

Suddenly Last Summer

A Southern Gothic mystery by Tennessee Williams
14th April – 4th June 2023



The English Theatre
Frankfurt

Tennessee Williams' Suddenly
LAST SUMMER

Plötzlich im letzten Sommer
A Southern Gothic mystery by Tennessee Williams

Director **Josh Seymour**

Playing from **14th April 2023**

COMMERZBANK    **gab** tel (069) 242 316-20
www.english-theatre.de

Teachers' Resource Pack

This teachers' pack includes information as well as tasks and topics to be dealt with in the classroom. The tasks do not necessarily build on each other. Cut and paste as you please, and please consult the official program for additional information.

Background information to “Suddenly Last Summer” by Tennessee Williams

The Author

Tennessee Williams

Thomas Lanier Williams III (March 26, 1911 – February 25, 1983), known by his pen name Tennessee Williams, was an American playwright and screenwriter.

He had two siblings, older sister Rose Isabel Williams (1909–1996) and younger brother Walter Dakin Williams (1919–2008). As a young child Williams nearly died from a case of diphtheria that left him frail and virtually confined to his house during a year of recuperation. At least partly due to his illness, he was considered a weak child by his father. Cornelius Williams, a descendant of hardy East Tennessee pioneer stock, had a violent temper and was prone to use his fists. He regarded what he thought was his son's effeminacy with disdain. Edwina, Williams's mother, locked in an unhappy marriage, focused her attention almost entirely on her frail young son. Critics and historians agree that Williams drew from his own dysfunctional family in much of his writing and his desire to break free from his puritan upbringing, propelled him towards writing.

At age 33, after years of obscurity, Williams suddenly became famous with the success of *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) in New York City. He introduced "plastic theatre" in this play and it closely reflected his own unhappy family background. It was the first of a string of successes. His next major play was *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), a study of the mental and moral ruin of a former Southern belle, Blanche Du Bois. Her genteel pretensions are no match for her brutish brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski. This success was followed by *Camino Real* (1953), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), and *Night of the Iguana* (1961). *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* were both awarded Pulitzer prizes.

Much of Williams's most acclaimed work has been adapted for the cinema. He also wrote short stories, poetry, essays, and a volume of memoirs. In 1979, four years before his death, Williams was inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame.

Throughout his life Williams remained close to his sister, Rose, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia as a young woman. In 1943, as her behaviour became increasingly disturbing, she was subjected to a lobotomy, requiring her to be institutionalised for the rest of her life. As soon as he was financially able, Williams moved Rose to a private institution just north of New York City, where he often visited her. He gave her a percentage interest in several of his most successful plays, the royalties from which were applied toward her care. The devastating effects of Rose's treatment may have contributed to Williams's alcoholism and his dependence on various combinations of amphetamines and barbiturates.

After some early attempts at relationships with women, by the late 1930s, Williams began exploring his homosexuality. When he returned to New York City in 1948, Williams met and fell in love with Frank Merlo (1921–1963). An occasional actor of Sicilian ancestry, he had served in the U.S. Navy during World War II. This was the enduring romantic relationship of Williams's life, and it lasted 14 years until infidelities and drug abuse on both sides ended it. Shortly after their breakup, Merlo was diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer. Williams returned to him and cared for him until his death on September 20, 1963.

In the years following Merlo's death, Williams descended into a period of nearly catatonic depression and increasing drug use, which resulted in several hospitalizations and commitments to mental health facilities.

He was noted for bringing to his audiences a slice of his own life and the feel of southern culture. Elia Kazan (director) said of Tennessee: "Everything in his life is in his plays, and everything in his plays is in his life."¹

¹ U.a. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tennessee-Williams> https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tennessee_Williams

Top right: Tennessee and his sister Rose Isabel Williams.

Middle left: Tennessee Williams

Bottom right: Tennessee and his long-term partner Frank Merlo



Rose Williams – Tennessee Williams's Sister

Rose Williams was the sister of American playwright Tennessee Williams, who devoted much of his life to her care. She was the inspiration for several of the characters in his plays and other works. She inspired the character of Laura Wingfield in his play *The Glass Menagerie* amongst others. Rose was born in 1909, two years before her brother, and they were childhood playmates in Columbus, Mississippi. As Rose grew older, she began to exhibit symptoms of paranoia.

She also developed digestive disorders, which may have been psychosomatic, and the limited medical and psychiatric resources of the time repeatedly diagnosed her wrongly. Her brother noticed and wrote in his diaries of what he referred to as her "little eccentricities". By the 1930s she was making more and more trips to hospitals, for increasingly lengthening stays.

Rose was diagnosed with **schizophrenia** in June of 1937 and a violent episode the following month led her to **accuse her father of attempting to rape her**. She screamed that she was going to kill him in reprisal and her parents had her sent to a private sanitarium briefly. She was later removed from the sanitarium and sent to the state mental hospital in Farmington, Missouri. Over the ensuing months, her delusions and violent mood swings worsened and increased in frequency. During lucid periods she maintained a correspondence with her brother, by then an accomplished and increasingly famous writer.

In 1943, as Rose's condition continued to worsen, she was given a **lobotomy**. Following the surgery, she was able to write to her brother, indicating that she was doing well. She would never fully recover and **remained depressed and delusional**. She continued to be institutionalized. The **operation had not been voluntary** and it was her mother Edwina Williams who requested it is performed. Her father had no objection, after the violent episode in which his daughter had accused him of attempted rape, he effectively washed his hands of her care.

For the rest of her life, Rose Williams remained institutionalized, incapable of caring for herself and her brother paid for her care. When he died his estate established a trust to ensure that she would have everything she needed.²

The Director

Josh Seymour is a theatre director based in London. He trained as Resident Assistant Director at the Donmar Warehouse 2014-5 and was Runner-Up for the 2018 RTST Peter Hall Award. Work as a director includes the world premiere of *The Narcissist* by Christopher Shinn (Chichester Festival Theatre), the world premiere of *Musik* by Jonathan Harvey and The Pet Shop Boys (Edinburgh Festival/Arts Theatre), and the European premieres of *Adding Machine* (Finborough Theatre) and *One Arm* (Southwark Playhouse), for which he won Best Director at the 2016 Off-West End Awards.



² <https://historycollection.com/10-horrifying-examples-people-subjected-lobotomies-tragic-results/4/>

Further reading on Rose's neurodiversity: <http://www.tennesseewilliamsstudies.org/journal/work.php?ID=113>

Suddenly Last Summer- Synopsis

1936, in the Garden District of New Orleans. Mrs. Violet Venable, an elderly socialite widow from a prominent local family, has invited a doctor to her home. She talks nostalgically about her son Sebastian, a poet, who died under mysterious circumstances in Spain the previous summer. During the course of their conversation, she offers to make a generous donation to support the doctor's psychiatric research if he will perform a lobotomy on Catharine, her niece, who had travelled with Sebastian and has been confined to St. Mary's, a private mental asylum, at Mrs Venable's expense since returning to America. Mrs. Venable is eager to "shut her up" once and for all, as she continues to babble about Sebastian's violent death and smash her son's reputation by hinting at his homosexuality.

Catharine arrives at Mrs Venable's home, in order to meet the doctor, followed by her mother and brother. They are also eager to suppress her version of events, since Mrs. Venable is threatening to keep Sebastian's will in probate until she is satisfied, something Catharine's family can't afford to challenge. But the doctor injects Catharine with a truth serum and she proceeds to give a scandalous account of Sebastian's moral dissolution and the events leading up to his death, how he used her to procure young men for his sexual exploitation, and how he was set upon, mutilated, and partially devoured by a mob of starving children in the street. Mrs. Venable lunges at Catharine but is prevented from striking her with her cane. She is taken off stage, screaming. Far from being convinced of Catharine's insanity, however, the doctor concludes the play by stating he believes her story could be true.

Character descriptions

Catharine Holly

Catharine Holly is Sebastian's cousin and Mrs Venable's late husband's niece. When she is introduced to the play, she is a patient in a mental asylum and about to meet a doctor, who is supposed to diagnose her mental state and see if she is a suitable candidate for his research with lobotomies.

Catharine is deeply disturbed, on the one hand by the events she lived through the previous year, on the other hand by being held captive in the asylum by her aunt Mrs Venable. Put through several treatments she still would not stop to tell her story about what happened to her cousin Sebastian, which is why Mrs Venable now wants to shut her up for good.

Long before the story starts, Catharine lived through a traumatic event that caused her to feel trapped inside herself. Sebastian, her cousin, broke through to her in her depression and invited her to join him on his yearly summer travels. For a while she felt as though she had found her place. However, in the final days of summer Sebastian pulled away from Catharine and began to act erratically. Catharine, who loved her cousin in the only way he would let her – motherly -, was unable to protect him. She had to witness how he was eaten alive. The fact that she could not help him still causes her a lot of pain and makes her feel guilty.

Mrs. Venable

Mrs. Venable, once an extraordinarily beautiful woman, now is a withered and wheelchair-bound Southern matriarch who is desperate to keep the memory and legacy of her son Sebastian pure. Mrs. Venable and Sebastian had shared an abnormally close relationship, travelled often, and revelled in their chosen lifestyle. On their trips extroverted and beautiful Mrs Venable had attracted young suitors for her shy son. When Mrs. Venable suffered from a stroke and became unable to travel, she was of no further use for her son. After Sebastian's death, Mrs. Venable immediately blames Catharine and refuses to believe in her account of the trip. Mrs. Venable wants to keep the memory of Sebastian unstained, so she has Catharine institutionalised and tries to have her lobotomized with Dr Cukrowicz's help. She is a wealthy woman, who bribes the doctor and threatens Catharine's mother and brother to cut them off financially if they do not consent to Catharine's lobotomy. She has strong narcissistic tendencies and is a very overbearing mother figure.

Dr. Cukrowicz

Dr Cukrowicz or "Dr Sugar" is a doctor who specialises in matters of the brain. Mrs. Venable contacts him under the guise of offering him research funding. However, when Dr Cukrowicz meets Mrs Venable he quickly learns of her true cause for calling him. Mrs. Venable wants him to lobotomize her niece who she claims is disturbed. Dr. Cukrowicz warns Mrs. Venable of the potential harm in his treatment and seems reluctant to continue their meeting. Dr Cukrowicz meets his possible patient Catharine Holly, nevertheless, and helps her share her account of the events that occurred the previous summer. He understands that he is blackmailed by Mrs Venable but does not take a clear stand right away. However, he makes clear that the well-being of his patients is more important to him than his research's success. He functions as the anti-Sebastian in painting a picture of doctors always looking for God's support in the understanding of the New Testament.

Sebastian

When the play starts, Sebastian is already dead. We only learn about him through the accounts of his mother and his cousin, Catharine. Sebastian was a passionate poet in his forties who travelled the world to fuel his artistic ambitions. He believed in and was fascinated by the idea of a vengeful and aggressive God, was vain but shy and saw his fellow human beings as objects of his desire at best. His usual travel partner had been his mother Mrs. Venable, to whom he had an unusually close relationship. When Sebastian began to plan his trip the previous summer, his mother had suffered from a stroke, so he asked his cousin Catharine Holly to join him instead. On their trip, she procured young and beautiful men for him but shortly after he wanted to change "the menu". At the beginning of their trip, he showered her with affection and spoiled her until at last his behaviour towards her changed. He drew away from her and started finding his victims, not the rich and beautiful anymore but homeless children, himself. At the same time his heart disease seemed to get worse and Sebastian was getting more and more restless. Eventually, the children Catharine had seen him with before, turned against him and ate him alive.

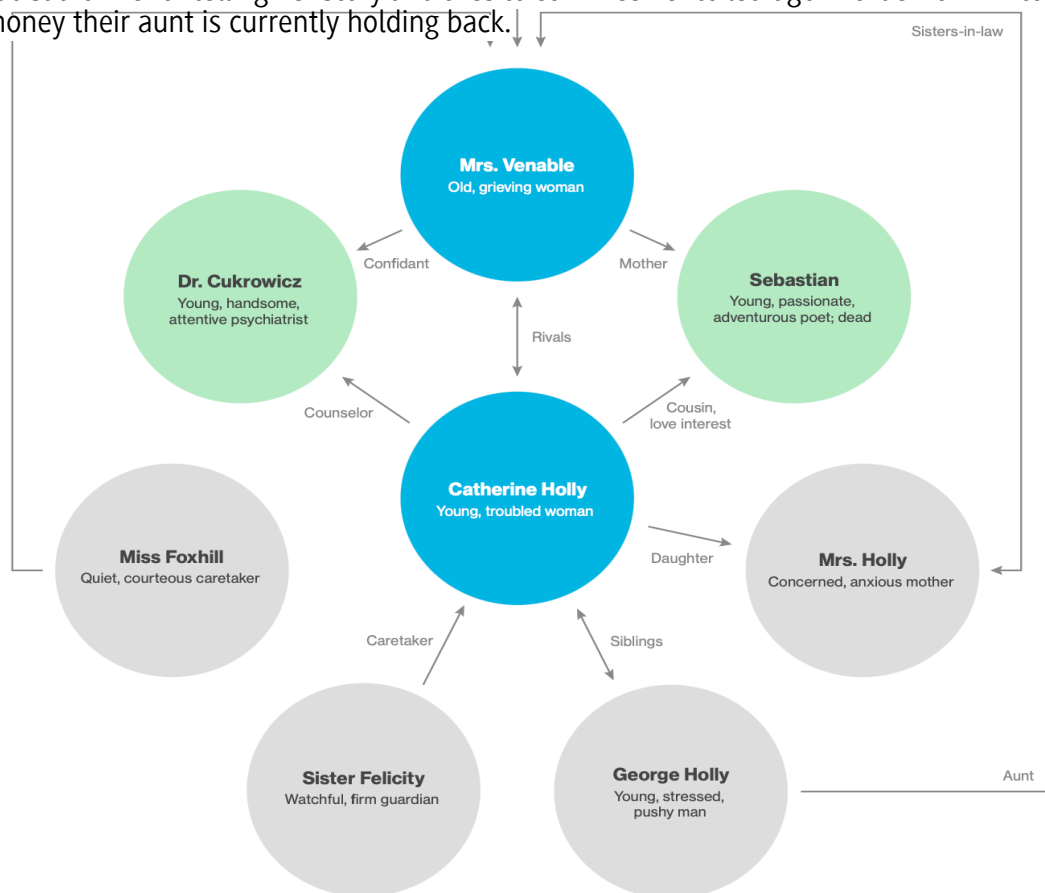
Sister Felicity

A nun of the Saint Mary's psychiatric facility and Catharine's assigned guardian, she genuinely seems to care about Catharine, as well as pity her.

Mrs Holly and George

Mrs Holly is Catharine's mother and Mrs Venable's dead husband's sister. She cares for her daughter but is also aware that she and her family are financially dependent on Mrs Venable. She tries to hold the peace between Catharine and her brother but also tries to helplessly win over Mrs Venable.

George is Catharine's vain and ambitious brother, who has inherited and already wears Sebastian's clothes and hopes to receive the significant amount of money Sebastian has left him, too. He is mad at Catharine for telling her story and tries to convince her to let it go in order for him to receive the money their aunt is currently holding back.



Medical treatments of mental illness in the 1900s

In "Suddenly Last Summer", set in the 1930s, one of the main characters, Catharine, is institutionalised by her aunt who fears a social decline and reputational damage caused by Catharine's tale about Sebastian's death. In these institutions Catharine had undergone every possible treatment for her alleged condition without effect. According to Mrs Venable all that is left now is to drill into her brain.

In the early 20th century, the number of patients residing in mental hospitals increased significantly while little in the way of effective medical treatment was available. **Lobotomy** was one of a series of radical and invasive physical therapies developed in Europe at this time that signalled a break with a psychiatric culture of therapeutic nihilism that had prevailed since the late nineteenth-century. The new "heroic" physical therapies devised during this experimental era, including malarial therapy for general paresis of the insane (1917), deep sleep therapy (1920), **insulin shock therapy** (1933), cardiazol shock therapy (1934), and **electroconvulsive therapy** (1938), helped to imbue the then therapeutically moribund and demoralised psychiatric profession with a renewed sense of optimism in the curability of insanity and the potency of their craft. The success of the shock therapies, despite the considerable risk they posed to patients, also helped to accommodate psychiatrists to ever more drastic forms of medical intervention, including lobotomy.

According to Mrs Venable Catharine had already undergone electroconvulsive therapy and insulin shock therapy amongst others without noticeable success.

Insulin shock therapy

Insulin shock therapy or **insulin coma therapy** was a form of psychiatric treatment in which patients were repeatedly injected with large doses of insulin in order to produce daily comas over several weeks. It was introduced in 1927 by Austrian-American psychiatrist Manfred Sakel. By the late 1940s, the majority of psychiatric hospitals in the US were using insulin coma treatment.

Insulin coma therapy was thought to relieve symptoms including anxiety, tension, fear, irritability, hostility, elation, paranoid projections, obsessive and compulsive thinking, delusions, and hallucinations.

The doctors from the Bronx V.A. reported that patients waking from an insulin-induced coma "Display deep confidence in the staff...They frequently express 'a feeling of being reborn.'" Common side effects, however, included obesity, brain damage, and sometimes death; modern **research on the era** says that the fatality rate was around 1%, and patients also risked permanent brain damage. There was never any serious evidence that insulin coma therapy had any positive effect on patients whatsoever.³

Electroconvulsive therapy

The ECT procedure was first conducted in 1938 by Italian psychiatrist Ugo Cerletti and rapidly replaced less safe and effective forms of biological treatments in use at the time. ECT is often used with informed consent as a safe and effective intervention for major depressive disorder, mania, and catatonia. It is still used today. **People who can't take medications for mental health conditions for any reason can often still receive ECT.** This can make a big difference for people with organ

³ <https://daily.jstor.org/the-unproven-deadly-common-cure-for-schizophrenia/>

function problems or people who are pregnant (ECT is safe during all three trimesters of pregnancy). It's especially effective in combination with medication.

However, early applications of electroshock were hardly risk-free, which applies to our play. Fractures and, more permanently, memory loss were some of the risks. And some patients had the treatment forced on them, which, once publicly known, contributed significantly to its poor image.⁴

Other non-surgical treatments for mental illness

Malaria Therapy was used to artificially induce fever and lay the foundation for all the methods of stress therapy used in psychiatry, such as electric shock, and insulin.

Deep sleep therapy (DST), also called **prolonged sleep treatment** or **continuous narcosis**, is a discredited form of ostensibly psychiatric treatment in which drugs are used to keep patients unconscious for a period of days or weeks. Deep sleep therapy involved inducing patients into a coma lasting between one to eight weeks. Many patients either died during the sleep or awoke from it with varying degrees of impairment, ranging from permanent amnesia to chronic panic.

Cardiazol shock therapy followed the idea that convulsions might have a beneficial effect on schizophrenic patients.

Lobotomy

Mrs Venable wants Doctor "Sugar" to cut the story of Sebastian's death out of Catharine's head. In medical terms, she wants to have Catharine lobotomized. But what is a lobotomy?

A lobotomy is a **surgical procedure** that doctors developed as a treatment for mental health conditions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It involves breaking the connection between the frontal lobe and the thalamus.

While lobotomies caused some people with mental illnesses to become **calmer**, they also **frequently caused significant changes in personality**, such as apathy and social disinhibition. The procedure had very serious health risks, and doctors sometimes used it in ways that were unethical.

Evidence that surgical manipulation of the brain could calm patients first emerged in the late 1880s, when Swiss physician Gottlieb Burkhardt, who supervised an insane asylum, removed parts of the brain cortex in patients suffering from auditory hallucinations and other symptoms of mental illness (symptoms later defined medically as schizophrenia). Burkhardt performed his operation on six patients, with the specific **purpose** not of returning the patients to a state of sanity but of putting them into a **state of calm**. One of Burkhardt's patients died several days following the operation, and another later committed suicide (though it is unclear whether the suicide was associated with the surgery). However, several of the **patients were easier to manage** following the surgery.

Also in 1935, Portuguese neurophysician António Egas Moniz headed a similar operation on a human. Moniz, who was affected by gout and could not use his hands to perform the surgery, enlisted the help of Portuguese surgeon Pedro Almeida Lima. The surgery consisted of drilling two holes in the patient's head and then injecting pure ethyl alcohol into the prefrontal cortex. At the time, this first operation was considered a success, since there appeared to be a reduction in the symptoms of severe paranoia and anxiety that the patient had suffered prior to the surgery. Moniz and Lima operated on nearly 40 patients by 1937; however, the results were mixed, with some patients improving, others showing no change in symptoms, and still others relapsing. Despite this, the practice was soon widely adopted, largely because there were **few other therapeutic measures available** at the time for quieting chronically agitated, delusional, self-destructive, or violent patients. One of the **criticisms** of the procedure was that it was for the **benefit of those**

⁴ <https://daily.jstor.org/why-electroshock-therapy-isnt-bad-for-you/>

looking after the lobotomy recipients rather than for the people themselves, by making them easier to manage.

The prefrontal leukotomy procedure developed by Moniz and Lima was modified in 1936 by American neurologists Walter J. Freeman II and James W. Watts. Freeman preferred the use of the term *lobotomy* and therefore renamed the procedure "prefrontal lobotomy."

In 1945 Freeman streamlined the procedure, replacing it with transorbital lobotomy, in which a picklike instrument was forced through the back of the eye sockets to pierce the thin bone that separates the eye sockets from the frontal lobes. The pick's point was then inserted into the frontal lobe and used to sever connections in the brain (presumably between the prefrontal cortex and thalamus).

A large proportion of such lobotomized patients exhibited reduced tension or agitation, but many also showed other effects, such as **apathy, passivity, lack of initiative, poor ability to concentrate, and a generally decreased depth and intensity of their emotional response to life.** Some died as a result of the procedure. However, those effects were not widely reported in the 1940s, and at that time the long-term effects were largely unknown. Because the procedure met with seemingly widespread success, Moniz was awarded the 1949 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine (along with Swiss physiologist Walter Rudolf Hess).⁵

Abundance of Symbolism

From its first page, the script is rich in symbolic detail open to many interpretations. The "mansion of Victorian Gothic style" immediately connects the play with Southern Gothic literature, with which it shares many characteristics. Sebastian's "jungle-garden," with its "violent" colours and noises of "beasts, serpents, and birds ... of savage nature" introduces the images of predation that punctuate much of the play's dialogue. These have been interpreted variously as implying the violence latent in Sebastian himself; depicting modernity's vain attempts to "contain" its atavistic impulses; and standing for a bleak "Darwinian" vision of the world, equating "the primeval past and the ostensibly civilised present."

The Venus flytrap mentioned in the play's opening speech can be read as portraying Sebastian as the "pampered" son, or "hungry for flesh"; as portraying the "seductive deadliness" concealed beneath Mrs. Venable's "civilised veneer," while she "clings desperately to life" in her "hothouse" home; as a joint "metaphor for Violet and Sebastian, who consume and destroy the people around them"; as symbolising nature's cruelty, like the "flesh-eating birds" of the Galapagos; as symbolising "a primitive state of desire," and so on.

Williams referred to symbols as "the natural language of drama" and "the purest language of plays." The ambiguity arising from the abundance of symbolism is therefore not unfamiliar to his audiences. What poses a unique difficulty to critics of *Suddenly Last Summer* is the absence of its protagonist. All we can know of Sebastian must be gleaned from the conflicting accounts given by two characters of questionable sanity, leaving him "a figure of unresolvable contradiction."

In spite of its difficulties, however, the play's recurrent images of predation and cannibalism point to Catharine's cynical pronouncement as key to understanding the playwright's intentions: "we all use each other," she says in Scene 4, "and that's what we think of as love." Accordingly, Williams commented on a number of occasions that Sebastian's death was intended to show how:

"Man devours man in a metaphorical sense. He feeds upon his fellow creatures, without the excuse of animals. Animals actually do it for survival, out of hunger ... I use that metaphor [of cannibalism] to express my repulsion with this characteristic of man, the way people use each other without conscience ... people devour each other."⁶

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/science/lobotomy>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suddenly_Last_Summer

Southern Gothic

Southern Gothic is an artistic subgenre of fiction, country music, film and television that are heavily influenced by Gothic elements and the American South. Common themes of Southern Gothic include storytelling of deeply flawed, disturbing or eccentric characters who may be involved in hoodoo, decayed or derelict settings, grotesque situations, and other sinister events relating to or stemming from poverty, alienation, crime, or violence.

Elements of a Gothic treatment of the South were first apparent during the 19th century. The genre was consolidated, however, only in the 20th century, when dark romanticism, Southern humour, and the new literary naturalism merged in a new and powerful form of social critique. The thematic material was largely a reflection of the culture existing in the South following the collapse of the Confederacy as a consequence of the Civil War, which left a vacuum in its cultural and religious values.

Some of the characteristics include exploring madness, decay and despair, continuing pressures of the past upon the present, particularly with the lost ideals of a dispossessed Southern aristocracy and continued racial hostilities.

Southern Gothic particularly focuses on the South's history of slavery, racism, fear of the outside world, violence, a "fixation with the grotesque, and a tension between realistic and supernatural elements". Villains who disguise themselves as innocents or victims are often found in Southern Gothic literature, giving us a blurred line between victim and villain.

Lesson Material

Pre-Watching Tasks

The Set Design

The script to "Suddenly Last Summer" starts with a description of the set.

- A) Read the description. Draw the design the way you envision it.

Scene One

The set may be as unrealistic as the decor of a dramatic ballet. It represents part of a mansion of Victorian Gothic style in the Garden District of New Orleans on a late afternoon, between late summer and early fall. The interior is blended with a fantastic garden which is more like a tropical jungle, or forest, in the prehistoric age of giant fern-forests when living creatures had flippers⁷ turning to limbs and scales⁸ to skin. The colours of this jungle- garden are violent, especially since it is steaming with heat after rain. There are massive tree-flowers that suggest organs of a body, torn out, still glistening with undried blood; there are harsh cries and sibilant hissings and thrashing sounds in the garden as if it were inhabited by beasts, serpents, and birds, all of savage⁹ nature ...

- B) The play is set in Sebastian's home and garden. When the play starts, Sebastian is already dead. In Think-Pair-Share analyse the description and anticipate what the themes of the play could be based on the set.

⁷ Flossen

⁸ Schuppen

⁹ wild

- C) The following excerpt is the first scene of the play. Sebastian's mother, Mrs Venable, tells the doctor about her late son.

Gather information about Sebastian. Don't forget to read between the lines. Also consider the connection made between Sebastian and his garden.

MRS VENABLE: Yes, this was Sebastian's garden. The Latin names of the plants were printed on tags attached to them but the print's fading out. Those ones there -*[She draws a deep breath.]*- are the oldest plants on earth, survivors from the age of the giant fern- forests. Of course, in this semi-tropical climate - *[She takes another deep breath.]* - some of the rarest plants, such as the Venus flytrap - you know what this is, Doctor? The Venus fly- trap?

DOCTOR: An insectivorous plant?

MRS VENABLE: Yes, it feeds on insects. It has to be kept under glass from early fall to late spring and when it went under glass, my son, Sebastian, had to provide it with fruit flies flown in at great expense from a Florida laboratory that used fruit flies for experiments in genetics. Well, I can't do that, Doctor. *[She takes a deep breath.]* I can't, I just can't do it! It's not the expense but the -

DOCTOR: Effort.

MRS VENABLE: Yes. So goodbye, Venus flytrap! -like so much else ... Whew! ... *[She draws breath.]* - I don't know why, but-! I already feel I can lean on your shoulder, Doctor - Cu? - Cu?

DOCTOR: Cu-kro-wicz. It's a Polish word that means sugar, so let's make it simple and call me Doctor Sugar. *[He returns her smile.]*

MRS VENABLE: Well, now, Doctor Sugar, you've seen Sebastian's garden.

[They are advancing slowly to the patio area.]

DOCTOR: It's like a well-groomed jungle ...

MRS VENABLE: That's how he meant it to be, nothing was accidental, everything was planned and designed in Sebastian's life and his - *[She dabs her forehead with her handkerchief, which she had taken from her reticule.]* - work!

DOCTOR: What was your son's work, Mrs Venable? - besides this garden?

MRS VENABLE: As many times as I've had to answer that question! D'you know it still shocks me a little? - to realize that Sebastian Venable the poet is still unknown outside of a small coterie of friends, including his mother.

DOCTOR: Oh.

MRS VENABLE: You see, strictly speaking, his *life* was his occupation.

DOCTOR: I see.

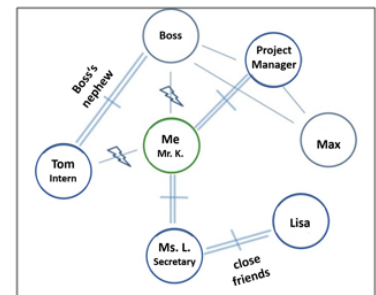
MRS VENABLE: No, you *don't* see, yet, but before I'm through, you will. - Sebastian was a poet? That's what I meant when I said his life was his work because the work of a poet is the life of a

poet, and - vice versa, the life of a poet is the work of a poet, I mean you can't separate them, I mean -well, for instance, a salesman's work is one thing and his life is another - or can be. The same thing's true of -doctor, lawyer, merchant, *thief*! - But a poet's life is his work and his work is his life in a special sense because - oh, I've already talked myself breathless and dizzy.

- D) While watching the play, pay attention to the set. Compare it afterwards in class to your designs. Discuss why changes have been made to Williams's design and interpret these.

Getting to know the Characters

Read the character descriptions (Background Information). Create a sociogram based on these descriptions.¹⁰



Working with the script – Text comprehension

- A) Read the excerpt below. Catharine starts telling the doctor what happened to Sebastian at the beach.

CATHARINE: In Cabeza de Lobo there is a beach that's named for Sebastian's name saint, it's known as La Playa San Sebastian, and that's where we started spending all afternoon, every day. [...]

CATHARINE: I don't want to go on ...

DOCTOR: Go on with the story. Every afternoon last summer your cousin Sebastian and you went out to this free public beach?

CATHARINE: No, it wasn't the free one, the free one was right next to it, there was a fence between the free beach and the one that we went to that charged a small charge of admission.

DOCTOR: Yes, and what did you do there? Did anything happen there that disturbed you about it?

CATHARINE: Yes! [...] He bought me a swim-suit I didn't want to wear. I laughed. I said, 'I can't wear that. It's a scandal to the jaybirds¹¹!' [...]

CATHARINE: [...]

¹⁰ A **sociogram** is a graphic representation of social links that a person has. It is a graph drawing that plots the structure of interpersonal relations in a group situation.

¹¹ Colourful bird. (as) naked as a **jaybird** - spiltterfasernack

It was a one-piece suit made of white lisle, the water made it transparent! *[She laughs sadly at the memory of it.]* - I didn't want to swim-in it, but he'd grab my hand and drag me into the water, all the way in, and I'd come out looking naked!

DOCTOR: Why did he do that? Did you understand why?

CATHARINE: Yes! To attract! -Attention.

DOCTOR: He wanted you to attract attention, did he, because he felt you were moody? Lonely? He wanted to shock you out of your depression last summer?

CATHARINE: Don't you understand? I was PROCURING for him!

[MRS VENABLE's gasp is like the sound that a great hooked fish might make.]

She used to do it, too.

[MRS VENABLE cries out.]

Not consciously! She didn't *know* that she was procuring for him in the smart, the fashionable places they used to go to before last summer! Sebastian was shy with people. She wasn't. Neither was I. We both did the same thing for him, made contacts for him, but she did it in nice places and in decent ways and I had to do it the way that I just told you! - Sebastian was lonely, Doctor, and the empty Blue Jay notebook got bigger and bigger, so big it was big and empty as that big empty blue sea and sky ... I knew what I was doing. I came out in the French Quarter¹² years before I came out in the Garden District¹³ ... [...]

And before long, when the weather got warmer and the beach so crowded, he didn't need me anymore for that purpose. The ones on the free beach began to climb over the fence or swim around it, bands of homeless young people that lived on the free beach like scavenger dogs, hungry children ... So now he let me wear a decent dark suit. I'd go to a faraway empty end of the beach, write postcards and letters and keep up my - third-person journal till it was -five o'clock and time to meet him outside the bathhouses, on the street ... He would come out, *followed*.

CATHARINE: The homeless, hungry young people that had climbed over the fence from the free beach that they lived on. He'd pass out tips among them as if they'd all - shined his shoes or called taxis for him ... Each day the crowd was bigger, noisier, greedier!- Sebastian began to be frightened. -At last, we stopped going out there ... [...]

- B) Sum up the content of the scene in your own words.
- C) Catharine says that she, and before her Mrs Venable, was procuring for Sebastian. Explain what she means and how she did that.
- D) Think about the people who would probably be drawn to her and what this tells us about Sebastian.
- E) Research LGBTQ rights and societal acceptance in in the US in the 1930s. (e.g. homosexuality in the Hays Code)

¹² Oldest neighborhood in city of New Orleans. In early 20th century known for cheap rents and air of decay.

¹³ The 19th-century origins of the Garden District illustrate wealthy newcomers building opulent structures based upon the prosperity of New Orleans

While Watching Tasks

Quiz

1. What did Sebastian do for a living?
 - He was a poet
 - He was a gardener
 - He was a lawyer
 - He was a farmer
2. What is the meaning of the doctor's name, Cukrowicz?
 - It's a Polish word meaning crow.
 - It's a Polish name meaning white.
 - It's a Polish name meaning sugar.
 - It's a Croatian name meaning sugar.
3. What was Sebastian's health problem?
 - He had loose teeth
 - He had a heart condition
 - He had schizophrenia
 - He had gonorrhoea
4. According to Mrs. Venable, what did Sebastian insist on in the people he hung around with?
 - Red hair
 - Homosexuality
 - A southern accent
 - Good looks
5. What is Lions View?
 - A human experimentation lab.
 - A hospital for mentally ill patients in which lobotomies are used as treatment.
 - The perspective of a big cat.
 - A hospital for patients suffering from Alzheimer's.
6. Why does Mrs Venable want to bribe the doctor?

- She wants him to give Catharine a lobotomy, so that no one will hear and/or believe the story that Catharine is telling.
- She wants him to give Catharine a lobotomy, so that Catharine doesn't suffer any longer.
- She wants him to be her husband.
- She wants him to assassinate Catharine.

7. What did Sebastian leave George and Catharine in his will?

- He left them a letter of apology.
- He left them each a framed portrait of himself.
- He left them fifty thousand dollars each.
- He left them his garden.

8. How is Mrs Venable related to the Holly family?

- Mrs Holly is her sister
- She is Catharine's grandmother
- Her late husband is Mrs Holly's Brother
- She is having an affair with George

9. What does Mrs. Venable claim her health problem was?

- Just a tiny heart attack
- Just a mild brain haemorrhage
- Just a small stroke
- Just a slight aneurysm

10. What does the doctor give Catharine to assure that she speaks the truth?

- A good hard slap
- A mind-blowing kiss
- A shot of truth serum
- A dollar

11. What was Catharine's reaction after being assaulted and left after the Mardi Gras ball? Choose the answer that fits best.

- She went back to the ball to get her coat.
- She started to write her diary in the third person singular.
- She hid in Sebastian's room and waited for her cousin to avenge her.
- In order to finally find herself a husband, she went travelling with Sebastian.

12. What does Catharine mean when she says she procured for Sebastian?

- Sebastian was a pimp and she worked in his brothel.
- She attracted people with her looks so that Sebastian would be able to use them.

- She bought his heart pills for him.
- She assisted him in finding ways to seduce people.

13. What did Sebastian eventually die from?

- He got eaten by starving children
- He had a heart attack
- He died of syphilis
- Trying to become a god he imitated the flesh-eating birds and jumped off a cliff

14. What does the doctor think of Catharine's story?

- He thinks it's a hallucination induced by neurosyphilis
- He thinks it may be true.
- He has no idea what to think.
- He wants to give her a lobotomy

Analysing the designs - Plastic Theatre

The English Theatre Frankfurt's production of "Suddenly Last Summer" follows the principles of Plastic Theatre.

- Read the definition below before watching the play.
- Form groups based on the different focus areas (light/sound/costume/props/stage directions) and pay attention to your chosen aspect while watching the play.
- When back in class, get into your focus groups and discuss the realisation of plastic theatre for your area. What did you notice? Which effect did light/sound/costume/props/stage directions have on the audience? Was the ETF successful in following the principles of plastic theatre? If not, what would you have done differently?
- Present your results to the other groups.

Tennessee Williams introduced a concept to his plays called "Plastic Theatre" with the aim to get a closer approach to truth.

Plastic theatre is the process of performing with props, sounds, costumes and stage directions. Instead of expecting a real outcome, the piece expresses symbolic meaning and often parallels the characters states of mind on stage. The purpose is to create an environment where the audience can become fully immersed in a story. Sets and costumes are designed to be realistic and the acting is highly stylized to create the illusion, that a whole other world is presented on stage. Additionally, it adds drama to a scene, can heighten the awareness of certain events, introduces the audience to more abstract ideas and drives the plot to a climax. Plastic theatre is used to generate various theater experiences yet is most often known to create arresting and thought-provoking performances.

“Suddenly Last Summer” – A Southern Gothic Play

- A) Read the definition of the Southern Gothic.
- B) Think – Pair – Share: referring to the production you have just seen, explain why “Suddenly Last Summer” is categorized as a Southern Gothic play.

Post-Watching

Creating a cover for a Southern Gothic Play

- A) Draw or describe a cover for Williams’s play while considering Southern Gothic topics based on the definition.

Symbolism in “Suddenly Last Summer”

Tennessee Williams is known to use symbols in his plays to convey his message. Let’s have a closer look at some of them.

- A) Reactivate your knowledge about stylistic devices. Define “symbol” and name examples. Name the differences between symbols, metaphors and similes.
- B) After having seen the play recently, try to remember symbols used within the play and collect in class.
- C) Either focus on one of the symbols mentioned in class and analyse it *or* take a closer look at the following excerpt from the play. Focus on
 - the use of colours and
 - the description of Sebastian in contrast to the homeless children.

CATHARINE: In Cabeza de Lobo there is a beach that's named for Sebastian's name saint, it's known as La Playa San Sebastian, and that's where we started spending all afternoon, every day. [...]

CATHARINE: I don't want to go on ...

DOCTOR: Go on with the story. Every afternoon last summer your cousin Sebastian and you went out to this free public beach?

CATHARINE: No, it wasn't the free one, the free one was right next to it, there was a fence between the free beach and the one that we went to that charged a small charge of admission.

DOCTOR: Yes, and what did you do there?
Did anything happen there that disturbed you about it?

CATHARINE: Yes![...]

He bought me a swim-suit I didn't want to wear. I laughed. I said, 'I can't wear that. It's a scandal to the jaybirds!'¹⁴ [...]

CATHARINE: [...]

It was a one-piece suit made of white lisle, the water made it transparent! *[She laughs sadly at the memory of it.]* - I didn't want to swim-in it, but he'd grab my hand and drag me into the water, all the way in, and I'd come out looking naked!

DOCTOR: Why did he do that? Did you understand why?

CATHARINE: Yes! To attract! -Attention.

DOCTOR: He wanted you to attract attention, did he, because he felt you were moody? Lonely? He wanted to shock you out of your depression last summer?

CATHARINE: Don't you understand? I was PROCURING for him!

[MRS VENABLE's gasp is like the sound that a great hooked fish might make.]

She used to do it, too.

[MRS VENABLE cries out.]

Not consciously! She didn't *know* that she was procuring for him in the smart, the fashionable places they used to go to before last summer! Sebastian was shy with people. She wasn't. Neither was I. We both did the same thing for him, made contacts for him, but she did it in nice places and in decent ways and I had to do it the way that I just told you! - Sebastian was lonely, Doctor, and the empty Blue Jay notebook got bigger and bigger, so big it was big and empty as that big empty blue sea and sky ... I knew what I was doing. I came out in the French Quarter years before I came out in the Garden District [...]

And before long, when the weather got warmer and the beach so crowded, he didn't need me anymore for that purpose. The ones on the free beach began to climb over the fence or swim around it, bands of homeless young people that lived on the free beach like scavenger dogs, hungry children ... So now he let me wear a decent dark suit. I'd go to a faraway empty end of the beach, write postcards and letters and keep up my - third-person journal till it was -five o'clock and time to meet him outside the bathhouses, on the street ... He would come out, *followed*.

CATHARINE: The homeless, hungry young people that had climbed over the fence from the free beach that they lived on. He'd pass out tips among them as if they'd all - shined his shoes or called taxis for him ... Each day the crowd was bigger, noisier, greedier!- Sebastian began to be frightened. -At last we stopped going out there ... [...]

CATHARINE: Then one day, a few days after we stopped going out to the beach - it was one of those white blazing days in Cabeza de Lobo, not a blazing hot *blue* one but a blazing hot *white* one.[...]

We had a late lunch at one of those open-air restaurants on the sea there. - Sebastian was white as the weather. He had on a spotless white silk Shantung suit and a white silk tie and a white panama and white shoes, white - white lizard skin - pumps! He - *[She throws back her head in a startled laugh at the recollection.]* - kept touching his face and his throat here and there with a white silk handkerchief and popping little white pills in his mouth, and I knew he was having a

¹⁴ Colourful bird. (as) naked as a jaybird - spiltterfasernackt

bad time with his heart and was frightened about it and that was the reason we hadn't gone out to the beach ...

[During the monologue the lights have changed, the surrounding area has dimmed out and a hot white spot is focused on CATHARINE.] [...]

CATHARINE: Where was I? Oh, yes, that five o'clock lunch at one of those fish-places along the harbour of Cabeza de Lobo, it was between the city and the sea, and there were naked children along the beach which was fenced off with barbed wire from the restaurant and we had our table less than a yard from the barbed-wire fence that held the beggars at bay ... There were naked children along the beach, a band of frightfully thin and dark naked children that looked a flock of plucked birds, and they would come darting up to the barbed-wire fence as if blown there by the wind, the hot white wind from the sea, all crying out, '*Pan, pan, pan!*'

DOCTOR *[quietly]*: What's *pan*?

CATHARINE: The word for bread, and they made gobbling noises with their little black mouths, stuffing their little black fists to their mouths and making those gobbling noises, with frightful grins! - Of course, we were sorry that we had come to this place, but it was too late to go ... [...]

CATHARINE: I told you Cousin Sebastian wasn't well. He was popping those little white pills in his mouth. I think he had popped in so many of them that they had made him feel weak ... His, his! - eyes looked- dazed, but he said: 'Don't look at those little monsters. Beggars are a social disease in this country. If you look at them, you get sick of the country, it spoils the whole country for you .. .' [...]

CATHARINE: Always when I was with him, I did what he told me. I didn't look at the band of naked children, not even when the waiters drove them away from the barbed-wire fence with sticks! - Rushing out through a wicket gate like an assault party in war!- and beating them screaming away from the barbed-wire fence with the sticks ... Then! [...]

CATHARINE: The, the the! - band of children began to - serenade us ...[...]

CATHARINE: Play for us! On instruments! Make music! - if you could call it music ... [...]

CATHARINE: All during lunch they stayed at a - a fairly *close - distance* ...

DOCTOR: Your Cousin Sebastian was *entertained* by this - *concert*?

CATHARINE: I think he was *terrified* of it! [...] I think he recognized some of the musicians, some of the boys, between childhood and - older ...[...]

CATHARINE: After the salad, before they brought the coffee, he suddenly pushed himself away from the table, and said, 'They've got to stop that! Waiter, make them stop that. I'm not a well man, I have a heart condition, it's making me sick!' - This was the first time that cousin Sebastian had ever attempted to correct a human situation! - I think perhaps that *that* was his - fatal error ... It was then that the waiters, all eight or ten of them, charged out of the barbed-wire wicket gate and beat the little musicians away with clubs and skillets and anything hard that they could snatch from the kitchen! - Cousin Sebastian left the table. He stalked out of the restaurant after throwing a handful of paper money on the table and he fled from the place. I followed. It was all white outside. White hot, a blazing¹⁵ white hot, hot blazing white, at five o'clock in the afternoon in the city of - Cabeza de Lobo. It looked as if - [...]

As if a huge white bone had caught on fire in the sky and blazed so bright it was white and turned the sky and everything under the sky white with it! [...]

¹⁵ Brennend, gleißend, höllisch

CATHARINE: Cousin Sebastian seemed to be paralysed near the entrance of the cafe, so I said, 'Let's go.' I remember that it was a very wide and steep white street, and I said, 'Cousin Sebastian, down that way is the waterfront and we are more likely to find a taxi near there ... Or why don't we go back in?- and have them *call* us a taxi! Oh, let's do! Let's do *that*, that's better!' And he said, '*Mad*, are you *mad*? Go back in that filthy place? Never! That gang of kids shouted vile things about me to the waiters!' 'Oh,' I said, 'then let's go down toward the docks, down there at the bottom of the hill, let's not try to climb the hill in this dreadful heat.' And Cousin Sebastian shouted, 'Please shut up, let me handle this situation, will you? I want to handle this thing.' And he started up the steep street with a hand stuck in his jacket where I knew he was having a pain in his chest from his palpitations ... But he walked faster and faster, in panic, but the faster he walked the louder and closer it got!

DOCTOR: What got louder?

CATHARINE: The music.

DOCTOR: The music again.

CATHARINE: The oompa-oompa of the - following band. - They'd somehow gotten through the barbed wire and out on the street, and they were following, following! - up the blazing white street. The band of naked children pursued us up the steep white street in the sun that was like a great white bone of a giant beast that had caught on fire in the sky! - Sebastian started to run and they all screamed at once and seemed to fly in the air, they outran him so quickly. I screamed. I heard Sebastian scream, he screamed just once before this flock¹⁶ of black plucked little birds that pursued him and overtook him halfway up the white hill.

DOCTOR: And you, Miss Catharine, what did *you* do, then?

CATHARINE: Ran!

DOCTOR: Ran where?

CATHARINE: Down! Oh, I ran down, the easier direction to run was down, down, down, down! - The hot, white, blazing street, screaming out 'Help' all the way, till -

DOCTOR: What?

CATHARINE: - Waiters, police, and others - ran out of buildings and rushed back up the hill with me. When we got back to where my cousin Sebastian had disappeared in the flock of featherless little black sparrows, he - he was lying naked as they had been naked against a white wall, and this you won't believe, nobody *has* believed it, nobody *could* believe it, nobody, nobody on earth could possibly believe it, and I don't *blame* them! - They had *devoured*¹⁷ parts of him.

[MRS VENABLE cries out softly.]

Torn or cut parts of him away with their hands or knives or maybe those jagged tin cans they made music with, they had torn bits of him away and stuffed them into those gobbling fierce little empty black mouths of theirs. There wasn't a sound anymore, there was nothing to see but Sebastian, what was left of him, that looked like a big white-paper-wrapped bunch of red roses had been *torn, thrown, crushed!* - against that blazing white wall ...

¹⁶ Schwarm

¹⁷ verschlingen

- D) Catharine establishes the connection between her cousin and his namesake San Sebastian. Do research on Saint Sebastian and compare the two.

Williams's image of humanity

- E) Read the scene and the quote by Tennessee Williams about the nature of love and hate below.
- F) Think/Pair/Share: Sum up in your own words Tennessee Williams's image of humanity.
- G) Discuss his image. Do you agree?

DOCTOR: Miss Catharine, do you hate [your aunt]?

CATHARINE: I don't understand what hate is. How can you hate any- body and still be sane? You see, I still think I'm sane!

DOCTOR: You think she did have a stroke?

CATHARINE: She had a slight stroke in April. It just affected one side, the left side, of her face ... but it was disfiguring and, after that, Sebastian couldn't use her.

DOCTOR: Use her? Did you say use her?

[The sounds of the jungle garden are not loud but ominous.]

CATHARINE: Yes, we all use each other and that's what we think of as love, and not being able to use each other is what's - *hate* ...

"Man devours man in a metaphorical sense. He feeds upon his fellow creatures, without the excuse of animals. Animals actually do it for survival, out of hunger ... I use that metaphor [of cannibalism] to express my repulsion with this characteristic of man, the way people use each other without conscience ... people devour each other."¹⁸

Autobiographic elements in Tennessee Williams's play

- A) Do research on Tennessee Williams and his sister Rose.
- B) Elia Kazan (director) said of Tennessee: "Everything in his life is in his plays, and everything in his plays is in his life."
Based on "Suddenly Last Summer", do you agree? Say why and give examples.
- C) Discuss the following statement:

¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suddenly_Last_Summer

Sebastian, the gay character in "Suddenly Last Summer" is portrayed as a predator and narcissist. Nowadays such negative and nonreflective portrayals of homosexuality should not be repeated.

Appendix

Quiz

15. What did Sebastian do for a living?

- **He was a poet**
- He was a gardener
- He was a lawyer
- He was a farmer

16. What is the meaning of the doctor's name, Cukrowicz?

- It's a Polish word meaning crow.
- It's a Polish name meaning white.
- **It's a Polish name meaning sugar.**
- It's a Croatian name meaning sugar.

17. What was Sebastian's health problem?

- He had loose teeth
- **He had a heart condition**
- He had schizophrenia
- He had gonorrhoea

18. According to Mrs. Venable, what did Sebastian insist on in the people he hung around with?

- Red hair
- Homosexuality
- A southern accent
- **Good looks**

19. What is Lions View?

- A human experimentation lab.
- **A hospital for mentally ill patients in which lobotomies are used as treatment.**
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20. Why does Mrs Venable want to bribe the doctor?

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21. What did Sebastian leave George and Catharine in his will?

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- He left them each a framed portrait of himself.
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- A mind-blowing kiss
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- A dollar

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Choose the answer that fits best.

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- He thinks it's a hallucination induced by neurosyphilis
- **He thinks it may be true.**
- He has no idea what to think.
- He wants to give her a lobotomy

11-14 correct answers	6-10 correct answers	0-5 correct answers
 Congratulations! You understood a lot!	 Quite good already! Talk to your classmates again about the show, you might tap into new levels of understanding!	 Don't give up! Talk to your classmates about the parts of the show that are still a bit fuzzy to you.