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Much Ado About Shmooping

Ruminations, news, and behind-the-scenes antics from the people who bring you Shmoop.

Why Should I Care About Ghosts by Henrik Ibsen

August 19, 2009 by Shmoop

You've probably heard a lot about "Change" recently. Since Obama successfully ran on Change with a capital C, it's washing all the advertisements. "Change" is the new "Green." Change is on the Dr. Phil billboards, it's on those cotton grocery bags, it's selling cola and sports shoes. The self-help and fitness industries make millions convincing us we can easily change – and selling us the book, DVD, or podcast that shows us how.

In *Ghosts*, Ibsen presents a very different view of change. In his play, change is a grim, excruciating *reality* to which he subjects Mrs. Alving. This lady is not just changing her clothes, she is peeling herself apart. This kind of change – the difficult unseating of long-held beliefs – hurts. It's *hard*.

Mrs. Alving is a middle-aged woman. She *could be* taking it easy, having coffee with her friends and complaining about her husband. But that's not her. She's seeking, she's questioning, she's open to reinventing herself. Though she had always viewed herself as a the victim of an alcoholic, unfaithful husband, Mrs. Alving realizes that her husband had been suffocated by convention.

This is a woman who courageously faces the story she tells herself about her life, and changes it. She watches the ground underneath her disappear, and she redefines herself. Would you have the courage to start over from scratch, like Mrs. Alving?

Read more on Shmoop: Ghosts

Tags: one, man, love, people, like, house, know, life, way, never, see, down, says, good, think, husband, wants, play, mrs, truth, sex, own, old, act, make, things, take, doesn, home, something, father, comes, son, mother, fire, reputation, captain, joy, ghosts, ibsen, duty, ideas, almost, alving, oswald, manders, pastor, regina, engstrand, orphanage
Posted in Education, Essays, High School, Paper, Study Guides, Why Should I Care?, college, homework, literature | Leave a Comment »

Why Should I Care About An Ideal Husband by Oscar Wilde

August 12, 2009 by Shmoop

An Ideal Husband is most definitely a comedy. It's funny, it's silly, and everyone's overdressed. Remove the ruffles and bows, though, and the play is pretty darn serious. It's about how to live with other people. How do we, with our very different personalities and expectations, understand each other? How do we keep from judging others? Should we keep from judging others, or do our judgments give us important information about how we want to conduct our own lives?

These questions are always present in our lives – in how we deal with our friends, how we handle our parents, even in how we vote and decide political issues. Imagine you found out that one of your classmates cheated on an important

test. In general, she's a cool person. You like her. She'll probably go on to do great things. But knowing what you know, would you give her an A in the class?

What if she were your sister?

The play argues that, with a loved one, you should accept without judgment. Don't throw the first stone. Turn the other cheek. Follow the golden rule.

But as the play ends and Sir Robert gets off scot-free, there's an irritating little question. Did he deserve it? What do you think?

Read more on Shmoop: An Ideal Husband

Tags: one, man, love, people, like, time, wife, past, know, life, little, very, says, good, sir, husband, wants, woman, play, mrs, power, room, act, make, lady, doesn, don, most, women, robert, public, political, makes, marriage, want, thing, characters, comes, character, letter, lord, goring, chiltern, cheveley, mabel, wilde, caversham, ideal, markby, oscar
Posted in Education, Essays, High School, Paper, Study Guides, Why Should I Care?, college, homework, literature | Leave a Comment »

Why Should I Care About Dr. Heidegger's Experiment by Nathaniel Hawthorne

August 5, 2009 by Shmoop

As long as we can remember, young people have been associated with foolishness. Our grandmother told us as much when we were kids, our parents warned us of as much when we went started high school, and we may have proved them all right in college. There's a reason that movies like *Clueless*, *Can't Hardly Wait*, and *10 Things I Hate About You* are set among teens and twenty-somethings, instead of the average group of adults. They don't call it "the folly of youth" for nothing.

So just what is it about being young that drives that urge to do foolish things? Growing up is about making mistakes (like trying to eat an entire bowl of Jell-O in under forty-five seconds without throwing up) and, hopefully, learning from them. Whether those mistakes are silly (like our Jell-O example) or serious (think lessons in relationships, family, work), we have to make them in order to realize that they are, in fact, mistakes. The idea is that, once we're old, we've learned our lesson, and there will be no more Jell-O free-for-alls.

Hawthorne challenges the idea that mistakes are made because we don't know any better. Instead, he seems to say that young people make mistakes *simply because they are young*. Even if we were graced with the 20/20 vision of hindsight, he argues, it's unlikely we would do any better on a second time around through the perilous minefield that is youth.

Is this reasonable? Possible? Totally ridiculous? Before you answer, we suggest to you the delightfully peculiar and creepy "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment." Who knows – it might be one less life lesson you have to learn the hard way.

Read more on Shmoop: Dr. Heidegger's Experiment

Tags: literature, one, people, like, time, know, little, first, well, story, target, see, very, think, old, make, men, dead, second, water, really, three, character, young, narrator, hawthorne, doctor, point, four, youth, whether, study, rose, drink, shmoop, literary, heidegger, guests, experiment, elixir, fountain, nathaniel, vase, mirror, widow, device, hippocrates, skeleton, closet, mistakes
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Take Your Classroom on the Road, Under a Tree, or in a Canoe

August 4, 2009 by Shmoop

Remember how exciting "back-to-school" was when you were a tot? Butterflies in the stomach. Shopping sprees with mom. That crazy laser background that you just had to have for your school picture. We at Shmoop are *that* excited for the new school year (our first since opening our doors last November). Yeah, laser background excited.

We're kicking off August with our first big announcement of the season (much more coming soon).

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USA Today's Weekend Magazine on Shmoop

July 31, 2009 by Shmoop

Back to School Bargains

> "Shmoop.com provides homework help with a spin: It's designed by doctorate students who load it up with plenty of pop-culture references and fun 'tude. (Sample from a plot summary of "Hamlet": "Welcome to Elsinore, Denmark, land of the recently deceased king who likes to chill out in ghost form at night on the castle battlements …")"

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Why Should I Care About The Taming of the Shrew by William Shakespeare

July 29, 2009 by Shmoop

A lot of movie producers like to call *The Taming of the Shrew* the classic "battle of the sexes" story. They're right, in a way, and it's true that Shakespeare's play has inspired a ton of films and televisions shows that fit this genre. Katherine and Petruchio do in fact go toe-to-toe when they first meet and they do fight for the upper hand in their marriage throughout most of their honeymoon. It's also true that many of these scenes can be hilarious, especially when Kate holds her own with Petruchio.

But, anyone who has read the play knows that it's by no means a simple story about a bickering couple. They also know that the fight is hardly equal or fair. The truth is that Kate is subject to some really brutal treatment because she

refuses to be the silent, obedient, and mild-mannered wife that society demands. Unlike Angelina Jolie's character in *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, Katherine Minola *doesn't* get to parade around in stilettos and a killer black dress with a revolver strapped to her thigh. It's true that Kate puts up a pretty good verbal fight, especially when she first meets Petruchio, but *The Taming of the Shrew* actually ends with Kate on her knees telling Petruchio that *he is her* king. Seriously – here's a little excerpt from Kate's final monologue:

I am ashamed that women are so simple
To offer war where they should kneel for peace,
Or seek for rule, supremacy and sway
When they are bound to serve, love, and obey. (5.2.7)

Whether or not Kate actually believes any of this is up for debate. (You can read what we have to say about the final speech in "What's Up With the Ending?" but come right back.) The point is that Katherine really doesn't have any other choice in the matter. She has to give this speech if she wants any kind of tranquility in her marriage because she has no legal rights as a 16th-century wife – she's basically her husband's property, which means she has to play nice if she wants Petruchio to let her eat, sleep, or pick out her own clothes.

The play makes us stop and think about what it means to portray men and women duking it out on stage, film, TV, whatever. We also dig the way it forces the audience to question their assumptions about "proper" gender roles and their attitudes about the power dynamics between romantic couples (friends and blood relatives, too).

Ever felt pressured to conform to somebody else's expectations and values (at school, home, in a romantic relationship)? Ever been told to act more like a "good girl," or to be a "man"? We thought so. And we think you'll like the way this play makes you think about what that means.

Read more on Shmoop: The Taming of the Shrew

Tags: act, baptista, behavior, bianca, doesn, father, good, gremio, grumio, hortensio, house, husband, induction, kate, katherine, know, like, little, lord, love, lucentio, make, man, marriage, marry, men, obedient, old, one, padua, petruchio, play, really, says, see, Shakespeare, shrew, sly, social, speech, stage, taming, target, tells, tranio, way, wedding, wife, woman, women
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Why Should I Care About Babylon Revisited by F. Scott Fitzgerald

July 22, 2009 by Shmoop

It's a particularly relevant time to read "Babylon Revisited," a story in part about the aftermath of the stock market crash of 1929. F. Scott Fitzgerald takes a look back at a generation of reckless partying, drinking, and spending that has come to a screeching halt. Using his own personal experiences and the history unfolding around him, Fitzgerald paints the portrait of a man and a generation struggling with the deeds of the past and the bleakness of the future.

Fitzgerald – unlike the newscasters, bloggers, and campaigners you've been listening to recently – doesn't spend his time pointing fingers. He doesn't address the question of whose fault the crash was. Instead, he takes a good, hard look at the *general* irresponsibility that, in his mind, characterized the 1920s. He's interested in an attitude, not a scapegoat. And more importantly, he's interested in what that means for those who are there when the party comes to an end – those who suffer through the next day's (year's? decade's?) hangover.

Of course, the current financial crisis is no Great Depression. But instead of talking about the economic differences, we can think about the personal relevance "Babylon Revisited" holds for us. We're looking at the story of a man who is not only forced to make serious changes to his lifestyle, but also to face the mistakes of his irresponsible past and try seriously to atone for them. Economic trends aside, we're pretty sure you have, at some point in your life, been in his shoes.

Read more on Shmoop: Babylon Revisited

Tags: address, babylon, bar, character, charlie, crash, daughter, day, doesn, drink, drinking, duncan, first, fitzgerald, great, honoria, know, left, life, like, lincoln, literature, long, lorraine, lost, man, marion, old, one, own, paris, part, past, pay, peters, place, revisited, ritz, scott, see, shmoop, short, stock, story, take, target, time, wales, way, wife
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Why Should I Care About The Death of Ivan Ilych by Leo Tolstoy

July 15, 2009 by Shmoop

Tolstoy's message in *The Death of Ivan Ilych* isn't exactly subtle: no matter how easy it might be to forget (in the midst of SATs, sports, school, dates, TV shows, and video games), we're all going to die at some point.

Even if we don't have a freak drapery accident and wind up with a drawn-out illness like Ivan Ilych, we're still faced with death. Death is just easier to forget about when everything seems pleasant. That's why Ivan doesn't think about it. But it doesn't matter: death sneaks up on him when he least expects it.

And when Ivan becomes ill, he finds that he isn't able to enjoy many, or any, of the things he once did. Ivan finds that the friends he'd made aren't real friends, that his family doesn't really love him, and that he's totally alone. He finds that barely anything he's done in his life means anything to him.

The Death of Ivan Ilych brings to our attention the unpleasant fact that we all have to die, and that we might have to suffer a whole lot first. Our medicines might be better than those of Ivan's doctors, but we haven't gotten any closer to escaping mortality, and many people still die only after a long and painful period of disease. Perhaps *Ivan Ilych*, which is famous for its psychological depth, will help you understand what many people go through when they're dying.

Perhaps *Ivan Ilych* will also get you thinking about what mortality means *for you*. Like Ivan, you might start wondering how you should live your life, and how you can find meaning in it.

Read more on Shmoop: The Death of Ivan Ilych

Tags: class, death, die, doctor, doesn, dying, else, false, family, fedorovna, first, friends, gerasim, god, going, good, illness, ilych, ivan, ivanovich, life, like, make, most, narrator, once, one, own, pain, people, peter, praskovya, really, see, seems, something, story, suffering, thing, things, think, through, time, tolstoy, vasya, very, way, whole, wife, work
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Shmoop Overview for Teachers, Librarians, Professors, Homeschool

July 8, 2009 by Shmoop

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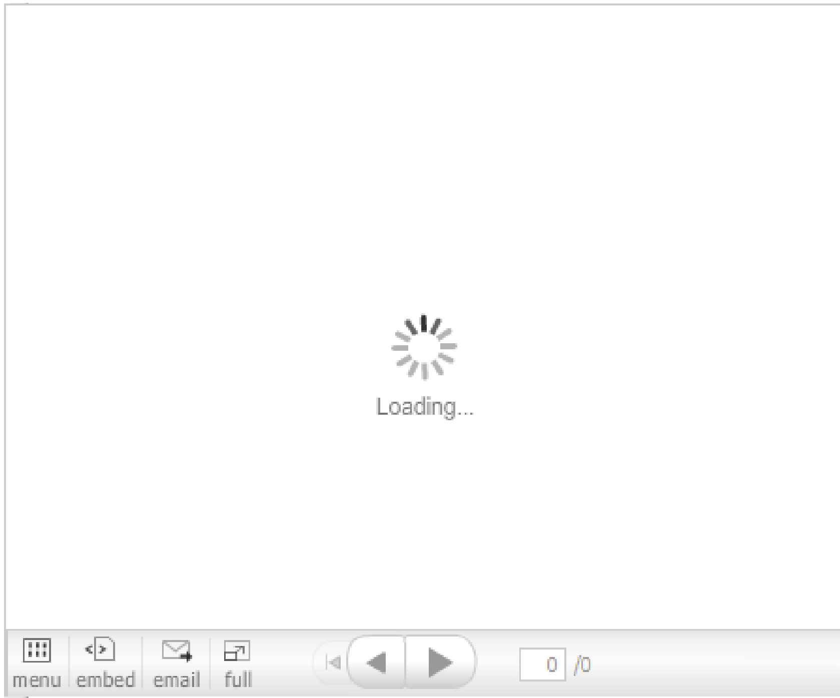

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Posted in Teachers | Leave a Comment »

Why Should I Care About Twelfth Night, or What You Will by William Shakespeare

July 8, 2009 by Shmoop

OK, most of us have no idea what it would be like to lose a twin sibling in a ship-wreck before cross-dressing as a singing eunuch, only to discover that we are in love with a man, who is in love with a woman, who is in love with our disguise.

But, anyone who has ever been a teenager (yep, that's everybody over the age of twelve) knows a little something about being in love. We're betting you know exactly what it's like to try to keep that love a secret, too.

If you think about it, this is what Viola in *Twelfth Night* deals with. Check out how she describes her secret crush to the guy of her dreams without revealing to him that he's the object of her affection:

She never told her love,
But let concealment, like a worm i' the bud,
Feed on her damask cheek: she pined in thought,
And with a green and yellow melancholy
She sat like patience on a monument,
Smiling at grief. Was not this love indeed?

We don't run around talking like this in our day-to-day lives (it might be fun, though), but Viola's speech captures *perfectly* that gut-wrenching, sickly "yellow and green" feeling that makes your cheeks flush red ("damask") and literally seems to eat away at your insides ("like a worm in the bud") when you're too afraid to do anything about it and you don't want anyone to know your secret, because you're afraid they won't love you back if they know who you really are.

Yep. That's it *exactly*. Secret crushes are brutal, especially when you're trying to figure out who you are and you're afraid that what people see on the outside doesn't match what you feel like on the inside. So, the next time you think nobody could *possibly* have a clue about what you're going through, crack open your copy of *Twelfth Night* and tell it

to Uncle Shakespeare. He totally gets you.

Read more on Shmoop: Twelfth Night, or What You Will

Tags: aguecheek, andrew, antonio, around, belch, boy, brother, cesario, dead, doesn, duke, feste, fool, good, know, letter, like, literature, love, make, malvolio, man, maria, night, olivia, one, orsino, play, pretty, really, says, sebastian, see, seems, Shakespeare, shmoop, sir, social, target, tells, think, thinks, time, toby, twelfth, viola, way, well, william, woman
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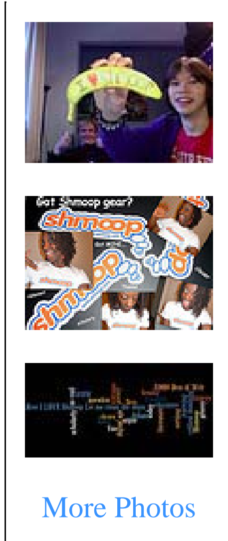

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