

Heaven Sent

By Rick Whelan

Study guide prepared by Becky Brett, Literary Adjunct
Designed for students in grades 7-12

Virginia SOLs

English – 7.5, 8.5, 9.1, 9.5, 10.6, 11.6, 12.3, 12.6
Theatre Arts – M.8, M.9, M.12, M.13, M.14, TI.8, TI.10, TI.11, TI.13, TII.9, TII.12, TII.13, TII.14, TII.15, TII.16, TIII.12

Tennessee TCAPs

Language Arts – 7.1.12, 7.1.13, 8.1.12, 8.1.13
English I – 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 3.1, 3.2
English II – 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 3.1, 3.2
English III – 2.01, 2.02, 2.08, 2.10, 2.11, 2.12, 4.05, 4.07
Theatre 6th-8th Grade – 6.0, 7.0, 8.0
Theatre 9th-12th – 5.0, 6.0, 7.0, 8.0

North Carolina SCOS

Theatre Arts (grade 7) – 7.01, 7.7.03, 7.7.05,
Theatre Arts (grade 8) - 7.01, 7.04, 7.06,
Theatre Arts I – 5.03, 6.01, 7.02, 8.01 **Theatre Arts II** – 5.01, 5.03, 6.03, 8.03
Theatre Arts III – 1.06, 5.02, 7.02, 8.0 **Theatre Arts IV** – 5.01
English Language Arts – 7.5.02, 8.5.02
English I – 5.01, 5.03 **English II** – 3.01, 3.04, 4.02, 4.05, 5.01
English III – 5.01, 5.03 **English IV** – 5.01, 5.02, 5.03
AP English Language – 5.01
AP English Literature – 5.01

Setting

Raveloe County, Kentucky during the Great Depression



“It’s a hard thing to find your place in this world for some people. This is a story about the redemption of this poor man’s soul on this earth.”

- Eugene Wolf, Actor playing Samuel

Characters

Samuel Langley – a recluse who serves as the town herbalist

Pastor Sims – Samuel's tormentor, a painful memory from his past

Mrs. Winthrop – upstanding citizen of the town, mother to Aaron

Ralph Budleigh – owner of the general store

Del Cass – son of a wealthy land owner, brother to Tom Cass, Eppie's father

Nancy Flagg - Del's ex-fiancee

Tom Cass – a selfish scoundrel, brother to Del Cass

Aaron Winthrop – Mrs. Winthrop's son, friend to Adult Eppie

Molly Stark – a desperate drunk, Eppie's mother

Young Eppie – small child left in the woods by her mother and taken in by Samuel

Adult Eppie - adopted daughter to Samuel

Voice of Hugh Cass (Recorded) – father of Del and Tom Cass

Synopsis

"The play is an adaptation of a classic story I was fascinated by as required reading in school years ago," says director Mary Lucy Bivins. "The play, moving the story to America and forward in time, I believe makes this timeless tale more accessible to audiences of all ages. Its messages are universal."

"All that glitters is not gold. The most treasured things in life could be Heaven sent."

- Mary Lucy Bivins, Director

Heaven Sent is very loosely based on the 19th century British novel, *Silas Marner*, by George Eliot.

Recluse Samuel Langley lives far removed from the people of Raveloe County, Kentucky. The time is the Great Depression, and although money and jobs are scarce, Samuel has managed to save up a small fortune as the local herbalist. People who can't afford to go to a doctor come to him for his curative potions.

Meanwhile, the wealthy Cass family sons, Del and Tom are engaged in a feud of sorts. Tom knows Del's secret—an illegitimate daughter by town drunk Molly Stark—and threatens to expose Del to their father, jeopardizing Del's financial security and his plans to win back his former fiancé, Nancy.

One night a young, abandoned girl (Del's daughter) shows up on Samuel's doorstep in need of care. He takes her in, and his life is forever changed as he is revived and begins to find beauty in life and the ability to slowly rejoin his community.

The play uses the convention of a Greek Chorus, in which the cast remains on stage throughout the play, sometimes making sound effects, providing offstage voices or singing. This convention also serves to emphasize Samuel's separation from the rest of the community. Scenery is minimal, with playing areas suggested by lighting and a few representative props.

"I find the hardest thing about writing a play is coming up with a satisfying plot ... not making the story "artificial" ... but rather springing from the characters' own desires and distinct personalities."

- Rick Whelan, Playwright

Biography of the Playwright

Rick Whelan was an actor before he was a playwright. He played that lovable loser Charlie Brown in the national touring company of *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown*. His plays have been produced at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, the Actors' Theatre of Louisville and the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, Canada. In 2004 the Barter Theatre produced his adaptation of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. His new play *Kindred Spirits* was

read at Barter's Appalachian Festival of Plays and Playwrights this summer.

About writing *Heaven Sent*, Whelan says, "Nothing will kill a play's potential as quickly as a phony plot point. Once you establish the characters, it is jarring to have them doing something that seems unnatural to their own personalities.

"Since experts tell me there are only around ten basic plots in all of literature, you'd think this would be easy. But each story is like a fingerprint - unique unto itself. Once you have fleshed out a character, you owe it to your audience to be faithful to his or her distinct personalities. Once the audience steps back and says to themselves ... 'Oh Samuel would never do that!' you have lost them ... and you have scuttled your own play.

Let's hope that's not the case with *Heaven Sent*."

Themes

Redemption: Samuel has hardened to everything and everyone, but Eppie's arrival redeems his faith in others and himself. At the end of Act I his prayer shows how he is starting to open himself up:

I need to keep this child. I don't know where she come from. Don't really care, neither. Life is hard for little things. And I reckon everyone's got a right to be safe in this world for a little while at least.

Del's relationship with Nancy is a process of reconciliation, and he finally redeems himself with her. Molly redeems herself for abandoning Eppie by insisting with Del that he take some responsibility for Eppie.

Inclusion: According to Whelan, "Everyone is part of something whether they like it or not." The play explores what it means to be part of a community and what our responsibilities to each other are.

Family: Families come in all shapes and sizes. Samuel and Eppie are no less a family than if he were her biological father. Del and Molly are a family even though they have no children of their own.

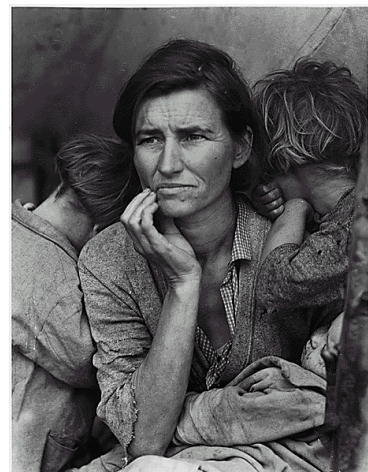
Small acts of kindness can make a huge difference: Eppie is moments away from turning into a tragic repeat of her mother, but the singular act of one person taking her in and taking care of her changes her life forever. This play shows how the accumulation of people doing the right thing in small ways can add up to a major impact.

Money and happiness: Samuel has a small fortune, yet he is miserable. Del is the wealthiest man in town, but all his money can't buy the affection of his biological daughter.

Feeling alone and abandoned: Samuel is alone in the terror of his epileptic seizures. Eppie is literally abandoned in the woods. Both of these characters find happiness and redemption because one person took an interest. Nancy is abandoned by Del on their wedding day.

Questions & Activities for Guided Study Grades 7-9

1. An important part of this play is Samuel's treasure. What do you treasure most and why?
2. Which would you rather have: \$1,000 today or 1 cent doubled every day for 30 days? (On day 1 you have \$.01. On day 2 you have \$.02. On day 3 you have \$.04, etc.) Discuss the concept of compound interest (something that Samuel did not take advantage of).
3. How does setting this play in the Great Depression



enhance the story? Is this a story that could be set in another time? If so, what would change?

4. Samuel is an herbalist. What are some helpful plants that you know of? What do they do?

5. Families come in all shapes and sizes. Who are the people that make up your family? Remember that some may be friends who are more like relatives to you. Write a scene with all of them in the same room, like a family dinner. What are their quirks and habits? Which of those habits do you have, too? Are they funny? Annoying? Scary? Weird?

Grades 10-12

1. This play uses the convention of a Greek Chorus. What is a Greek Chorus? How does this affect the storytelling?

2. This play is an adaptation of the novel, *Silas Marner*. How is the play different from the novel upon which it is based? How does presenting the story as a play change your perception of it?

3. Take a story you are reading right now and adapt a scene to be acted on stage.

4. In this play, small acts of kindness add up to make an enormous difference in someone's life. Choose a major event in history and look backward at the small events that led up to it.

5. One of the major themes of this play is our place in the community and our responsibility to others. What acts of community service have you engaged in? Do you volunteer anywhere? What are you doing to make your community a better place to live? What could you do? Perhaps your class would like to choose a community service project to do in honor of Samuel and his selfless act of taking in a little stranger who needed help.

