

A Noise
Within
Study
Guide



The Eccentricities of a Nightingale

by Tennessee Williams

Photo by Craig Schwartz



The Heart of the Matter 10/11 SEASON

The Eccentricities of a Nightingale

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Tennessee Williams

(1911-1983)



CONSIDERED ONE OF America's most prominent playwrights, Thomas Lanier Williams III was born in Columbus, Mississippi into a troubled family which was to prove the inspiration for many of his works. His father, Cornelius, was a traveling salesman who became abusive to his children as they grew older. His mother, Edwina, came from an aristocratic southern family and was somewhat smothering. At the age of eight, Tom contracted diphtheria and was unable to do much for about two years. His mother, in an attempt to keep him from being idle, encouraged him to use his imagination and bought him a typewriter.

In 1918, the family moved to St Louis, Missouri. In 1927, Tom won third prize for an essay published in *Smart Set* entitled, *Can a Good Wife be a Good Sport?* A year later he published *The Vengeance of Nitocris* in *Weird Tales*.

Williams attended the University of Missouri — Columbia where he was a member of the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity. His frat brothers nicknamed him 'Tennessee' because of his broad southern drawl. In the late 1930's Williams transferred to Washington University for a year and eventually received his degree from the University of Iowa in 1938.

In 1939 Williams moved to New Orleans' French Quarter to write for the WPA. This setting would find its way into his plays *Vieux Carré* (1977) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947).

The person who had the greatest influence on him was his sister Rose, a fragile beauty who was diagnosed with schizophrenia and spent most her adult life in mental hospitals. After unsuccessful attempts at therapy, she became paranoid. Her parents eventually allowed a prefrontal lobotomy in an effort to treat her. The operation went badly and



Rose was incapacitated for the remainder of her life. This was a hard blow for Tennessee who never forgave his parents for agreeing to the operation. Williams suffered from depression and addictions to prescription drugs and alcohol throughout his life. Most biographers attribute his inner torment to the social strain placed on him as a known homosexual. He had suffered a nervous breakdown at a young age and was always haunted by the constant fear that he would go mad like his sister.

Williams had achieved a fame few playwrights of his day could equal. Williams wrote twenty-five full-length plays and dozens of short plays and screenplays, two novels, a novella, sixty short stories, over one hundred poems and an autobiography. His works have been translated into twenty seven languages. Among his many awards were two Pulitzer Prizes (in 1948 for *A Streetcar Named Desire* and in 1955 for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*) and four New York Drama Critics Circle Awards.

Characters in his plays are often seen as a direct representation of his family members. Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* is modeled on Rose, as is the character of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and the subject of lobotomy arises in *Suddenly Last Summer*. Amanda Wingfield can be seen to represent Tennessee's mother. Characters such as Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* and Sebastian in *Suddenly Last Summer* are considered autobiographical.

Williams' play, *The Parade, or Approaching the End of a Summer*, was written when he was 29 and worked on throughout his life. This play is an autobiographical depiction of an early romance in Provincetown, MA. Williams met and fell in love with Frank Merlo in 1947 while living in New Orleans. Merlo was a second generation Sicilian American who had served in the navy during World War II. William's 1948 play *The Rose Tattoo* was inspired by this relationship. The relationship lasted from 1947 until Merlo's death in 1963 and provided the stability that Williams' needed to produce his enduring works. With Merlo's death, Williams fell into a long period of depression. He was the victim of a gay-bashing in January 1979 in Key West. He was beaten by five teenagers, but was not seriously injured.

Williams died at the age of 71 after he choked on a bottle cap in his room at the Hotel Elysee in New York. Some believed that he had been murdered, but the police report indicated that drugs were involved. Many prescription drugs were found in his room, and the lack of an adequate gag response that would have released the bottle cap from his throat may have been due to drug and alcohol influence.

Williams was buried at Calvary Cemetery, St Louis Missouri, despite his desire to be buried at sea near the same place as the poet Hart Crane, whom he considered one of his most important influences. ❖

Timeline



1911 Thomas Lanier Williams is born in Columbia, Mississippi to Cornelius and Edwina Dakin Williams.

1918 The family relocates to St. Louis, Missouri.

1927 Tom places third in a national essay contest sponsored by *The Smart Set* magazine.

1929 Tom Williams enters the University of Missouri.

1931 Tom's father forces him to withdraw from school and work in a shoe factory where he meets a young man by the name of Stanley Kowalski who was to inspire a character in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

1935 Tom writes *Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay*, a four-scene comedy about the love affairs of two sailors, which was performed by the Memphis Garden Players.

1937 Two of Tom's plays, *Candles to the Sun* and *The Fugitive Kind* are produced by the Mumpers of St Louis.

1938 Tom graduates from the University of Iowa with a B.A. degree.

1939 Tom moves to New Orleans and changes his name to "Tennessee". He wins \$100 Group Theatre prize for *American Blues* and receives a Rockefeller Grant to develop a new play.

1940 *Battle of Angels* (later revised as *Orpheus Descending*) produced.

1943 Pre-frontal lobotomy performed on Williams' sister Rose. The operation is a failure and leaves Rose incapacitated for the rest of her life. Tennessee never forgives his parents who allowed this experimental surgery to take place.

1944 *The Glass Menagerie* premieres at the Lyric Theatre in Chicago.

1945 *The Glass Menagerie* opens at the Playhouse Theatre Broadway and wins the NY Drama Critics Circle Award.



1947 Williams meets and falls in love with Frank Merlo. *A Streetcar Named Desire* opens on Broadway and wins the Drama Critics' Circle Award.

1948 *A Streetcar Named Desire* wins the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. *Summer and Smoke* opens at the Music Box Theatre on Broadway.

1951 *The Rose Tattoo* opens at the Martin Beck Theatre on Broadway earning Williams a Tony Award for Best Play.

1953 *Camino Real* opens at the National Theatre on Broadway.

1955 *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* opens at the Morosco Theatre on Broadway and wins The Drama Critics' Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

1956 Williams writes the screenplay for *Baby Doll*.

1957 *Orpheus Descending* opens at the Martin Beck Theatre on Broadway.

1958 *Suddenly Last Summer* produced.

1959 *Sweet Bird of Youth* opens at the Martin Beck Theatre on Broadway.

1960 *Period of Adjustment* opens at the Helen Hayes Theatre on Broadway.

1961 *The Night of the Iguana* opens at the Royale Theatre on Broadway and wins the Drama Critics' Circle Award.

1963 *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* opens at the Morosco Theatre on Broadway.

1968 *The Seven Descents of Myrtle* opens at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre and closes after 29 performances.

1969 *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* produced.

1973 *Small Craft Warnings* produced. *Out Cry* opens at the Lyceum Theatre on Broadway closing after 12 performances.

1976 *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale* (reworked from *Summer and Smoke*) opens at the Morosco Theatre closing after 24 performances. *This is Entertainment* produced.

1980 *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* opens at the Cort Theatre on Broadway closing after 14 performances.

1981 *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* produced.

1983 Tennessee Williams dies in New York on February 24.

Works and Awards

Full-Length Plays

Battle of Angels
Stairs to the Roof
The Glass Menagerie
You Touched Me (in collaboration with Donald Windham)
A Streetcar Named Desire
Summer and Smoke
The Eccentricities of a Nightingale
The Rose Tattoo
Camino Real
Cat on a Hot Tin Roof
Orpheus Descending
Garden District: Something Unspoken & Suddenly Last Summer
Sweet Bird of Youth
Period of Adjustment
The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore
The Night of the Iguana
Slapstick Tragedy: The Mutilated & The Gnädiges Fräulein
Kingdom of Earth
The Seven Descents of Myrtle
The Two-Character Play
In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel
Small Craft Warnings
Out Cry
The Red Devil Battery Sign
Vieux Carre

Short Plays

27 Wagons Full of Cotton
The Purification
The Lady of Larkspur Lotion
The Last of My Solid Gold Watches
Portrait of a Madonna
Auto-Da-Fe
Lord Byron's Love Letter
The Strangest Kind of Romance
The Long Goodbye
Hello from Bertha
This Property is Condemned
Talk to Me Like the Rain
I Rise in Flame, Cried the Phoenix
I Can't Imagine Tomorrow
Confessional
The Frosted Glass Coffin
A Perfect Analysis Given by a Parrot

At Liberty
The Enemy: Time
The Dark Room
10 Blocks to the Camino Real
The Case of the Crushed Petunias
The Unsatisfactory Supper
Moony's Kid Don't Cry
Demolition Downtown
Life-Boat Drill

Original Screenplay

Baby Doll
One Arm

Television Plays

The Migrants (with Lanford Wilson)
Stopped Rocking

Poetry

In the Winter of Cities
Androgyne, Mon Amour

Prose

One Arm (stories)
The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone (novella)
Hard Candy (stories)
The Knightly Quest (novella and stories)
Eight Mortal Ladies Possessed (stories)
Moise and the World of Reason (novel)
Memoirs (autobiography)

Awards

2 Rockefeller Fellowships
Grant from the Institute of Arts and Letters
New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for *The Glass Menagerie* (1945)
The Sidney Howard Memorial Award for *The Glass Menagerie* (1945)
New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1948)
The Donaldson Award for *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1948)
The Pulitzer Prize for *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1948)

The New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955)
The Pulitzer Prize for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955)
The New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for *The Night of the Iguana* (1962)
Brandeis University Creative Arts Award (1965)
Gold Medal for Drama by the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1969)
Doctor of Humanities, University of Missouri (1969)
National Theatre Conference Annual Award (1972)
Doctor of Literature, Honoris Causa (1972), University of Hartford, Connecticut
Centennial Medal of the Cathedral of the Church of St. John the Divine (1973)
Entertainment Hall of Fame Award (1974)
Medal of Honor for Literature by National Arts Club (1975)

Cast of Characters & Setting



Photo by Craig Schwartz

Cast of Characters

Alma Winemiller
The Reverend Winemiller, her father
Mrs. Winemiller, her mother
John Buchanan, Jr.
Mrs. Buchanan, his mother
Roger Doremus
Vernon
Mrs. Bassett
Rosemary
A Traveling Salesman

Scenes

Act One

THE FEELING OF A SINGER

SCENE 1 The Fountain

SCENE 2 The Rectory

SCENE 3 The same

Act Two

THE TENDERNESS OF A MOTHER

SCENE 1 The Buchanan House

SCENE 2 The Rectory

SCENE 3 Dr. Buchanan's Office

SCENE 4 The Rectory

Act Three

A CAVALIER'S PLUME

SCENE 1 The Fountain

SCENE 2 A Small Hotel

EPILOGUE: The Fountain

Setting

The entire action of the play takes place in Glorious Hill, Mississippi. The time is shortly before the First World War.

Synopsis



THE SPIRITED AND MUSICALLY TALENTED Alma Winemiller has become increasingly fearful that she will remain a spinster—unwed and unloved. Her small town family's restrictions become increasingly hard to bear, as her father the Minister maintains his stern oversight. Her mother's tenuous grasp of reality place further obstacles in front of Alma as she maintains her efforts to fit in. Her Father's cold judgement of Mrs. Winemiller's mental stability is that she has purposely departed from sanity, and Alma does her best to negotiate the many judgments of the townspeople.

But an opportunity to create lasting happiness for her life presents itself to Alma when the young John Buchanan returns from Johns Hopkins University medical school. Alma immediately seizes upon John as the answer to her loneliness and fear. However, John's "dowager" mother is only concerned with a socially advantageous match for her son—and she frowns on any potential relationship between John and Alma.

Alma's budding infatuation with the young doctor looks like desperation to some—and for John it sometimes uncovers deep feelings of ambivalence. Alma and John choreograph a complex dance of attraction and uncertainty—as both are drawn together but their future together remains unclear. Finally, after her best efforts, Alma succeeds in seducing John—and the pair entwine for a brief, beautiful moment. But ultimately, Alma earns a fate very different than a happily-ever-after that she had perhaps once envisioned with John—as the ties of family and pressures of societal position draw them apart. ❖

The Rarest of Theatrical Birds

by Prof. James Kincaid

The Eccentricities of a Nightingale is that rarest of theatrical birds—a neglected masterpiece. That it is a masterpiece, powerfully moving and brilliantly constructed, is immediately apparent to anyone who reads or sees it. Alma Winemiller is Williams' most courageous and daring portrayal of the role into which he poured his deepest agonies and talents—the lonely, sensitive, talented woman who finds herself so ill-matched with the world around her that she can find no satisfactory outlet, no role that will allow her to grow or even, perhaps, to breathe. "I am Alma!" Williams declared to Betsy Palmer, who was about to play the role; and we can see what he means: this, his most focused and relentless drama, doesn't allow us to escape the tragic ferocity of Alma's resistance, her determination to engage in a battle she knows full well she will lose. Alma's world threatens to smother her spirit and her poetic heart; she knows she will lose but will not lose without exhausting every weapon she has. Alma demands what she has every right to and will not be granted—dignity, beauty, and love.

How this masterpiece came to be neglected is a strange and sad story. Almost as soon as Williams, then at the height of his popularity finished *Summer and Smoke*, he realized that it was too diffuse, murkily metaphysical, and melodramatic. He ripped into the play, abandoning subplots and allowing the poetic tragedy of his heroine to emerge and to flower. But this massive rewrite of *Summer and Smoke* was finished too late to use as a replacement—rehearsals for the London production were well under way—so the original play was doomed to hold the stage and, predictably, to fail. Worse, by the time Williams was able to urge the production of *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale*, as an independent work, his reputation was in free-fall and, in truth, nobody noticed this amazing play. We are fortunate that we have it now and, at long last, can see it performed and pay our respects to this great play and the brilliant playwright who gave it to us. ❖



Photo by Craig Schwartz

Music: Sacred versus Profane

Photo by Craig Schwartz



THE DIFFERENCE between sacred music—or music written for worship in the Church—and profane (or secular) music was a crisp line during the time period in which *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale* takes place—the early 20th Century. A Noise Within’s production of *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale* features American music from the pre-World War I era, taking its inspiration from music hall and liturgical influences.

In *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale*, Alma Winemiller asks John Buchanan if he wants to hear a song. He replies in the affirmative, and she gives him an interesting choice—asking him if he’d like to hear a song that is sacred or one that is profane. He chooses the latter, and Alma sings “From the Land of Sky-Blue Water”. The song is an example of the stereotypical portrayal of Native American myth and song that was prevalent during the era. With the singing of this piece, Alma firmly cements herself in the audience’s view as a product of her small-town surroundings—ignorant but fascinated with music that lay outside the realm of approval for her Father, Reverend Winemiller.

In its climax of popularity, the genre of music portrayed by sound designer Andrew Villaverde in A Noise Within’s production of *Eccentricities* takes its inspiration from the British Music Hall tradition. Comprised of popular—or profane—songs and variety acts, the Music Hall scene in the United States before World War I was the most popular form of nighttime entertainment.

“In Eccentricities, the Director Damaso Rodriguez and I tried wanted to evoke the popular music of the time, in order to establish Alma’s position as an outsider. The songs she was most fond of would not have been approved of by most of the townspeople—and her love of such tunes makes her even more eccentric in their eyes.”



Hamm’s Brewing Company used the song *The Land of Sky-Blue Water* as their jingle, beginning in 1952. The Hamms mascot—the Hamms Beer Bear—danced playfully to the tune in the many cartoon commercials in which the song appeared.

Suggested Activities

1. Popular Songs, Sacred versus Profane: Ask students to bring in an example of contemporary pop music to play for the rest of the class. After playing a representative sample as an example of

Theatre Lore

Why are actors called thespians?

In the sixth century B.C., a Greek chorus performer named Thespis was the first person in history to step away from the chorus and speak by himself, exchanging dialogue with the group and impersonating a character instead of simply reciting a story as the chorus had done before then.

secular or “profane” music, identify several main themes that run concurrent through the songs. Then, play a selection from 1920s church music such as hymns or other classical songs from the period. Ask students to identify if any of those themes are still present in the songs they brought. Why are they related? How have the messages changed over time, or through the change in genre?

2. Soundtrack: Ask students to imagine they are a sound designer for a production of *Eccentricities of a Nightingale*. Using contemporary instrumental or vocal music, ask students to create their own soundtracks for the production. There should be at least one song selection for each of the following parts of the play:

1. Alma meets John in the square at the Fourth of July
2. Alma pines away for John through her window, refusing to sleep until his light is turned out
3. Alma’s early efforts are thwarted by John’s Mother, who tears him away from her home
4. Alma and John finally are united for one brief moment
5. John’s departure, and Alma’s demise

Ask students to consider important elements such as change of locale, passage of time, or important mood shifts when selecting their songs. For a written extension, ask students to write a summary of their choices to be included in the CD liner notes. Students can share their projects together in a class music festival when finished. ❖



Photo by Craig Schwartz

Visual Arts: Creating the World of *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale*

Assemblage:

an art form comprised of three-dimensional pieces, assembled together to form one cohesive unit; an artful collection of found and created objects.



Original artwork by Joel Daavid.

THE EVOCATIVE, artful set design of A Noise Within's *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale* reflects the world of Alma Winemiller, Tennessee Williams' central character. Set designer Joel Daavid's design influences were taken directly from the pre-World War I time period in which the play is set, but also heavily influenced by the art form of assemblage.

"My initial conversations with director Damaso Rodriguez framed the course of my work on the set for Eccentricities. We wanted a set design that evoked the Musée Mecanique spoken of by Alma's mother in the play. That direction ended up creating a sort of an open palette for me—because I work in a fine art form called assemblage—and gave me artistic freedom. Assemblage is 3 dimensional artwork comprised of found objects and, pieces from nature, junk, small toys, etc. that the artist collects together to speak to a certain story. What we wanted to do was use pieces of our story in the play—some are quite literal, and some are suggested. It's a play that takes place in many places, so we wanted to allude to many places—such as the fountain which we see in the first scene, and the angel that Williams suggested. There's a churchlike window—beautiful, but also there is decrepitude present in the set, which speaks to elements of Alma's character and how she's surrounded by elements that want to bring her down—and the brokenness of what she becomes by the end of the play."

Suggested Activity

1. Assemblage: Gather representations of key elements gathered from an in-depth reading of *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale*. Examples include a plume or feather, an angel, a fountain, and sheet music. Ask students to pick a central topical focus or color scheme on which to focus in their work—such as women in the pre-WWI era, or the role of poetry and literature in the South. Using the chosen topic or color scheme, create a work of assemblage using a deep picture frame to contain the elements. When finished, ask students to share their artwork with the group and articulate their perspective to the class, noting the ways in which the current social, economic, and political contexts influenced their interpretation of the images they selected. ❖

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Photo by Craig Schwartz

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Being an Audience Member

Today, movies and television take audiences away from what was once the number one form of amusement: going to the theatre. But attending a live theatrical performance is still one of the most thrilling and active forms of entertainment. In a theatre, observers are catapulted into the action, especially at an intimate venue like *A Noise Within*, whose thrust stage reaches out into the audience and whose actors can see, hear, and feel the response of the crowd. Although playhouses in the past could sometimes be rowdy, participating in the performance by giving respect and attention to the actors is the most appropriate behavior at a theatrical performance today. Shouting out (or even whispering) can be heard throughout the auditorium, as can rustling paper or ringing phones.

After *A Noise Within*'s performance of *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale*, you will have the opportunity to discuss the play's content and style with the performing artists and directors. You may wish to remind students to observe the performance carefully or to compile questions ahead of time so they are prepared to participate in the discussion.

Theatre Vocabulary

These terms will be included in pre- and post-performance discussions at *A Noise Within*.

blocking: The instructions a director gives his actors that tell them how and where to move in relation to each other or to the set in a particular scene.

character: The personality or part portrayed by an actor on stage.

conflict: The opposition of people or forces which causes the play's rising action.

dramatic irony: A dramatic technique used by a writer in which a character is unaware of something the audience knows.

genre: Literally, "kind" or "type." In literary terms, genre refers to the main types of literary form, principally comedy and tragedy. It can also refer to forms that are more specific to a given historical era, such as the revenge tragedy, or to more specific sub-genres of tragedy and comedy such as the comedy of manners, farce or social drama.

motivation: The situation or mood which initiates an action. Actors often look for their "motivation" when they try to dissect how a character thinks or acts.

props: Items carried on stage by an actor to represent objects mentioned in or implied by the script. Sometimes the props are actual, sometimes they are manufactured in the theatre shop.

proscenium stage: There is usually a front curtain on a proscenium stage. The audience views the play from the front through a "frame" called the proscenium arch. In this scenario, all audience members have the same view of the actors.

set: The physical world created on stage in which the action of the play takes place.

setting: The environment in which a play takes place. It may include the historical period as well as the physical space.

stage areas: The stage is divided into areas to help the director to note where action will take place.

Upstage is the area furthest from the audience. **Downstage** is the area closest to the audience. **Center stage** defines the middle of the playing space. **Stage left** is the actor's left as he faces the audience. **Stage right** is the actor's right as he faces the audience.

theme: The overarching message or main idea of a literary or dramatic work. A recurring idea in a play or story.

thrust stage: A stage that juts out into the audience seating area so that patrons are seated on three sides. In this scenario, audience members see the play from varying viewpoints. *A Noise Within* features a thrust stage.

About A Noise Within

A NOISE WITHIN'S MISSION is to produce the great works of world drama in rotating repertory, with a company of professional, classically-trained actors. *A Noise Within* educates the public through comprehensive outreach efforts and conservatory training programs that foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of history's greatest plays and playwrights.

As the only company in southern California working in the repertory tradition (rotating productions using a resident ensemble of professional, trained artists), *A Noise Within* is dedicated solely to producing classical literature from authors such as Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen, Shaw, and Euripides.

The company was formed in 1991 by founders Geoff Elliott and Julia Rodriguez-Elliott, both of whom were classically trained at the acclaimed American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco. They envisioned *A Noise Within* after recognizing a lack of professional, classical productions and education in Southern California and sought out and assembled their own company of actors to meet the need. All of *A Noise Within's* resident artists have been classically

trained, and many hold Master of Fine Arts degrees from some of the nation's most respected institutions, such as Juilliard, Yale, and the American Conservatory Theatre.

In its 19-year history, *A Noise Within* has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle's revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

In 2004, *A Noise Within* accepted an invitation to collaborate with the Los Angeles Philharmonic for a tandem performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Hollywood Bowl.

More than 25,000 individuals attend productions at *A Noise Within* annually, and the company draws over 10,000 student participants to its education programs every year. Students benefit from in-school workshops, conservatory training, and an internship program, as well as subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, discussions with artists, and state standards-compliant study guides.

Study Guides

A Noise Within creates California standards-compliant study guides to help educators prepare their students for their visit to our theatre. Study guides are available at no extra cost to download through our website: anoisewithin.org. All of the information and activities outlined in these guides are designed to work in compliance with Visual and Performing Arts, English Language, and other subject standards as set forth by the state of California.

Study guides include background information on the plays and playwrights, historical context, textual analysis, in-depth discussion of *A Noise Within's* artistic interpretation of the work, interviews with directors and designers, as well as discussion points and suggested classroom activities. Guides from past seasons are also available to download from the website: anoisewithin.org.



Study Guide Credits

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