

Gaslight Study Guide Text

The Shaw Festival presents

Gaslight

By Johnna Wright and Patty Jamieson

Based on the Play *Angel Street*

By Patrick Hamilton

Directed by Kelli Fox

Set and costumes designed by Judith Bowden

Lighting designed by Kimberly Purtell

Original music and sound designed by Gilles Zolty

The Story

Bella Manningham is a young wife who seemingly has it all – a nice home and a comfortable upper-middle class life.

She has servants, Elizabeth and Nancy, to attend to her needs and to help run the household.

Her husband, Jack, appears to be attentive and loving.

So why is Bella on edge?

As we learn more about the Manningham household, it becomes clear that something is amiss.

The new servant, Nancy, is causing problems.

Despite his dotting appearance, Jack is hiding something – he keeps disappearing in the evenings and won't tell Bella where he's going...

...and after he leaves, Bella hears strange sounds in the house, and the gas lights dim for no apparent reason.

Is Bella losing her grip on reality? Or is something more sinister afoot?

The World of the Play

Gaslight is set in 1901, in a Victorian row house in London, England.

This style of terraced house was popular with the middle classes in England. In the Victorian Era (the years during which Queen Victoria reigned – 1837-1901) the middle classes in England grew exponentially, in both numbers and importance. During the early part of the 1800s, the Industrial Revolution created a whole new group of skilled workers. Bankers, clerks, engineers, merchants and manufacturers became increasingly important as industries grew.

As their employment opportunities expanded, the middle class became more and more interested in having things that would have been previously unattainable – servants, paid education for their children, luxuries like pre-packaged foods and sweets, and single-family dwellings.

This expansion, in turn, fueled more manufacturing to keep up with demand, and cities like London expanded to make room for new residents. Much like subdivisions in suburban areas today, London's row houses and neighbourhoods expanded to accommodate this new middle class.

One of the modern conveniences becoming available in 1901 was the use of gas for lighting and cooking. Prior to this time, lighting was predominantly restricted to candles and oil lamps, and cooking was done over an open fire or on a wood or coal-burning stove. Compared to these methods, natural gas was cleaner and more efficient, and so it was highly desirable in middle- and upper-class homes. Although it was invented in 1792, gas lighting did not become widespread in England until the Industrial Revolution. However, while gas was a significant improvement over wax and oil, it was not without its drawbacks – it produced toxic carbon monoxide, had a nasty habit of causing explosions, and if too many gas lights were turned on in the home, the larger draw on fuel would cause lights to dim.

Another of the challenges of growing industrialisation was the impact it had on English society. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, most people in England lived in rural areas, and were employed in agriculture or small crafts or trades. In these rural areas, people lived in small villages, and they relied on their neighbours for support. While poverty was still a concern, communities often supported those who needed help.

With the rise of industrialisation, however, many people moved away from living in small villages, and into the larger towns and cities, where industrial industries were based. For women in particular, this shift was problematic, as it was coupled with a shift in societal views on the role of women. While Britain had been a patriarchal society since Roman colonisation, the rise of Queen Victoria signalled a significant increase in the divide between men's and women's roles. Victoria's reign came to represent a specific ideal of femininity – one that revolved around family, motherhood, and feminine respectability.

Rather than women working alongside men in the family business, during the Victorian era, men increasingly commuted away from home to work, and women were expected to remain behind as the "angel of the house" – overseeing all domestic duties, but reliant on men for financial support.

In the middle and upper classes, women usually married in their early 20s, and often married an older man – which served to reinforce the hierarchy between the sexes. Unmarried girls and women were considered the property of their fathers – upon marriage, her body, property and money transferred to her husband. Women had few rights, and very little recourse in the event of abuse. Orphaned girls, such as Bella, were particularly vulnerable, especially as we learn that her mother allegedly suffered from a mental illness.

In the Victorian era, there was little understanding of mental health. Coupled with the Victorian belief that women were emotional and dependent, many (including medical professionals) believed that women were more prone to disease and illness, particularly of the mind. This belief was the basis for the diagnosis of insanity in many female patients in the 19th Century. It was common for female patients in the Victorian era to be diagnosed as suffering from "hysteria." Especially for 19th century middle- and upper-class women, who were completely dependent on their fathers and husbands, there was very real pressure to conform to often-unattainable expectations around their roles as respectable and "pure" daughters, wives and mothers. With so little power and control over their lives, and restricted independence, it is no wonder that depression and anxiety were rampant among Victorian women. Living a monotonous existence, struggling to cope under systems of strict gender ideals and unyielding patriarchy, and with no support from family or medical professionals, many women suffered in silence.

Those that didn't, often found themselves committed to asylums, such as the Bethlem Royal Hospital in London – commonly referred to as Bedlam. In Victorian Britain, the asylum offered a solution – committing a "hysterical" woman to the asylum provided a convenient and acceptable way to deal with socially inappropriate or scandalous behaviour. The woman could be committed to the asylum by her family, thereby avoiding embarrassment. Unfortunately, this system was ripe for abuse – and women who were deemed "difficult," or those whose behaviour fell outside the "norms" of society, were also sent to asylums, sometimes for life. Conditions in the asylums of Victorian Britain were horrific, and mistreatment and abuse were rampant. Knowing this information, and Bella's mother's history, it is easy to see how even the mention of "madness" could cause Bella distress.

The Playwrights

The original playwright of *Gaslight*, Patrick Hamilton, was no stranger to difficult circumstances. Born in Sussex, England in 1904, his parents were writers, but due to his father's alcoholism and financial mismanagement, his family spent much of his youth in boarding houses. As they moved around a lot, Hamilton's formal education was sporadic, and ended officially at the age of 15, when he was pulled out of school by his parents. Despite his lack of formal education or training, Hamilton displayed an early talent for writing, publishing his first poem in 1919. After a brief career as an actor, Hamilton moved to writing novels, and then plays.

Hamilton was very interested in ideas of power and position in society. He became interested in the philosophies of Karl Marx and was for a time a Marxist, although he never formally joined the Communist Party. Hamilton also disliked many aspects of modern life and was distressed by the rise of Fascism in Europe, and many of his novels feature dystopian themes and explore disillusionment with capitalist culture.

Hamilton was fascinated with theatrical melodrama, and he incorporated some of his interest in the macabre in his writing. *Gaslight* was written during a particularly dark period in Hamilton's life – six years prior to its writing, Hamilton was hit by a drunk driver and dragged through the streets of London – which left him with multiple disfiguring injuries. Two years later, his mother committed suicide. He suffered from depression and began drinking to deal with the symptoms of his illness. He died from cirrhosis of the liver and kidney failure in 1962, at the age of 58.

Despite this difficult life, two of Hamilton's plays, *Gaslight* and *Rope*, became wildly successful. Both *Gaslight* and *Rope* were turned into popular films in both Britain and the United States. Sometimes produced in America under the title "Angel Street," the most well-known version of *Gaslight* is the 1944 film version, starring Ingrid Bergman:

While Hamilton's original story relies on the character of a police detective to help Bella "solve" her situation, our production focuses on the agency of the women in the story. Our playwrights, Patty Jamieson and Johnna Wright, wanted to examine what would happen if Bella saved herself. As Patty and Johnna say, "like many stories from this era, Hamilton's Angel Street can be difficult for a modern audience to navigate because it is based on some dated ideas about how women operate. It's frustrating to see Bella, the heroine, so easily dismissed."

In our version, there is no police inspector, and no one is coming to save Bella. Can she find the strength to save herself?

Gaslight – The Terminology

Definition: "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." – Merriam-Webster

Definition: "an increasing frequency of systematically withholding factual information from, and/or providing false information to, the victim - having the gradual effect of making them anxious, confused, and less able to trust their own memory and perception." – Urban Dictionary

We hear the term "gaslighting" thrown around a lot nowadays – in reference to politicians, to current events, and even to celebrities:

The term comes from Hamilton's play. But in the original version, and in ours, the gaslight actually has the opposite effect. Whereas now we refer to gaslighting as a deliberate attempt to deceive someone or make someone doubt their own reality, in the play, the gaslights actually function as a clue – helping Bella to learn the truth about what is really going on in the house.

The Design

"In broad long streets where the vista of lamps stretches far far away into almost endless perspective; in courts and alleys, dark by day but lighted up at night by this incorruptible tell-tale... bright, silent, and secret...not a houseless night-wanderer, not a homeless dog, shall escape that searching ray of light which the gas will lend him, to see and to know." – G.A. Sala

I love the way Sala personifies the light, making it an active seeker of truth, from whom no evil can hide. – Kelli Fox, Director

Our production takes place in a single room inside the Manningham's home. Because of this single location, all of the design elements must work together to help advance the story. Take careful note of the setting – there are both clues and red herrings around the set!

Pay attention to how the lighting is used to set the tone, and what colours are used in the set. The costumes also say something about the characters – especially Bella. As you watch our production, think about what the set and costumes are conveying about the characters and the story.

Finally, listen for the production's soundscape. How is music used to define the overall production, and each character? How does it add to the tension of the story?

We look forward to seeing you soon at the Shaw Festival!