



**THE ENGLISH THEATRE
OF HAMBURG**

presents

GASLIGHT

**by
Patrick Hamilton**

STUDY GUIDE

Premiere on 21st November 2025

Preview performances at reduced prices on 17th, 18th, 19th, and 21st November

Tuesday – Saturday 19:30

selected Sundays 14:30

Wednesday/Friday 11:30 (Matinee performances weekly alternating)

THE ENGLISH THEATRE OF HAMBURG

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TICKETS

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Dear English Teachers and Friends,

The English Theatre will premiere **GASLIGHT** by Patrick Hamilton on 21 November 2025, with preview performances at reduced prices on 17, 18, 19, 20 November. Bookings for this English play have already started. See the cover of this publication for dates and times of performances. Bookings have already started. Teachers who wish to preview the play before bringing a group of students to the theatre should contact marketing@englishtheatre.de.

About the Playwright

Patrick Hamilton (1904–1962), the son of an eccentric clergyman, worked for a time as a repertory actor and wrote several successful plays, including **ROPE** (1929) and **GASLIGHT** (1939), both thrillers, and **THE DUKE IN DARKNESS** (1943), a historical drama. He also wrote radio plays. His novels include **CRAVEN HOUSE** (1926), the story of the inmates of a boarding house; **THE MIDNIGHT BELL** (1929), **THE SIEGE OF PLEASURE** (1932) and **THE PLAINS OF CEMENT** (1934), a trilogy published in 1935 as **TWENTY THOUSAND STREETS UNDER THE SKY** which deals respectively with the interlocking lives of Bob, a waiter, Jenny, a prostitute and Ella, a bar-maid; **HANGOVER SQUARE** (1941), a thriller set in Earls Court dealing with George Harvey Bone's fatal passion for destructive Netta; and **THE SLAVES OF SOLITUDE** (1947), also set in a boarding house, which centers on the wartime experiences of the quiet spinster Miss Roach. Hamilton's particular gift is for describing, in the words of J.B. Priestley, "a kind of No-Man's-Land of shabby hotels, dingy boarding houses and all those saloon bars where the homeless can meet." ; Michael Holroyd praises his "invention of the monster-bore—that terrible mixture of the banal and the sinister who entertains the reader by driving the other characters in the book to distraction." All the novels show a pre-occupation with the perils and pleasures of drinking, and Hamilton's Marxism is expressed in his compassion for the hopelessness of his characters' lives.

source: The Oxford Companion to English Literature (1985)

About the Play

GASLIGHT is a 1938 thriller play, set in 1880s London, written by the British novelist and playwright Patrick Hamilton. Hamilton's play is a dark tale of a marriage based on deceit and trickery, and a husband committed to driving his wife insane in order to steal from her. Premiering at the Richmond Theatre in London on 5 December 1938 before transferring to the Apollo Theatre in the West End on 1 January, the play closed after six months and 141 performances, but it has endured through an impressive list of incarnations most notably **FIVE CHELSEA LANE** (1941 American play – renamed for Los Angeles production), **ANGEL STREET** (1941 American play – renamed again when Los Angeles production transferred to Broadway), and **GASLIGHT** (1958 Australian television play). **ANGEL STREET** was a hit in its Broadway premiere, and it remains one of the longest running in Broadway history, with 1,295 total performances. The play was adapted to the big screen as two films, both entitled **GASLIGHT**—a 1940 British film, and a 1944 American film directed by George Cukor, also known as **THE MURDER IN THORNTON SQUARE** in the UK. Both films are considered classics in their respective countries of origin and are generally equally critically acclaimed. The 1944 American version received seven nominations at the 17th Academy Awards including Best Picture and won two, Best Actress (for Ingrid Bergman) and Best Production Design. In 2019, the film was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant".

source: wikipedia.com



SUMMARY

Patrick Hamilton's
GASLIGHT

Summary

The play is set in a living room on the first floor of a house in an unfashionable quarter of London. It is the latter part of the nineteenth century. Late afternoon.

Except for their two servants, Nancy and Elizabeth, Mr. and Mrs. Jack Manningham live alone. As the play opens, husband and wife are sitting in the living room and Big Ben strikes five. Jack Manningham asks his wife, Bella, to ring for the girl to put coal on the fire, but she feels it is a task she can do herself and does not want to ring a servant for something so trivial. He insists, however, that servants are there to serve and demands that Bella ring the bell. When the girl comes, Mr. Manningham humiliates his wife by suggesting that she would perhaps look more attractive if she could persuade Nancy, the pretty young servant, to share with her the secrets of her make-up.

After Nancy, who has enjoyed immensely Manningham's attentions, leaves, the embarrassed Bella reproaches Jack, but soon forgets her humiliation when he promises to take her to the theatre to see one of her favourite actors. Bella is overjoyed by the prospect of getting out and thanks Jack profusely. She assures him she has felt much better recently, and he suggests it is because of her medicine, but she claims it is because he has been devoting more time to her.

When Nancy brings the tea, Bella announces proudly to her that she will be going to the theatre with her husband and, as the saucy Nancy leaves, Bella sticks her tongue out at her. Bella then tells Jack how Nancy torments and laughs at her in secret, but Jack replies that Bella is imagining things. They sit down to tea and muffins and seem to be enjoying each other's company until Jack suddenly notices with alarm that something in the room is missing. He promises to say nothing more about it if his wife returns the object to its proper place immediately. Bella says that he does not know what he is talking about. When Jack points out that it is a picture

that is missing again, Bella becomes distraught and tries desperately to convince him that someone else must have taken it this time. In response to this, Jack calls the two servant women, one at a time, and asks them to swear that they did not take the picture and to kiss the Bible to prove that they are telling the truth. Afterwards, Bella frantically grabs the Bible as well and kisses it twice, swearing before God Almighty that she never touched the picture. Jack claims that she is going mad like her mother before her and threatens to withdraw his "protection" if she persists in this way. Bella appeals to him for understanding:

Bella: I may be going mad like my poor mother, but if I am mad, you have got to treat me gently. Jack—before God—I never lie to you knowingly. If I have taken down that picture from its place, I have not known it. If I took it down on those other occasions, I did not know it either. Jack, if I steal your things—your rings—your keys—your pencils and your handkerchiefs, and you find them later at the bottom of my box, as indeed you do, then I do not know that I have done it...and must be treated kindly and gently so that I may get well.

When Bella finds the picture behind the cupboard, Jack accuses her of knowing where it was all along. Bella explains that she only "supposed" it was there because it had been found there twice before. Jack informs her that he is going out and that she should go lie down for a little in the dark. Before leaving he asks Bella for the grocery bill so he can pay it. She says it is on the desk, but Jack cannot find it, so he accuses her of playing a new trick on him. Bella becomes hysterical and screams that everyone is plotting against her. Jack tells her that if she does not calm down, he will knock her down and take her to her room and lock her in the darkness for a week. He tells her that by the time he returns at 10 p.m. she will either produce the bill and admit she was lying or be prepared to see a doctor.

After Mr. Manningham's departure, Elizabeth announces to Mrs. Manningham that a gentleman has come to see her. At first Bella refuses to see him,



but Elizabeth, who is genuinely concerned about her mistress, encourages her to be brave and to receive the unexpected guest. Bella consents and Elizabeth admits Mr. Rough, a middle-aged man with a brusque, friendly manner. Rough, a retired police detective, tries to persuade Bella that he is someone she can trust. He explains that he knows what has been going on in the house because one of his male employees has been seeing Bella's maid, Nancy, who reports everything that happens in the Manningham household in detail.

When Rough asks Bella if she has ever been up to the top floor of the house, she explains that it is shut up and that no one ever goes up there. During Rough's interrogation, we find out that Bella first started thinking she was losing her mind six months ago, right after they started living in the house which they had purchased with her money. Bella tells Rough she hears noises in her bedroom at night when her husband is out. It sounds as if "somebody's walking about up there," she says. Rough suggests that it might be her husband up there, that he might have left by the front door and returned through some outside entrance to the roof. She admits this had occurred to her, but she had dismissed the idea as a sign of madness. She first thought it was her husband because ten minutes after he leaves the gas lights in the house always dim in intensity just before the strange noises begin. She explains that this happens only when someone in the house puts on an extra light somewhere, but she has checked all over and found that no one has done so. The extra light must, therefore, have been put on by someone on the top floor. She has also noticed that once the lights return to their normal intensity, her husband always returns ten minutes later.

Bella also reveals to Rough that Jack gives her things to look after, and when he asks for them, they are gone and can never be found. Then he misses his rings, or his studs, and will hunt the place down for them, and finally find them lying hidden at the bottom of her workbox. Her little dog was found a few weeks ago with its paw hurt and now her husband keeps the dog away from her because he suspects that she injured the animal. She confides in Rough that she is sick with fear that she is going to be declared insane and locked up.

Detective Rough produces a bottle of Scotch from his

pocket and offers it to Mrs. Manningham as medicine, which is guaranteed to remove "dark fears and doubts," he maintains. After Bella takes a drink and calms down a bit, Mr. Rough begins to tell her what he knows about her house and her husband. Bella learns that Alice Barlow, a wealthy old woman, was murdered in the same house fifteen years ago. The murderer was after the extremely valuable rubies which the woman kept in her bedroom on an upper floor. The murderer was in the house from about 10 p.m. until dawn and during that time had turned everything upside down. Rough's theory is that the killer never found the rubies which are still hidden somewhere in the house. Rough thinks it is possible that the killer may have waited years, gone abroad, even gotten married and returned to resume the search. Gradually Bella begins to see the point that Mr. Rough is making.

Suddenly the gas lights dim, and the frightened Bella urges Rough to leave because she knows Jack must now be in the upper room of the house. Rough, however, has a few more things to say to Bella. Rough says, "Precisely that, Mrs. Manningham. Your husband. You see, I am afraid you are married to a dangerous man." Rough tells her that when he was working on the murder case fifteen years ago, he interviewed a lot of the relatives of the deceased, among them a distant cousin of the old woman by the name of Sydney Power.

Bella does not think this is of any particular interest until Rough informs her that he saw the man recently walking down the street with Bella on his arm. It was her husband, the man now known as Jack Manningham. Shocked, Bella does not want to accept the information as true. Mr. Rough, however, insists that her husband is a criminal maniac and that he is slowly, methodically, systematically, trying to drive her out of her mind. He continues, "He is Sydney Power, and he murdered Alice Barlow in this house. Afterwards he changed his name, and he waited all these years until he found it safe to acquire this house in a legal way. He then acquired the empty house next door. Every night, for the past few weeks, he has entered that house from the back, climbed up on to its roof and come into this house by the skylight. I know that because I have seen him do it."

Rough explains that Sydney Power married Bella



because she had the money necessary to purchase the house. Now that Power has the house, he no longer needs his wife and wants her out of the way because he is afraid she is beginning to know too much. Rough has also found out that Power is a bigamist who married a woman many years before he met Bella and never got a divorce. Furthermore, Rough has often seen him in the company of "fancy women in the low resorts of the town."

At Rough's request, Bella shows him the desk where the man whom she has been regarding as her legal husband keeps his papers. Before Rough can break into the locked drawer, however, the gas lights go up again to their normal intensity and Bella warns him that her husband will soon be coming back. Rough calls Elizabeth who wants to help her mistress in any way she can. Elizabeth points out that Rough can hide in the master's dressing room, and at Rough's instruction Bella goes up to her bedroom and locks the door.

Mr. Manningham returns and tells Elizabeth that he has just come back to change his collar. He then discusses his wife's mental health with her and warns her that she may be asked to testify to the fact that Bella has been behaving strangely. Knowing that she is in the company of a dangerous man, Elizabeth promises to remain loyal to him. As soon as Manningham exits, Rough comes out of hiding and Bella comes downstairs to join him.

When Rough breaks into the desk drawer he discovers a brooch and a watch which Bella thought she had lost. Her husband had told her he would give her no more gifts because she had lost them. Rough also finds a letter from Bella's cousin which had never been given to her. When she got married, Bella explains, she was cast off by all her relations. When she came to London with her husband, she wrote them but there was never any answer. Now she realizes that her husband confiscated the letters.

Rough asks her about the brooch which she says is second-hand. She shows him a trick she discovered by accident. If a pin is pulled at the back, the brooch opens out like a star. Rough is curious about the small empty spaces inside the brooch. Bella explains that there had been beads in it, but they had come loose and were

falling out, so she put them in a vase. Bella brings the beads to Rough, and he reads the inscription on the inside of the brooch: "Beloved A.B. from C.B. 1851." Then Rough tells her with great excitement that the beads are the missing Barlow rubies. He puts the brooch back where they found it and tells Bella he is going to the authorities with the news of his discovery and return later in the evening. He urges Bella, in the meantime, to go to her room and to use any excuse necessary to stay there. Then he says "Goodbye" and leaves.

Mr. Manningham returns to the house at 11 p.m. and is told by Nancy that his wife has a headache and does not want to be disturbed. Manningham takes Nancy in his arms and kisses her in a violent and prolonged manner. There is a pause in which Nancy looks at him, and then she kisses him passionately. The two confess that they are very attracted to each other and plan to meet away from the house the next day. After Nancy leaves the room, Manningham discovers that his desk drawer has been broken into. He quickly rings for Nancy and orders her to tell his wife to come down immediately "whether she is suffering from a headache or any other form of ailment." Bella again refuses to leave her room, so Manningham sends a note up with Nancy. Bella comes downstairs because her husband has written something in the note implying that he will hurt their little dog if she refuses to obey. The note, however, was just a ruse to get her out of her room. He asks her if she has found the grocery bill yet and if she remembers what he will do if she has not found it. She admits she has not found the bill and that she remembers he said he would lock her up if she could not produce it. He asks if she looked for the bill in his desk. She denies having done so but he does not believe her. Angrily he chastises her: "You sleep-walking imbecile, what have you been dreaming about tonight? Where has your mind wandered that you have split open my desk?"

In her highly nervous state Bella begins to believe that her husband is perhaps right, that she did, in fact, dream everything that happened, that Rough was just a figment of her imagination. But before she gets very far with this train of thought, Rough returns to the house and takes Manningham by surprise. Manningham sends Bella upstairs so he can deal with the intruder alone. Now Rough suggests he is just an old man seeing ghosts,



Manningham becomes apprehensive and asks him what he sees.

Continuing the game, Rough tells him that he sees two ghosts, an old woman and a handsome young man who cuts her throat open with a knife. Rough slowly and painfully reveals to the astonished Manningham all the information that he has against him, enough to put a rope around his neck. Manningham threatens to kill Rough, but the detective warns him that his men have just signaled their arrival from above by dimming the lights. At that moment a policeman rushes in and seizes Manningham, who puts up a violent struggle.

The prisoner is about to be taken away when Bella suddenly appears on the stairs and asks to speak with her husband alone. Rough reluctantly agrees but orders the policeman to tie Manningham to a chair to make sure he cannot get away. When Bella is alone with Manningham, he begs her to help him escape: "Now get something to cut this. I can get out through the dressing room window and make a jump for it." She obediently goes to his dressing room for a razor but when she returns and takes the razor from the case, a scrap of paper falls to the floor. It is the grocery bill Manningham told her she had lost.

Bella is elated at this further evidence that she is not mentally ill. Jack explains quickly that he must have

been mistaken about the bill and urges her to use the razor quickly to set him free. Bella, however, now takes advantage of the opportunity to taunt her husband as he has taunted her for the past six months. She asks, "Razor? What razor? You are not suggesting that this is a razor I hold in my hand. Have you gone mad, my husband?" Bella continues her mad act while Sydney Power, alias Jack Manningham, sits in the chair and squirms. "Or is it I who am mad? That's it. It's I. Of course, it was a razor. Dear God—I have lost it, haven't I? I am always losing things. She pretends to look for the razor as her husband pleads desperately for help.

Bella: I am trying to help you, aren't I? To help you escape. But how can a mad woman help her husband to escape? What a pity. If I were not mad, I could have helped you. If I were not mad, whatever you had done, I could have pitied and protected you! But because I am mad, I have hated you, and because I am mad I am rejoicing in my heart without a shred of pity, without a shred of regret, watching you go with glory in my heart!

Bella then calls for Inspector Rough who enters with a policeman to take Manningham away. Rough tries to calm Bella down and apologizes to her for giving her the most horrible evening of her life. Bella replies: "The most horrible? Oh, no. The most wonderful. Far and away the most wonderful."

THE END



Objective Questions

1. In which country does **GASLIGHT** take place?
2. Manningham accuses Bella of small aberrations in the household which he has arranged himself. Why? What does he hope to achieve?
3. Where does Manningham go when he leaves the house and what happens to the lights in the house ten minutes later?
4. How does Inspector Rough know what is going on in the Manningham household?
5. What sort of crime does Rough believe Manningham committed in the past? What was the reason for the crime?
6. What does Rough believe Manningham is looking for on the top floor of the house?
7. What is Manningham's real name?
8. Why did Manningham marry Bella, according to Rough?
9. What does Rough hope to find in Manningham's desk?
10. Bella shows Rough some beads belonging to a brooch he has found in the desk. What are they really?

Interpretative Questions

1. The playwright seems to be less interested in the crime Manningham has committed than in dramatizing the terrifying relationship between husband and wife. Describe the ways Manningham tries to drive Bella insane and the devastating effect it has on her.
2. Inspector Rough has the awesome task of convincing Bella she is not insane and that her husband is trying to dispose of her. How does he do this? What are some of the things he tells her and does to accomplish his purpose?
3. The two servants, Elizabeth and Nancy, have very different characters and attitudes toward their masters. Comment on these differences, giving examples of what they do in the play.
4. A good thriller depends on the interest it builds in its characters and the suspense it holds as to their fate. How does the playwright create interest and maintain suspense to the very end of the play?