

Harrington
21M.604 Fall 2005
Week 5, Assignment

1. Using 2-4 characters create a 10 minute play (10 pages) that centers on a disrupted ritual.
2. Read "A Streetcar Named Desire," by Tennessee Williams. What's the disrupted ritual in this play? How many can you name?

What is ritual?

Religious: funeral, wedding, daily mass, confession.

Social: 10 year old running poker game
3 friends meet at a bar one time a week

Family: Christmas evening
Thanksgiving morning
Birthday party
Graduation

Personal:

How you dress/eat.
Turning TV on every time character is alone.

Work:

What are the rituals in a lab with monkeys/rats/flies?
What would a disruption cause?
Doling out meds in a hospital.
Opening the mail
Opening/closing the office/store
Car pool
Watching the Superbowl
Riding the subway
Riding the commuter train
Boarding the Monday morning Delta shuttle.

As you prepare to write your play, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What is the ritual? Family? Social? Personal? Work-related?
2. What is the scenario of the ritual? What usually happens? Think it through step-by-step. How/when does it begin? End?
3. How does each character respond to the ritual? What may be very important to one character may mean very little to another. If the ritual is disrupted, the stakes are higher for one character than for another.
4. What disrupts the ritual? A person? Event? The weather? An idea? If it's someone, is the person an outsider or someone involved in the ritual? (Ex: Bob's

always been second banana to Vick in their group. Tonight Bob's decided to change that.)

5. When and how is the ritual disrupted? What are the SPECIFIC circumstances?
Ex: If the ritual is disrupted before it even begins, the scene will be very different than if the ritual is interrupted while it's happening. The pinochle game getting cancelled because the Jones's house was burgled that afternoon is very different from having a burglar enter mid-game.
6. How does the disruption affect the ritual? Characters? Relationships?
Immediately? As the scene progresses?
7. What CONFLICT does the disruption create? Does anyone try to get rid of the disruption? Does anyone ignore it? Go along with it? Is the conflict strictly between the ritual and the disruption? Or does the conflict also occur among characters involved in the ritual?
8. Are any or all of the conflicts resolved? Does the ritual change significantly?
Permanently? Are characters and relationships affected? Permanently? Does the old ritual stay pretty much intact? Or does it fall apart? Does a new ritual start to evolve to replace the old one? If so, does it include all the original characters in the ritual? More? Less?

Read any script, watch any production and you'll see that plays very often focus on disrupted rituals. Almost all people need—require—their lives to be relatively calm, to go along smoothly. People naturally tend to be uncomfortable with change, because change is threatening. Most people, then, consciously or unconsciously, work very hard to maintain the status quo and maintain things the way they are. Rituals reinforce the status quo by giving people a repeated pattern to their lives. When someone or something disrupts the ritual, people are shaken up, lives are thrown off balance, ideas are brought into question. Whether major or minor, the disruption creates conflict. The characters are forced to deal with the disruption in order to return to a state of equilibrium, either by trying to return to the way things were, or by creating new rituals to replace old ones.

Anything is possible when even the smallest personal ritual is disrupted. That's why the disrupted ritual is such a powerful playwriting tool.

In Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire," literally every kind of ritual from the cosmic to the seemingly insignificant is disrupted over the course of the play. Each disruption adds more and more heat to the central conflict between Blanche de Bois and Stanley Kowalski.