

HARPER: Oh, well, don't apologize, you....I can't expect someone who's really sick to entertain me.

PRIOR: How on earth did you know...

HARPER: Oh that happens. This is the very threshold of revelation sometimes. You can see things...how sick you are. Do you see anything about me?

PRIOR: yes.

HARPER: What?

PRIOR: You are amazingly unhappy.

HARPER: Oh big deal. You meet a Valium addict and you figure out she's unhappy. That doesn't count. Of course I....Something else. Something surprising.

PRIOR: Something surprising.

HARPER: Yes.



PRIOR: Your husband's a homo.

(Pause).

HARPER: Oh, ridiculous.

*(Pause, then very quietly)*

Really?

PRIOR: *(Shrugs)* Threshold of revelation.

HARPER: Well I don't like your revelations. I don't think you intuit well at all. Joe's a very normal man, he...Oh God. Oh God. He...Do homos take, like, lots of long walks?

PRIOR: Yes. We do. In stretch pants with lavender coils. I just looked at you, and there was...

HARPER: A sort of blue streak of recognition.

PRIOR: Yes.

HARPER: Like you know me incredibly well.

PRIOR: Yes.

HARPER: Yes.

I have to go now, get back, something just...feel apart.

Oh God, I feel so sad.

PRIOR: I...I'm sorry. I usually say, "Fuck the truth," but mostly, the truth fucks you.

HARPER: I see something else about you...

PRIOR: Oh?

HARPER: Deep inside you, there's a part of you, the most inner part, entirely free of disease. I can see that.

PRIOR: Is that...That isn't true.

HARPER: Threshold of revelation.

Home...

*(She vanishes.)*

PRIOR: People come and go so quickly here...

*(To himself in the mirror)* I don't think there's any uninfected part of me. My heart is pumping polluted blood. I feel dirty.

*(He begins to wipe makeup off with his hands, smearing it around. A large gray feather falls from up above. Prior stops smearing the makeup and looks at the feather. He goes to it and picks it up.)*

A VOICE *(It is an incredibly beautiful voice)*: Look up!

PRIOR: *(Looking up, not seeing anyone)*: Hello?

A VOICE: Look up!

PRIOR: Who is that?

A VOICE: Prepare the way!

PRIOR: I don't see any...

*(There is a dramatic change in lighting, from above.)*

A VOICE:

Look up, look up,  
Prepare the way  
the infinite descent  
A breath in air  
floating down  
Glory to...  
*(Silence.)*



PRIOR: Hello? Is that it? Helloooo! What the fuck...? (*He holds himself*) Poor me. Poor poor me. Why me? Why poor poor me? Oh I don't feel good right now

## REFLECTION

“Jubilat Agno”

by Christopher Smart

<http://www.pseudopodium.org/repress/jubilat/>

Let students, most of whom are probably unfamiliar with Smart's imaginative masterpiece, explore his fragmentary poem, reading as much of it as they can from the website above, particular where the “let” lines alternate with the “for” lines.

Fragment A follows below:

Rejoice in God, O ye Tongues; give the glory to the Lord, and the Lamb.

Nations, and languages, and every Creature, in which is the breath of Life.

Let man and beast appear before him, and magnify his name together.

Let Noah and his company approach the throne of Grace, and do homage to the Ark of their Salvation.

Let Abraham present a Ram, and worship the God of his Redemption.

Let Isaac, the Bridegroom, kneel with his Camels, and bless the hope of his pilgrimage.

Let Jacob, and his speckled Drove adore the good Shepherd of Israel.

Let Esau offer a scape Goat for his seed, and rejoice in the blessing of God his father.

Let Nimrod, the mighty hunter, bind a Leopard to the altar, and consecrate his spear to the Lord.

Let Ishmael dedicate a Tyger, and give praise for the liberty, in which the Lord has let him at large.

Let Balaam appear with an Ass, and bless the Lord his people and his creatures for a reward eternal.

Let Anah, the son of Zibion, lead a Mule to the temple, and bless God, who amerces the consolation of the creature for the service of Man.

Let Daniel come forth with a Lion, and praise God with all his might through faith in Christ Jesus.

Let Naphthali with an Hind give glory in the goodly words of Thanksgiving.

Let Aaron, the high priest, sanctify a Bull, and let him go free to the Lord and Giver of Life.

Let the Levites of the Lord take the Beavers of the brook alive into the Ark of the Testimony.

Let Eleazar with the Ermine serve the Lord decently and in purity.

Let Ithamar minister with a Chamois, and bless the name of Him, which cloatheth the naked.

Let Gershom with an Pygarg Hart bless the name of Him, who feedeth the hungry.

Let Merari praise the wisdom and power of God with the Coney, who scoopeth the rock, and archeth in the sand.

Let Kohath serve with the Sable, and bless God in the ornaments of the Temple.

Let Jehoida bless God with an Hare, whose mazes are determined for the health of the body



and to parry the adversary.

Let Ahitub humble himself with an Ape before Almighty God, who is the maker of variety and pleasantry.

Let Abiathar with a Fox praise the name of the Lord, who ballances craft against strength and skill against number.

Let Moses, the Man of God, bless with a Lizard, in the sweet majesty of good-nature, and the magnanimity of meekness.

Let Joshua praise God with an Unicorn -- the swiftness of the Lord, and the strength of the Lord, and the spear of the Lord mighty in battle.

Let Caleb with an Ounce praise the Lord of the Land of beauty and rejoice in the blessing of his good Report.

Let Othniel praise God with the Rhinoceros, who put on his armour for the reward of beauty in the Lord.

Let Tola bless with the Toad, which is the good creature of God, tho' his virtue is in the secret, and his mention is not made.

Let Barak praise with the Pard -- and great is the might of the faithful and great is the Lord in the nail of Jael and in the sword of the Son of Abinoam.

Let Gideon bless with the Panther -- the Word of the Lord is invincible by him that lappeth from the brook.

Let Jotham praise with the Urchin, who took up his parable and provided himself for the adversary to kick against the pricks.

Let Boaz, the Builder of Judah, bless with the Rat, which dwelleth in hardship and peril, that they may look to themselves and keep their houses in order.

Let Obed-Edom with a Dormouse praise the Name of the Lord God his Guest for increase of his store and for peace.

Let Abishai bless with the Hyaena -- the terror of the Lord, and the fierceness, of his wrath against the foes of the King and of Israel.

Let Ethan praise with the Flea, his coat of mail, his piercer, and his vigour, which wisdom and providence have contrived to attract observation and to escape it.

Let Heman bless with the Spider, his warp and his woof, his subtlety and industry, which are good.

Let Chalcol praise with the Beetle, whose life is precious in the sight of God, tho his appearance is against him.

Let Darda with a Leech bless the Name of the Physician of body and soul.

Let Mahol praise the Maker of Earth and Sea with the Otter, whom God has given to dive and to burrow for his preservation.

Let David bless with the Bear -- The beginning of victory to the Lord -- to the Lord the perfection of excellence -- Hallelujah from the heart of God, and from the hand of the artist inimitable, and from the echo of the heavenly harp in sweetness magnificent and mighty.

Let Solomon praise with the Ant, and give the glory to the Fountain of all Wisdom.

Let Romamti-ezer bless with the Ferret -- The Lord is a rewarder of them, that diligently seek



him.

Let Samuel, the Minister from a child, without ceasing praise with the Porcupine, which is the creature of defence and stands upon his arms continually.

Let Nathan with the Badger bless God for his retired fame, and privacy inaccessible to slander.

Let Joseph, who from the abundance of his blessing may spare to him, that lacketh, praise with the Crocodile, which is pleasant and pure, when he is interpreted, tho' his look is of terror and offence.

Let Esdras bless Christ Jesus with the Rose and his people, which is a nation of living sweetness.

Let Mephibosheth with the Cricket praise the God of cheerfulness, hospitality, and gratitude. Let Shallum with the Frog bless God for the meadows of Canaan, the fleece, the milk and the honey.

Let Hilkiah praise with the Weasel, which sneaks for his prey in craft, and dwelleth at ambush.

Let Job bless with the Worm -- the life of the Lord is in Humiliation, the Spirit also and the truth.

Let Elihu bless with the Tortoise, which is food for praise and thanksgiving.

Let Hezekiah praise with the Dromedary -- the zeal for the glory of God is excellence, and to bear his burden is grace.

Let Zadoc worship with the Mole -- before honour is humility, and he that looketh low shall learn.

Let Gad with the Adder bless in the simplicity of the preacher and the wisdom of the creature.

Let Tobias bless Charity with his Dog, who is faithful, vigilant, and a friend in poverty.

Let Anna bless God with the Cat, who is worthy to be presented before the throne of grace, when he has trampled upon the idol in his prank.

Let Benaiah praise with the Asp -- to conquer malice is nobler, than to slay the lion.

Let Barzillai bless with the Snail -- a friend in need is as the balm of Gilead, or as the slime to the wounded bark.

Let Joab with the Horse worship the Lord God of Hosts.

Let Shemaiah bless God with the Caterpillar -- the minister of vengeance is the harbinger of mercy.

Let Ahimelech with the Locust bless God from the tyranny of numbers.

Let Cornelius with the Swine bless God, which purifyeth all things for the poor.

Let Araunah bless with the Squirrel, which is a gift of homage from the poor man to the wealthy and increaseth good will.

Let Bakbakkar bless with the Salamander, which feedeth upon ashes as bread, and whose joy is at the mouth of the furnace.

Let Jabez bless with Tarantula, who maketh his bed in the moss, which he feedeth, that the pilgrim may take heed to his way.



Let Jakim with the Satyr bless God in the dance. --

Let Iddo praise the Lord with the Moth -- the writings of man perish as the garment, but the Book of God endureth for ever.

Let Nebuchadnezzar bless with the Grasshopper -- the pomp and vanities of the world are as the herb of the field, but the glory of the Lord increaseth for ever.

Let Naboth bless with the Canker-worm -- envy is cruel and killeth and preyeth upon that which God has given to aspire and bear fruit.

Let Lud bless with the Elk, the strenuous asserter of his liberty, and the maintainer of his ground.

Let Obadiah with the Palmer-worm bless God for the remnant that is left.

Let Agur bless with the Cockatrice -- The consolation of the world is deceitful, and temporal honour the crown of him that creepeth.

Let Ithiel bless with the Baboon, whose motions are regular in the wilderness, and who defendeth himself with a staff against the assailant.

Let Ucal bless with the Cameleon, which feedeth on the Flowers and washeth himself in the dew.

Let Lemuel bless with the Wolf, which is a dog without a master, but the Lord hears his cries and feeds him in the desert.

Let Hananiah bless with the Civet, which is pure from benevolence.

Let Azarias bless with the Reindeer, who runneth upon the waters, and wadeth thro the land in snow.

Let Mishael bless with the Stoat -- the praise of the Lord gives propriety to all things.

Let Savaran bless with the Elephant, who gave his life for his country that he might put on immortality.

Let Nehemiah, the imitator of God, bless with the Monkey, who is work'd down from Man.

Let Manasses bless with the Wild-Ass -- liberty begetteth insolence, but necessity is the mother of prayer.

Let Jebus bless with the Camelopard, which is good to carry and to parry and to kneel.

Let Huz bless with the Polypus -- lively subtlety is acceptable to the Lord.

Let Buz bless with the Jackall -- but the Lord is the Lion's provider.

Let Meshullam bless with the Dragon, who maketh his den in desolation and rejoiceth amongst the ruins.

Let Enoch bless with the Rackoon, who walked with God as by the instinct.

Let Hashbadana bless with the Catamountain, who stood by the Pulpit of God against the dissensions of the Heathen.

Let Ebed-Melech bless with the Mantiger, the blood of the Lord is sufficient to do away the offence of Cain, and reinstate the creature which is amerced.

Let A Little Child with a Serpent bless Him, who ordaineth strength in babes to the confusion of the Adversary.

Let Huldah bless with the Silkworm -- the ornaments of the Proud are from the bowells of their Betters.



Let Susanna bless with the Butterfly -- beauty hath wings, but chastity is the Cherub.  
Let Sampson bless with the Bee, to whom the Lord hath given strength to annoy the assai-  
lant and wisdom to his strength.  
Let Amasiah bless with the Chaffer -- the top of the tree is for the brow of the champion, who  
has given the glory to God.  
Let Hashum bless with the Fly, whose health is the honey of the air, but he feeds upon the  
thing strangled, and perisheth.  
Let Malchiah bless with the Gnat -- it is good for man and beast to mend their pace.  
Let Pedaiah bless with the Humble-Bee, who loves himself in solitude and makes his honey  
alone.  
Let Maaseiah bless with the Drone, who with the appearance of a Bee is neither a soldier nor  
an artist, neither a swordsman nor smith.  
Let Urijah bless with the Scorpion, which is a scourge against the murmurers -- the Lord  
keep it from our coasts.  
Let Anaiah bless with the Dragon-fly, who sails over the pond by the wood-side and feedeth  
on the cressies.  
Let Zorobabel bless with the Wasp, who is the Lord's architect, and buildeth his edifice in  
armour.  
Let Jehu bless with the Hornet, who is the soldier of the Lord to extirpate abomination and to  
prepare the way of peace.  
Let Mattithiah bless with the Bat, who inhabiteth the desolations of pride and flieth amongst  
the tombs.  
Let Elias which is the innocency of the Lord rejoice with the Dove.  
Let Asaph rejoice with the Nightingale -- The musician of the Lord! and the watchman of the  
Lord!  
Let Shema rejoice with the Glowworm, who is the lamp of the traveller and mead of the  
musician.  
Let Jeduthun rejoice with the Woodlark, who is sweet and various.  
Let Chenaniah rejoice with Chloris, in the vivacity of his powers and the beauty of his person.  
Let Gideoni rejoice with the Goldfinch, who is shrill and loud, and full withal.  
Let Giddalti rejoice with the Mocking-bird, who takes off the notes of the Aviary and reserves  
his own.  
Let Jogli rejoice with the Linnet, who is distinct and of mild delight.  
Let Benjamin bless and rejoice with the Redbird, who is soft and soothing.  
Let Dan rejoice with the Blackbird, who praises God with all his heart, and biddeth to be of  
good cheer.

## REFLECTION

Poems, Illustrated Poems, and Paintings  
The William Blake Archive  
by William Blake



<http://www.blakearchive.org/blake/main.html>

## LESSON PLAN

The Limitations of the Imagination

By Bill Yarrow, Joliet Junior College, Joliet, IL

In the excerpt from Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America*, Harper Pitt has a hallucination in which she discusses "the limitations of the imagination" with Prior Walter. She says, "Imagination can't create anything new, can it? It only recycles bits and pieces from the world and reassembles them into visions....Nothing unknown is knowable" (Scene 7).

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Is there a limit to imagination?

## GOALS

This lesson is most suitable for English/Language Arts classes but may have applications for almost any class.

## OBJECTIVES

Students will utilize argumentation, analysis, and oral and written communication skills.

## MATERIALS

Computer with Internet access.

## TIMEFRAME

This lesson will take 1-2 days to complete.

## PROCESS & PROCEDURE

1. Have class break up into two debate teams and a group of student judges. [There could be multiple teams depending on size of class and instructor preference.]
2. Use the Harper Pitt quote as the proposition to be debated. All aspects of the quote ["Imagination can't create anything new"; "It only recycles bits and pieces from the world"; "It... reassembles them into visions"; "Nothing unknown is knowable"] should be investigated.
3. The instructor can assign the pro or con position to a particular team or the students can choose themselves.
4. Each team should discuss the implications of the proposition and collect evidence and arguments to support their viewpoint. Imagination should be considered as broadly as possible covering all aspects of all the arts but also industrial and technological inventions should be considered.
5. Each team should search the Internet and the library or learning research center for rele-



vant information on imagination and imaginative creations.

6. The instructor should monitor and, through questions, help direct each team discussion to the strongest evidence and arguments.

7. The student judges should, with instructor's help, develop criteria by which to score the debate. Scoring sheets should be produced and given to each of the student judges. The scoring rubric should also be shared with all members of each team.

8. Each team should choose two representatives to be the actual debaters.

9. The debaters can refer to note cards.

10. The debate should be strictly timed (perhaps three minutes for each opening statement and two minutes for each rebuttal). Order of debate: pro, con, rebuttal of con, rebuttal of pro.

11. The debate should be presented before the remaining team members and the panel of student judges.

12. During the debate, the judges should score their rubrics and after the debate reveal their decision and make public their scoring.

13. Homework: everyone in the class should write a reflection on the debate discussing whether the decision was a fair one or not and explaining why the writer felt the way he or she did.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Evaluation of participation in debate preparation, evaluation of creation of scoring rubric, evaluation of participation in actual debate, evaluation of behavior while watching debate, and evaluation of written reflection paper.

## **ABOUT THE CHICAGO HUMANITIES FESTIVAL**

The Chicago Humanities Festival (CHF) creates year-round opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds, and economic circumstances to explore, enjoy, and support the arts and humanities. We accomplish this by presenting programs throughout the year, culminating in two annual Festivals of the Humanities, one in the spring specifically for children and families and one in the fall for the general public. The CHF's mission of providing broad access to the humanities – at a low ticket price – depends in part on the generosity of its most committed and enthusiastic supporters.

[www.chicagohumanities.org](http://www.chicagohumanities.org)