



# SEXUAL MISCONDUCT OF THE MIDDLE CLASSES



## *Sexual Misconduct of the Middle Classes*

Nov 8 – Nov 27, 2022

By Hannah Moscovitch

Winner of the 2021 Governor General's Literary Award for English-language drama

Teacher Guidebook by  
Tannia Ditchburn

## PLAY SYNOPSIS

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A provocative look into the intimate challenges within academia in the #MeToo era, this exploration of consent and exploitation won the Governor General's Award in 2021. Eda Holmes Directs this Montreal production starring Marcel Jeannin as the professor.

Known for her up-to-the-minute plays with shocking twists, Hannah Moscovitch takes on the topic of sexual misconduct in this present-day play. This story features two perspectives on the same relationship, asking the question, who owns this narrative?

Jon Macklem is a teacher in the middle of his third divorce. Lonely and full of self-loathing, he begins an illicit relationship with Annie—one of his nineteen-year-old students. The echoes of their relationship reverberate in the years that follow, growing from a rumble to a roar once #MeToo breaks.

## RECOMMENDATION TO TEACHERS

As a teacher accompanying your students to see this play, it is recommended to carefully prepare your students for watching the play given the sexual content, sensitive themes, and topics of the play. A trigger warning about the sexual content and themes of consent and sexual violence is suggested.

For more information on trigger warnings in the context of teaching, please consult the following reference: <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/trigger>.

## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

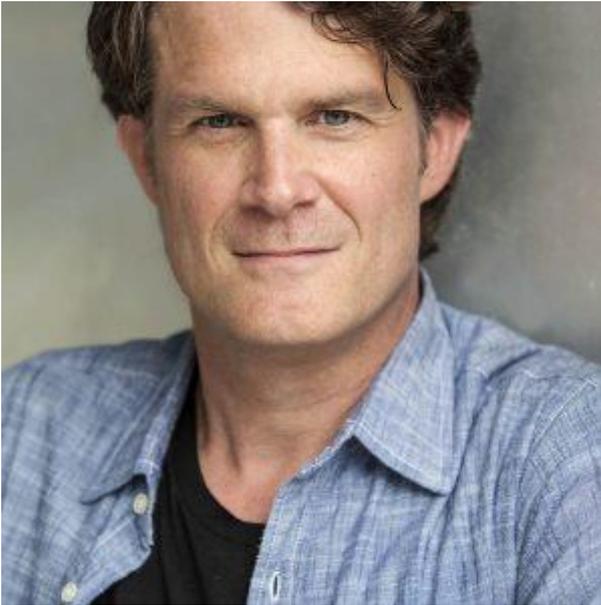
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Hannah Moscovitch is an acclaimed Canadian playwright, TV writer, and librettist whose work has been widely produced in Canada and around the world. Recent stage work includes *Sexual Misconduct of the Middle Classes* and *Old Stock: A Refugee Love Story* (co-created with Christian Barry and Ben Caplan). Hannah has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the Trillium Book Award, the Nova Scotia Masterworks Arts Award, the Scotsman Fringe First and the Herald Angel Awards at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and the prestigious Windham-Campbell Prize administered by Yale University. She has been nominated for the international Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, the Drama Desk Award, Canada's Siminovitch Prize in Theatre, and the Governor General's Literary Award. She is a playwright-in-residence at Tarragon Theatre in Toronto. She lives in Halifax. – [Playwrights Canada Press](#)



## ABOUT THE CAST

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### Marcel Jeannin

Marcel has performed in theatres across Canada, the United States, and France, and is a past member of both the Stratford Festival and National Arts Centre acting companies. For Centaur Theatre, credits include God in *Paradise Lost*, Karl/Steve in *Clybourne Park*, Alan in *God of Carnage*, and Antipholus in *The Comedy of Errors*. For the Segal Centre, credits include Freddie in *Noises Off*, Michael in *The Secret Annex* and Trigorin in *The Seagull*. For Hudson Village Theatre, credits include Marc in *Art*. Film and television credits include *Three Pines*, *The Braid*, *Crisis*, *Ghosts* and *300*, as well as the titular

voice in *The New Adventures of Lucky Luke*. He is a frequent guest artist at the National Theatre School of Canada.

### Inès Defossé



Originally from Paris and from a Franco-Asian family, Inès graduated from the Conservatoire d'art dramatique de Montréal in 2020. She played multiple roles in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* directed by Florent Siaud, in *Small Talk* by Carole Fréchette directed by Benoît Vermeulen, and in *Le Legs de Marivaux*, directed by Catherine Vidal.

During her last year of training, she appeared in two music videos for the electro-pop group Le Couleur, and made an appearance in the music video for *Limonade* by the artist Zoo Baby.

Since graduating from the Conservatoire, she made her debut on television in *Felix, Maude, et la fin du monde*. More recently, Inès played Zoé

in the series *Sans Rendez-vous*, broadcasted on Radio-Canada in the fall of 2021, and played Alexane Lessard in the hit series *District 31*.

Perfectly fluent in English and French, passionate about acting and eager to meet new people, Inès immerses herself in collective creations, scriptwriting and yoga.

## CHARACTERS

JON: Late thirties. An acclaimed novelist. University English professor. Brooding. Tweedy, but with style. On right side of attractive.

ANNIE: Nineteen. Big eyes. 1<sup>st</sup> year university student.

## THEMES

Forbidden love

Infatuation

Power and privilege

Wisdom of experience

## PRE-VIEWING TERMS & TOPICS TO REVIEW

Abuse of power

Consent

Exploitation

Me too movement / #Metoo

Perspective

Power dynamics

Professional misconduct

Relationships between teachers and students

Retrospection

Sexism

## PRE-SHOW DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPTS

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**Instructions for teachers:** The following questions can be used as pre-viewing discussion questions or writing prompts to prepare students and deepen their understanding of the context, topics, and themes of the play. Select the questions that best suit your discipline, the age group of your students and the depth of study you wish to take. Feel free to modify questions as needed to fit your needs and units of study.

1. What makes a play provocative?
2. Why and how is narration used in theatre?
3. What is the fourth wall in theatre? What does breaking the fourth wall mean?
4. What is professional misconduct? What isn't professional misconduct?
5. Can you identify relationships in your life/in the life of a typical high school or college student that involve a power dynamic or imbalance?
  - a. In which relationships do you/does a typical high school or college student commonly have more power? Why?
  - b. What are the potential advantages, disadvantages, risks, and responsibilities of being in a relationship with one or more people in which you hold more power?
  - c. In which relationships do you/does a typical high school or college student commonly have less power? Why?
  - d. What are the potential advantages, disadvantages, risks, and responsibilities of being in a relationship in which you have less power?
6. As a student, what recourses do you have to address or confront an abuse of power or professional misconduct of a teacher?
7. How might a power dynamic or imbalance exist in a romantic relationship?
8. What might be some reasons why victims of sexual misconduct or violence do not disclose or report their experiences?

9. Why might victims of sexual misconduct or violence only disclose or report their experience weeks, months, or years after it occurred?
10. Should colleges and universities have institutional policies that prevent teachers and students from dating or engaging in sexual/romantic relationships? Why? or why not?
11. What problems/issues might arise from a teacher-student romantic or sexual relationship?
12. How might consent be complicated by a relationship that involves a power imbalance?
13. What is the MeToo movement?

Watch a short video or read an article on the Me Too movement and discuss the movement with your class prior to seeing the play. Note: depending on the age of your current students, some students may have been as young as 11 years old when the #MeToo movement went viral.

### Videos:

- Tarana Burke On How The #MeToo Movement Started and Where It's Headed <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1Rb7TGgsp4>
- Ted Talk by Tarana Burke: Me Too is a movement, not a moment [https://www.ted.com/talks/tarana\\_burke\\_me\\_too\\_is\\_a\\_movement\\_not\\_a\\_moment](https://www.ted.com/talks/tarana_burke_me_too_is_a_movement_not_a_moment)
- Me Too: how it's changing the world <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATYK2svJ6eM>

### Articles:

- #MeToo Movement in Canada <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/metoo-movement-in-canada>
- Zacharek S., Dockterman, E. & Sweetland Edwards, H. (2017, December 18). The Silence Breakers. *Time*. <https://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2017-silence-breakers/>

## POST-SHOW DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPTS

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**Instructions to teachers:** select the questions that best suit your discipline, age of your students, and unit of study. Feel free to modify questions as needed. You may also wish to create questions or assignments using the additional resources provided on pages 12 & 13.

### General

1. How would you describe your experience watching this play? What emotions/ thoughts did you experience during or after this play? In what ways were those emotions intentionally evoked by the playwright?
2. What does Annie's red coat symbolize? In theatre, a symbol can be a powerful reminder to the audience of a key theme or message in the play. Was the red coat an effective use of symbol?

### Theatre

3. Should plays tackle complex social issues?
4. Is theatre an effective medium for illuminating or confronting social norms, biases, injustice, gender inequality, systemic oppression, or discrimination? Why or why not?
5. Eda Holmes the Artistic Director of Centaur Theatre chose an edgy and provocative piece that might make their audiences uncomfortable.
  - a. Did you or your peers find this play provocative? Uncomfortable at times?
  - b. Is it important for theatre companies to choose provocative pieces?
  - c. Why do people come to the theatre to see challenging and potentially uncomfortable plays rather than plays with traditional plots, tropes, and happy endings?
  - d. How would you describe the difference in your experience of a provocative play versus a provocative film?
6. The MeToo movement is a social justice movement that breaks the silence around sexual violence and abuse, empowers survivors, encourages survivors to support one another

and calls all members of society to action to end the cycle of sexual violence. What impact do you think Hannah Moscovitch's play makes towards this end?

7. What are your observations about gender parity in theatre? In film?
8. In a recent interview in *The Globe and Mail* with Martin Morrow (2020), Hannah Moscovitch said "I think women want plays that are about their experience of the world. And just writing about women, you're original by default, because nobody's been writing about this in the theatre before." Why is it important to ensure that there is more gender parity for playwrights like Hannah Moscovitch in Canadian theatre and theatre in general?

### **Narration, point of view & perspective**

9. Was it effective for Hannah Moscovitch to make Jon the narrator of the play?
10. In a literary or dramatic text, what is the difference between point of view and perspective?
11. What point of view is used by the narrator?
12. From whose perspective is this story told?
13. How might the play have been different if it were narrated by Annie?
14. What impact did John's narration of the affair have on our understanding of the power dynamics in his relationship with Annie?
15. Why does the playwright give Annie so few lines in the play?
16. Why does the playwright give Annie more lines towards the end of the play? What does this signify?

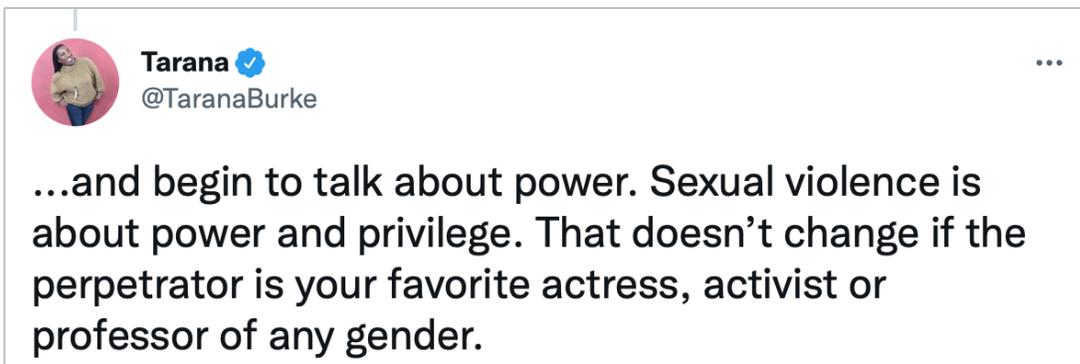
### **The ending**

17. How did you react to the ending of the play? How did the twist at the end of the play affect the story, the audience in general, and you as an individual audience member?
18. Does the ending of the play force you to rethink your own perspective on the story?

19. How might the twist at the end of the play be a final moment of catharsis for Annie and/or the audience?

### **Power and privilege, abuse of power and consent**

20. Read the tweet below posted on Twitter by Tarana Burke on August 20, 2018.
- To what degree do you agree or disagree with this tweet?
  - What connections can you make between the tweet and the power and privilege that are explored in the play?



21. Read the following article from 2018: [Concordia University head 'disturbed' by sexual misconduct allegations](#). What is your reaction to the article? What can higher educational institutions and others do to prevent or stop professional or sexual misconduct?
22. What can all members of society (students, teachers, colleagues, family, media, institutions, government, etc.) do to prevent / address / respond to professional or sexual misconduct?
23. Did Annie consent to the affair? Are there any grey areas or ambiguities about Annie's consent? How does the play explore the nuances of the relationship?
24. Was Annie exploited or taken advantage of?
25. How might Annie's consent be complicated by Jon's position as her professor, status as a well-known author, fame, and age?
26. What complicated questions does the play bring up around sexual consent and power dynamics?

27. What role does gender play in the power dynamics between Jon and Annie?
28. Should Jon be fired for his professional misconduct?
29. As we see in the shifts that occur in the timeline of the play, Annie gains perspective about the affair with age, increased knowledge, awareness, and maturity.
  - a. How might the retrospection that Annie has about the affair speak to the nature of sexual violence and/or misconduct and the challenges of coming forward as a survivor?
  - b. Why might survivors not initially recognize that they had been victimized?
30. Has this play affected how you think about power, privilege, and consent?
31. In what ways do you think the Me Too movement has affected how people act in relationships of power and privilege in academia or in other domains?

### **Characters & Casting**

32. How is the audience meant to feel about Jon? Are we meant to judge Jon for his misconduct or are we meant to like or empathize with Jon? What do you think is the playwright's intention in having the audience respond to the character in one way or another?
33. Were the characters blinded by infatuation and the excitement of engaging in a forbidden romance?
34. Did you have any preconceived notions about seeing a play with a cast of only two characters? What did you observe and what do you appreciate about a two-person play?
35. Were the actors well cast for their roles?
36. What do you think were the performance challenges for each actor in this play?

### **Set Design**

37. What did you appreciate about the set design of this play?
38. What techniques were used to move the audience seamlessly from one setting to another?

### **Breaking the fourth wall**

39. Is breaking the fourth wall a useful theatre convention? What effect does it have on the audience?
40. Do all narrators break the fourth wall?
41. How did you react to Jon's breaking of the fourth wall and speaking directly to you/the audience? What impact did this have on you, the story, your experience of the play, your judgement of the characters?
42. In what ways did Annie break the fourth wall? What impact did this have on you as an audience member?

### **From the Playwright**

43. Listen to the following podcast interview with playwright Hannah Moscovitch about the play. (Note: spoilers here)
  - a) Did hearing an interview with the playwright give you new insights about the play that you hadn't considered?
  - b) What do you appreciate about Hannah Moscovitch's goal/purpose in writing this play?

[Interview with Hannah Moscovitch on The Sunday Edition with Michael Enright](#) (Audio, 31:34)

## THEATRE WRITING EXERCISES

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1. Write a short dialogue scene that explores a power imbalance or abuse of power between two characters.

Variation 1: Write a short scene that explores a power imbalance or abuse of power between two characters. In keeping with Hannah Moscovitch's style consider writing this scene in a nuanced way, creating empathy for your characters, and ambiguities around the ethical implications of the relationship.

Follow up questions:

- What challenges did you experience in creating a scene about a power imbalance between two characters?
- How did you create a nuanced relationship?

Variation 2: same as above but introduce narration for one or both characters who will directly address the audience.

Follow up questions:

- How does narration impact your scene and the audience's interpretation of the relationship?
- How does your character break the fourth wall/directly address the audience?
- What does narration allow you to do that you couldn't do in a dialogue scene alone?
- From whose perspective is the story told?

2. Write a short two-person dialogue that makes effective multiple uses of the slash. A forward slash in a script (/) indicates the moment the next actor begins speaking. The result is characters speaking over one another or speaking at the same time. See examples on pages 15 & 16.
3. Work with a partner to act out your script and get the timing right. Make edits as needed.
4. Exchange scripts with another pair and practice acting out their script until you get the timing of the slash.
5. Perform your script or the other pair's script in front of your class or a small group.
6. Post-exercise questions:

- a) What did you find challenging about writing and performing the overlapping dialogue?
- b) What do you think is the intended effect of overlapping dialogue in a scene?

## ACTING/THEATRE EXERCISES

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1. Experiment with performing overlapping dialogue in a script. When you see a forward slash in the script (/) this indicates the moment the next actor begins speaking.
  - a. What do you think is intention of including overlapping dialogue between characters?

Acting exercise: In duets, try these examples of overlapping dialogue from the play.

### **Excerpt 1 (p. 16):**

ANNIE: I didn't mean to be so / uh  
Uh

JON: You know  
It's okay

ANNIE: I've read your work so I think I know you and I don't  
/ I don't know you at all.

JON: No  
No you know what?  
I do write  
From my own experience.

### **Excerpt 2 (p. 22):**

ANNIE: You said in one interview that  
You think about  
What's *not* being said when people talk / to you

JON: No not all the time

ANNIE: So I'm distracted by  
What you're thinking / about what I'm

JON: I'm  
No I'm  
No

**Excerpt 3 (p. 24-25):**

ANNIE: You're making fun of me for / liking

JON: I'm not.

ANNIE: But your work's also about love /  
And there's also wide consensus that it's good that you're a good writer

JON: You're comparing my characters who're bad at love to the *balcony scene*, to *arguably the most romantic*  
"Wide consensus" is different than "universal worldwide acclaim."

ANNIE: Is it that Shakespeare's uncool?

JON: No it's that you can't / compare

ANNIE: Because I'm not saying you're uncool. You're cool.

**Excerpt 4 (p. 35):**

Note: this excerpt also includes a dash at the end of the line which signifies that the light is cut off by the following line of dialogue.

JON: Well that's good because being middle-aged doesn't necessarily mean / you have more know-how

ANNIE: Middle-aged?  
You're forty-one / isn't that right?

JON: I'm forty-two

ANNIE: But you don't seem like a lot of adults you seem—

JON: "Adults?"  
Are you in a *different category* than "adults"?

## 2. Post-exercise questions:

- a) What did you find challenging about writing and performing the overlapping dialogue?
- b) What do you think is the effect created by overlapping dialogue in a scene?

### 3. Working with character status:

- b. In duets, perform a silent improvised scene demonstrating characters with contrasting status.

What are some ways an actor can demonstrate high status or low status without the use of their voice/words? Consider: body language, movement, physicality, positioning, etc.

Examples of characters with contrasting status: boss/employee, teacher/student, parent/child, police officer/citizen, owner/client, experienced employee/inexperienced employee.

- c. In duets or small groups, perform an improvised scene with dialogue that demonstrates a power imbalance between one or more characters (characters with contrasting status).

Consider: voice, tone, vocabulary, volume, body language, movement, physicality, positioning, etc.

## SUPPORTING RESOURCES

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### Interview with the playwright

[Interview with Hannah Moscovitch on The Sunday Edition with Michael Enright](#) (Audio, 31:34)  
(recommended post-viewing)

Accompanying article: [Hannah Moscovitch's provocative new play encourages a nuanced, open conversation in the age of #MeToo](#). *The Sunday Magazine*.

[Sexual Misconduct of the Middle Classes - interview with Hannah Moscovitch, Tarragon Theatre](#) (Video, 2:09)

### Additional information about the playwright

[Moscovitch, Hannah](#). *Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia*.

### Reviews of the play

[‘Sexual Misconduct of the Middle Classes’ is a familiar story of seduction — until it isn’t](#) (*The Toronto Star*).

[Hannah Moscovitch takes control of the male perspective in her post-#MeToo play Sexual Misconduct of the Middle Classes](#) (*The Globe and Mail*).

[Hannah Moscovitch cleverly examines Sexual Misconduct of the Middle Classes at Toronto’s Tarragon Theatre](#) (*The Globe and Mail*).

[Sexual Misconduct of the Middle Classes review – knotty and nuanced #MeToo play](#) (*The Guardian*).

[Review: Sexual Misconduct of the Middle Classes at Belvoir St Theatre](#) (*Theatre Travels*).

[Review: Belfry’s Sexual Misconduct of the Middle Classes an inventive play that swims against the tide](#) (*The Times Colonist*).

## Video clips from other productions of the play

[Sexual Misconduct of the Middle Classes – Belfry Theatre](#) (scene)

[Official Clip !\[\]\(41034d0756eb325b49f9c2da00394e36\_img.jpg\) MTC Digital Theatre: Sexual Misconduct of the Middle Classes](#) (scene)

[Petra Kalive directs a fascinating drama on contemporary gender politics starring Dan Spielman](#) (video with director and actor from the Melbourne Theatre Company)

## Videos about the Me Too Movement

[Tarana Burke On How The #MeToo Movement Started and Where It's Headed](#) (4:42)

[Ted Talk by Tarana Burke: Me Too is a movement, not a moment](#) (16:06)

[Me Too: how it's changing the world](#) (18:34)

## Reading about the Me Too Movement & Sexual Violence

Canadian Women. (n. d.). The Facts About the #MeToo Movement and its Impact in Canada. In *Canadian Women.org*. <https://canadianwomen.org/the-facts/the-metoo-movement-in-canada/>

Government of Canada. (n. d.). The Impact of Trauma on Adult Sexual Assault Victims. *Department of Justice*. <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/trauma/p2.html>

Rech, N. (2022, May 22). #MeToo Movement in Canada. *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/metoo-movement-in-canada>

## Glossary

**Note:** Reading and viewing the play offers a great opportunity to review and/or develop students' understanding and appreciation the literary and drama terms and techniques that are written in the script and demonstrated in the play.

**Beat:** used in a script to indicate a quick shift in the direction or mood of the scene. A beat can be used when there's a change in the action of the play (a character turns to a new subject or problem, there is a conflict, someone enters or exits).

**Breaking the fourth wall:** when a character breaks away from the play and speaks directly to the audience or looks directly and intentionally at the audience. This technique is typically used in narration.

**Characterization:** how an actor uses body, voice, action, dialogue, costuming and thought to develop and portray a character; how a playwright develops character indirectly through language, action and interaction with other characters.

**Dash:** punctuation used in a script to denote when two characters speak at the same time or over another.

**Empathy:** the capacity to relate to the feelings of another; in this case, the characters of the play.

**Foreshadowing:** a hint or warning of things to come, making specific events in the plot seem more probable as they unfold.

**Narration:** a technique involving one or more characters who speak directly to the audience to tell parts of the story, give information or comment on the action of the scene or the motivations of characters. Narrators speak from a point of view.

**Objective:** what a character wants in a scene, a character's goal. A character's objective should motivate their actions.

**Shift:** in the script a shift indicates a transition in time. This can mean the play advances to later that day, the next day, next year or years in the future.

**Status:** the contrasting power difference in the relationship between two characters. A high-status character may behave dominantly towards a low status character.

**Symbol:** a symbol is something that represents something else. Symbols used in theatre can be words, costumes, objects, etc. Symbols are used in drama to deepen their meaning and further explore the themes of the play (example: Annie's red coat).

**Tension:** the atmosphere created by unresolved or disquieting situations that human beings feel compelled to address; the state of anxiety the audience feels because of a threat to a character in a play.

## References

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