

THE HUMANS



BY STEPHEN KARAM

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STUDY GUIDE

THE HUMANS

By Stephen Karam

STUDY GUIDE

Created by
Anne-Marie Hanson & Morgan Gregory

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THEATRE ETIQUETTE

“To enter a theatre for a performance is to be inducted into a magical space, to be ushered into the sacred arena of the imagination.” – Simon Callow

Arrive Early: Latecomers may not be admitted to a performance. Please ensure you arrive with enough time to find your seat before the performance starts.

Cell Phones and Other Electronic Devices: Please **TURN OFF** your cell phones/iPods/gaming systems/cameras. We have seen an increase in texting, surfing, and gaming during performances, which is very distracting for the performers and other audience members. The use of cameras and recording devices is strictly prohibited.

Talking During the Performance: You can be heard (even when whispering!) by the actors onstage and the audience around you. Disruptive patrons will be removed from the theatre. Please wait to share your thoughts and opinions with others until after the performance.

Food/Drinks: Food and outside drinks are not allowed in the theatre. Where there is an intermission, concessions may be open for purchase of snacks and drinks. There is complimentary water in the lobby.

Dress: There is no dress code at the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre, but we respectfully request that patrons refrain from wearing hats in the theatre. We also strive to be a scent-free environment, and thank all patrons for their cooperation.

Leaving During the Performance: If an audience member leaves the theatre during a performance, they will be readmitted at the discretion of our Front of House staff. Should they be readmitted, they will not be ushered back to their original seat, but placed in a vacant seat at the back of the auditorium.

Being Asked to Leave: The theatre staff has, and will exercise, the right to ask any member of the audience to leave the performance if that person is being disruptive. Inappropriate and disruptive behaviour includes, but is not limited to: talking, using electronic devices, cameras, laser pointers, or other light- or sound-emitting devices, and deliberately interfering with an actor or the performance (tripping, throwing items on or near the stage, etc.).

Talkbacks: All Tuesday evening performances, student matinees and final matinees at Royal MTC feature a talkback with members of the cast following the show. While watching the performance, make a mental note of questions to ask the actors. Questions can be about the story, the interpretation, life in the theatre, etc.

Enjoy the show: Laugh, applaud, cheer and respond to the performance appropriately. Make sure to thank all the artists for their hard work with applause during the curtain call.



[Source](#)

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: Stephen Karam

Stephen Karam is an award-winning American playwright and screenwriter who grew up in Scranton, Pennsylvania. His play, *The Humans*, won the Tony Award for Best Play in 2016. He was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for both *Sons of the Prophet* (2012) and *The Humans* (2016). He graduated from Brown University in 2002 and currently teaches at The New School in New York City.

Karam is celebrated for his adept ability to negotiate the tension between the tragic and comedic aspects of being human. The Chicago Tribune praises Karam’s “special flair for making the absurd realities of contemporary life at once wildly laughable and heartbreakingly true.”

PLOT SYNOPSIS: *The Humans*

The Humans is a one-act play about the Blake Family, and the fears that the Blakes attempt to suppress but which refuse to stay buried. The play presents a Thanksgiving dinner at the newly rented, run-down apartment of Brigid Blake and her older boyfriend, Richard, as they entertain her parents, Erik and Deirdre, her Grandmother, “Momo,” and older sister, Aimee.

The play’s one real-time scene—on a two level set—with no blackouts, creates an unrelenting, though at times comedic, backdrop for the tension that mounts as the inner lives and fears of each member of the Blake family come into focus.

The play begins with a startling “thud” noise from above. As the evening unfolds, it becomes evident that despite the Blakes’ efforts to ignore, minimize or beautify that which they fear, *the uncanny* will and does infiltrate their family dinner.



Stephen Karam on Infusing Dread in *The Humans*:
<https://www.backstage.com/interview/stephen-karam-infusing-humans-dread/>

THE CHARACTERS: *The Humans*

Erik Blake, 60

Deirdre Blake, 61, Erik's wife

Aimee Blake, 34, their daughter

Brigid Blake, 26, their daughter

Fiona "Momo" Blake, 79, Erik's mother

Richard Saad, 38, Brigid's boyfriend



Roundabout Theatre Company's Production of The Humans

[\(source\)](#)

THE EPIGRAPHS

Often works of literature include one or more quotations or short passages that indicate central ideas or concerns of the work, referred to as *epigraphs*. Understanding *The Humans* can be enhanced by approaching the play through each epigraph. Karam presents two epigraphs for *The Humans*:

There are six basic fears, with some combination of which every human suffers at one time or another. . .

The fear of POVERTY
The fear of CRITICISM
The fear of ILL HEALTH
The fear of LOSS OF LOVE OF SOMEONE
The fear of OLD AGE
The fear of DEATH

- Napoleon Hill, *Think and Grow Rich*

The subject of the “uncanny”. . . belongs to all that is terrible – to all that arouses dread and creeping horror. . . The German word [for “uncanny”], unheimlich, is obviously the opposite of the heimlich, meaning “familiar,” “native,” “belonging to the home”; and we are tempted to conclude that what is “uncanny” is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar. . . [But] among its different shades of meaning the word heimlich exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, unheimlich. . . on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight.

- Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny”

FEAR

There are six basic fears, with some combination of which every human suffers at one time or another. . .

The fear of POVERTY

The fear of CRITICISM

The fear of ILL HEALTH

The fear of LOSS OF LOVE OF SOMEONE

The fear of OLD AGE

The fear of DEATH

- Napoleon Hill, *Think and Grow Rich*

One of Karam's creative acts has been to stage Hill's six basic fears. He presents these universal struggles in the particular context of a middle-class family, uniting the universal and the personal on stage and in the audience. The following brief comment on each fear will help the audience engage with *The Humans*. Audience members may watch and listen for the many and various references to each fear. A brief example for each is intended to whet the appetite.

Poverty

There are many, many references to matters of money and income. One example is how Brigid and Richard (a young couple) struggle to make ends meet while pursuing their dreams. When asked if she has any singing gigs lined up, Brigid reacts with frustration born of fear: "No, I'm spending most of my nights bartending – you guys don't even know how much student debt I'm stuck with –"

Criticism

Perhaps true to any family gathering, the characters indulge at times in criticism of each other, and they speak about external criticisms that upset them. Deirdre wants some baking covered in frosting, but after a comment by another character, the stage direction reads "*That was the one Deirdre wanted, but now she's too stung,*" and she just sits for a moment and then distracts herself by tending to Momo.

Ill Health

Health concerns, mental and physical, are constantly presented. The most evident is how Momo, the 79 year old mother/grandmother, suffers from dementia. Momo's consistent nonsensical mumblings make the fear of ill health inescapable for both the family and the audience.

Loss of Love

Familial or romantic, this fear surfaces clearly in several moments. Listen for the comment, "I've been losing sleep trying to – I was saying to Father Quinn in how. . . just *thinking* about losing you guys gets me thinking about. . ." and many others to do with losing love or having lost love.

Old Age

Erik and Deirdre are in their 60s, Momo is 79 and her good days are fewer and fewer, the light bulbs begin to burn out one-by-one, and lines like “This might be our last Thanksgiving together,” make the creeping of time an unavoidable presence.

Death

Again, Momo serves as a constant reminder of the nearness of death, but the fear of death appears on stage in many forms, such as in accounts of recurring dreams, comments on natural disasters and several references to the September 11th tragedy in New York in 2001.

ACTIVITY – The Six Basic Fears – Fill out the chart after viewing the play.

The 6 Basic Fears	Details about the characters and their fears	How the characters handle their fears
Poverty		
Criticism		
Ill Health		
Loss of Love (of Someone)		
Old Age		
Death		

THE UNCANNY

The staging of Hill’s six basic fears serves to activate what Sigmund Freud calls “the uncanny,” the focus of Karam’s second epigraph, and the complex core of *The Humans*.

The subject of the “uncanny”. . . belongs to all that is terrible – to all that arouses dread and creeping horror. . . The German word [for “uncanny”], unheimlich, is obviously the opposite of the heimlich, meaning “familiar,” “native,” “belonging to the home”; and we are tempted to conclude that what is “uncanny” is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar. . . [But] among its different shades of meaning the word heimlich exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, unheimlich. . . on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight.

- Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny”

Essentially, the uncanny is all that we dread and fear, all that is terrible, all that is concealed or kept out of sight, and all that is familiar or usual. Some of this seems contradictory, but all aspects of the uncanny are similar in that they are the aspects of life that we do not pay attention to or that we try not to pay attention to. We try to turn away from or avoid the things that frighten us. We minimize and even try to hide from ourselves the significance of what is familiar. The play startles us out of our assumptions, reminding us that the uncanny does and will surface in any and every human life.

ACTIVITY – The Uncanny and You – Complete the chart before or after viewing Royal MTC’s production.

<p>What are the things in your life that are familiar & congenial (pleasant or agreeable) that you don’t normally pay any attention to?</p>	<p>What are the things in your life that frighten you such that you try not to pay attention to them?</p>
<p>How do you, your family, your society work to hide or conceal these everyday things?</p>	<p>How do you, your family, your society work to hide or conceal these frightening things?</p>

THE ART OF THEATRE & THE UNCANNY

OVERLAPPING AND NON-VERBAL DIALOGUE

In order to consider the overlapping and non-verbal dialogue techniques and their possible effects, it is necessary to examine a short excerpt from the opening pages of the play.

ERIK. Have you complained to her about the noise?

BRIGID. No, Dad, she's a seventy-year-old Chinese woman, / I'm not gonna –

DEIRDRE. Well, Brigid, I'm sixty one – older people can still process information, we're / still able to –

BRIGID. I'm saying she means well she's older so I don't wanna disturb her if I don't have to / . . . Hey, here, I'll take your coats. . .

MOMO. (*Mumbled*) You can never come back. . . you can never come back / . . . you can never come back. . . cannever you come back. . .

DEIRDRE. Alright. . . you're alright, Mom. . .

Momo's mumbling is not directed to anyone – her primary focus is down, towards the floor; lost, she is passive and disconnected.

BRIGID. What's she saying?

DEIRDRE.
She's – [who the hell knows] –
even when she *is* sayin' real
stuff. . . what's been comin'
out is still all. . . [muddled]

MOMO.
. . . fernall heres ullerin. . .
werstrus um black. . . sezz
it bigger. . . fernal down
/ black. . . sornit all...

ERIK. Mom, hey Mom, this is Brigid's new apartment. . .

Overlapping Dialogue

Karam has employed two different types of overlapping dialogue. The first is indicated by the punctuation mark / which is used to indicate the point at which the next character to speak should begin speaking. For example, Deirdre begins speaking before Brigid has finished speaking:

BRIGID. No, Dad, she's a seventy-year-old Chinese woman, / I'm not gonna –

DEIRDRE. Well, Brigid, I'm sixty one – older people can still process information, we're / still able to –

The second overlapping dialogue technique Karam employs is by placing characters' lines beside each other on the page. Thus, Momo's mumbling is being spoken at the same time as Deirdre is speaking:

DEIRDRE.	MOMO.
She's – [who the hell knows] –	. . . fernall heres ullerin. . .
even when she <i>is</i> sayin' real	werstrus um black. . . sezz
stuff. . . what's been comin'	it bigger. . . fernal down
out is still all. . . [muddled]	/ black. . . sornit all...

And sometimes Karam uses both techniques at the same time, as can be noticed in Momo's lines, which Erik begins speaking over just after “down” and before “black.” Erik begins speaking over or along with Momo while Deirdre is also speaking, so Karam has indicated that three characters are speaking at the same time.

Non-Verbal Dialogue

The technique of *non-verbal dialogue* is less common in drama. In a section titled “Notes” at the beginning of the script, Karam writes “Dialogue in brackets [] is expressed non-verbally.” In the passage above, there are two examples of Karam's *non-verbal dialogue*, both in Deirdre's lines that overlap with Momo's. They are “[who the hell knows]” and “[muddled].” What makes *non-verbal dialogue* distinct from the more commonly used *stage-direction* is that *non-verbal dialogue* tells the director and actor what the character must communicate not how to communicate it. A *stage direction* is usually more explicit and unambiguous, such as for Momo to mumble her lines, given as (*Mumbled*). How the director and actor choose to express Deirdre's *non-verbal dialogue*, and that of others throughout the play, is a choice, though what is being said non-verbally is not.

A full discussion of the effects of such techniques is not possible in a study guide. Here are a few effects for consideration:

Verisimilitude: a sense of realism is created. People talk over each other in actual life.

Division: beginning to speak before another person has finished can indicate a dismissal of the previous speaker's concerns. Again, there is a realistic element here, since people often act this way in real conversation.

Chaos: with two or more characters speaking simultaneously the characters and the audience are thrust into chaos. It is frustrating to attempt to make sense of several lines being spoken together.

Regarding the focus on the uncanny, the overlapping dialogue is a dramatic technique that illustrates our ability to dismiss or ignore that which is uncomfortable by literally talking over it, or saying it, but not really saying it at all. The resulting sense of chaos helps to activate anticipation of something brewing or gathering that will surface or burst forth.

ACTIVITY—Writing Dialogue – Write a brief scene that attempts to emulate Karam's style.

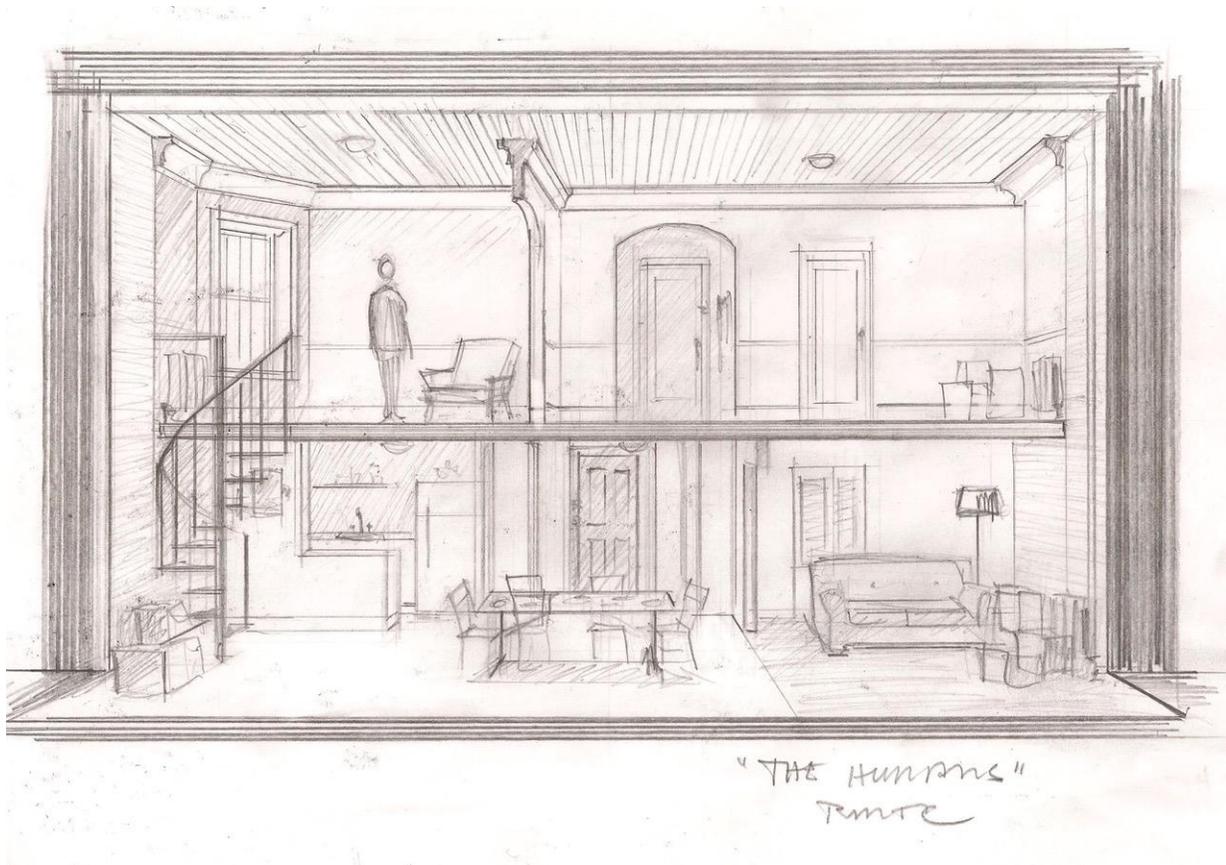
- With another person, write a short dialogue that incorporates *overlapping dialogue* and *non-verbal dialogue*.
 - It may help to think of a situation wherein your characters (have two to four of them) are excited or upset about something.
 - Try to write your dialogue in the format of the passage included above.
- Consider the effects of your use of *overlapping dialogue* and *non-verbal dialogue* in your scene.
 - What mood or tone does the *overlapping dialogue* and *non-verbal dialogue* help to generate?
 - What does the *overlapping dialogue* and *non-verbal dialogue* help to reveal about the characters in your scene?

SET, SETTING & STAGING

ACTIVITY— Appreciation of Stagecraft—Use the following questions to enhance your understanding of the play.

Four aspects of setting and set design are outlined below. After each there are questions to consider before you see the play. After viewing the play, expand your answers to explore how the technique connects to or reinforces the concept of the uncanny in this particular production.

Set



Set Design Drawing by Brian Perchaluk

In the script there is a detailed description of the set. Because each production will construct a distinct set, only a few phrases from the description have been included here.

- *A turn-of-the-century ground floor/basement duplex tenement apartment in New York City's Chinatown. It's just big enough to not feel small. It's just small enough to not feel big.*
- *The two floors are connected via a spiral staircase.*
- *Layers of faded off-white paint, rendering the space curiously monotone*

- *The layout doesn't adhere to any sensible scheme*
 - *The apartment is a touch ghostly, but not in a forced manner; empty pre-war basement apartments are effortlessly uncanny.*
- What atmosphere and mood are generated through this set design? While enjoying Royal MTC's production, be sure to consider other details of the set and how they create atmosphere and mood.
 - Can you think of anything significant about the apartment having two levels, one ground level and one basement level?
 - Though the audience does not see into the bathroom, the bathroom features prominently in the play. Consider why Karam would make the bathroom so important in his play.
 - The Kitchen, though visible, is somewhat concealed behind the spiral staircase. How might this set design detail be significant?
 - The apartment is empty, save for a fold-up table and a single armchair. Brigid and Richard have just moved into the apartment, but their belongings are stalled somewhere in a moving truck. Brigid even comments at one point that she and Richard have not decided which floor will be the bedroom and which the living room. What might be established by such a sparse, undecorated and undefined set?
 - What might be emphasized because the couple is in the process of moving-in, before establishing everyday routines and habits?



Set Design Model by Brian Perchaluk

One real-time scene

Karam makes it clear that the play must be performed in one real-time scene. By “one” Karam clearly means there should be no intermission and no black-outs. “Real-time” means time as we experience it, with life continuing “in all spaces at all times” (from Karam’s “Notes”).

- What effects could such a “realistic” time frame generate?
- How may a one real-time scene production differ from a production with one or more intermissions and/or leaps in time and place?

Lighting

The lights of the apartment begin to burn out part way through the play. The characters speak about and try to adjust to the darkness, which increases as more and more light bulbs go out.

- What effect or effects does the increasing darkness have?
- What light sources come on and/or are brought to the audience’s attention as the darkness increases?
- How might this building darkness relate to the notion of the uncanny?
- How are darkness and light, or their absence, important in the final moments of the play?
- Which character is alone on stage in the light and darkness at the beginning and the end of the play? Why might this be so?



Set Design by Brian Perchaluk

Sound

Karam uses sound in ways to create tension and reveal character. There are noises from offstage, characters speak with a range of emotion and volume, and the sounds of everyday life are throughout.

- How do sound and light work together in the play? What effect or effects are created or intensified by sound and light as the play progresses?
- What are the sounds that begin and end the play? How are these significant?
- There are several places in the script wherein dialogue is described as “audible but indecipherable.” What are the possible significances of this dialogue that the audience can hear but not decipher?
- At times, the sounds take characters out of the present moment, and at times they take them back into the present moment. How do the characters react to the various sounds on stage? When are these reactions appropriate, and when are they inappropriate, according to the nature and sources of the sounds?
- How are the characters’ fears emphasized through the sounds of the play?
- What are the connections, if any, to Hill’s six basic fears and/or Freud’s idea of the uncanny?

THEMATIC CONCERNS & THE UNCANNY

Ritual & Tradition

“That is a good Irish tradition, yessir...”

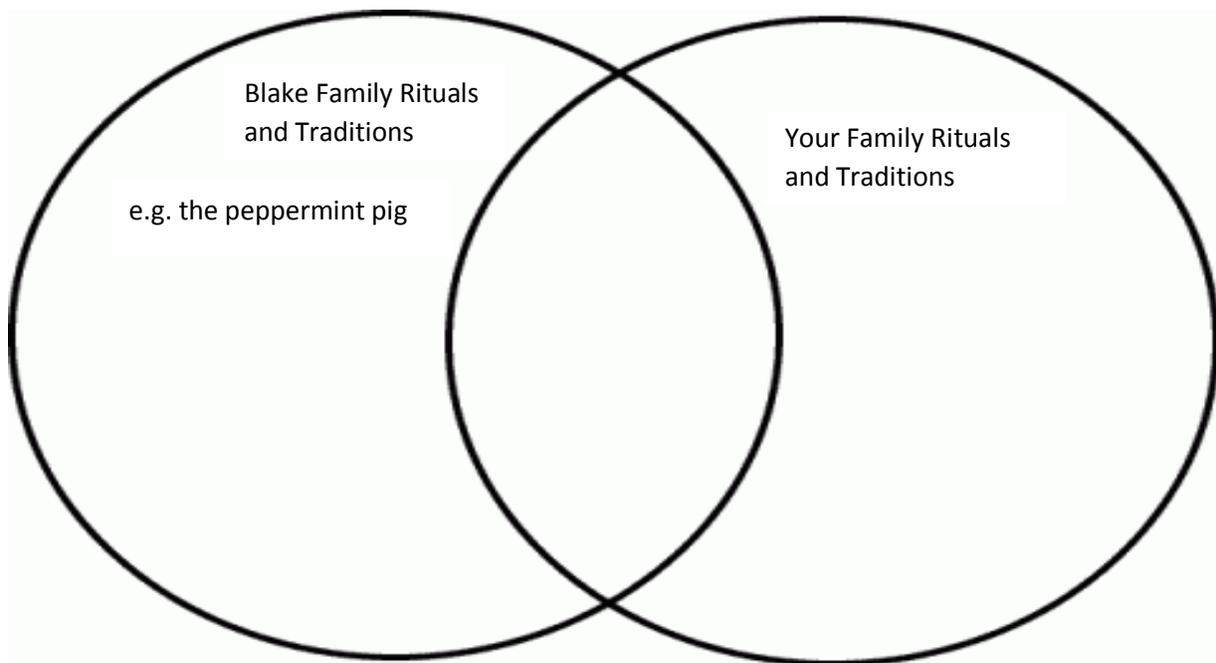
“The Blakes have been singing it for generations.”

“It’s not Thanksgiving without it.”



The Blakes sing “**The Parting Glass**,” a Scottish tradition, often sung at the end of a gathering of friends. Here is Winnipeg music group, The Wailing Jennys’ version:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_F4Cz8q_S2A

ACTIVITY—Venn Diagram—Before or after viewing the play, complete the following diagram. Pay particular attention to areas that overlap and what this might suggest about the role of ritual and tradition in our lives.



The Peppermint Pig

A Tradition Meant to be Broken, Then Eaten and Passed Around:
<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/24/nyregion/saratogas-peppermint-pig-is-an-unusual-holiday-tradition.html>

Diversions

“there’s enough going on in the real world to give me the creeps, I don’t need any more . . .”

“Your grandma grew up in a two-room cesspool and your tragedy is what – havin’ to figure out how to get a new letter of recommendation?”

ACTIVITY— Table—Explore the ways the Blakes – and people in your community – use diversions to distract themselves from what is upsetting or distressing (the uncanny).

The Everyday Uncanny	Diversions	The “all that is terrible” Uncanny
<p>That which is everyday or ordinary that the characters – and that we – try to avoid thinking about.</p> <p>e.g. toilet paper</p>	<p><u>The Blake Family Diversions</u></p> <p>Cruises Comic books Other people’s problems Relativistic thinking*</p> <p><u>Your Community’s Diversions</u></p>	<p>That which is frightening or terrible or disturbing that the characters – and that we – try to avoid thinking about.</p> <p>e.g. old age</p>

*Relativistic thinking: when a person tries to increase or decrease the significance of something by comparing it to something else. For example, getting a mediocre reference letter can be made to seem unimportant when compared to poverty.

Dreams

RICHARD. Oh yeah, sorry Erik, we got sidetracked before – you were talking about your dream?

ERIK. . . . A coupla nights I’ve had this [recurring dream] . . . there’ll be a, a woman . . .

RICHARD. Last week I dreamed I fell into an ice cream cone made of grass and became a baby.

...

ERIK. – the woman without a [face]...she’s trying to get me in this, like a tunnel?

RICHARD. Yeah? And what did you do?

ERIK. Uh... I don’t move, I dunno...

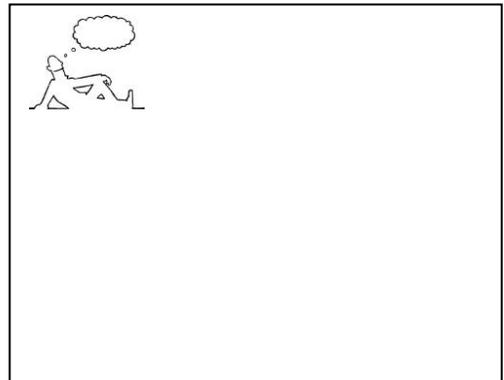
Dreams come up in the play at several moments, with Erik and Richard sharing some details of their dreams. Sigmund Freud, the author of one of the two epigraphs for the play, wrote extensively on dreams, suggesting they reveal suppressed feelings and fears. There is no shortage of analysis to do with the symbolic nature of dreams and what people dream about, with falling, being chased, and being naked in public among the most discussed.

ACTIVITY—Symbolism—Record details of and possible meanings for Erik and Richard’s dreams. Consider doing a similar activity for one of your own dreams.

Details of Dream



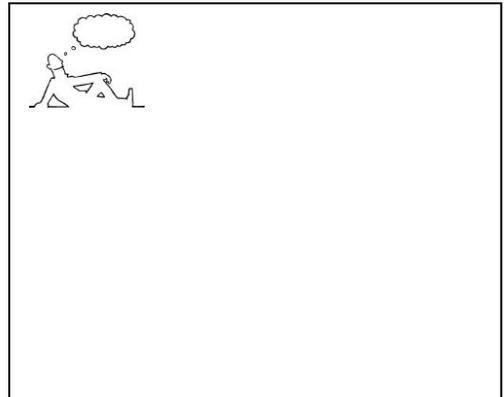
Possible meanings



Details of Dream



Possible meanings



PLAY'S CONCLUSION

“at the subatomic level everything is chaotic and unstable.”

ACTIVITY – Bringing it All Together— After viewing the play, consider how the theatrical techniques and significant aspects of *The Humans* intensify in the final few moments.

- Is there something specific that initiates this concluding crescendo (increase in loudness or intensity)? What?
- How are fear and the uncanny present or evident?
- What happens with dialogue, overlapping dialogue, and non-verbal dialogue?
- What has been done with the staging?
- What lights and sounds contribute to the intensity of the conclusion?
- Are ritual and diversions still present or have they fallen away?
- Would you consider this conclusion a coming together or a breaking apart? Why?



Playwright Stephen Karam, actors Reed Birney, Jayne Houdyshell and Cassie Beck, discuss “The Humans” during the Broadway run at the Helen Hayes Theatre:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6n0Y_FtYQDw

VOCABULARY

9/11 – the Twin Towers –On September 11, 2001, two planes were flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. Both buildings collapsed, killing over three thousand people.

Bhutan/ Bhutanese – a country in South Asia, located on the eastern edge of the Himalayas.

Dementia – a general term for a wide range of symptoms to do with decline of memory or other thinking skills when they interfere with the ability to perform everyday activities.

Ensure Shakes – meal supplements

Napoleon Hill – American self-help author best known for his 1937 book *Think and Grow Rich*, which is among the best-selling self-help books of all time.

Sigmund Freud - Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis. Regarded as one of the 20th century's most influential thinkers.

Statue of Liberty – colossal neo-classical sculpture in New York City. Received as a gift from France in the 1880s.

Ulcerative Colitis – long lasting inflammation and ulcers in the digestive tract. The more the colon is affected the more severe the symptoms, which include abdominal pain, diarrhea and weight loss.

Virgin Mary Statue – A central figure in Christian belief. Mary, or the Virgin Mary, is the mother of Jesus and many Christians pray to her for things like protection. The Virgin Mary statue mentioned in the play depicts Mary standing atop of a serpent. The statue emphasises Mary as protector, and the serpent as all that is dangerous and destructive in human life.

WORKS CITED

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