

# Study Guide for “Spinning Into Butter”

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Horizon High School’s Spring Play 2009

*Reprinted with permission from Inside Out, the Educational department for the Denver Center Theatre Company (January, 2002)*

## THE PLAY

*Spinning Into Butter* takes place at Belmont College, a fictional liberal arts college in Vermont. When Simon Brick, one of the few African American students on campus, reports that he has found racist notes attached to his door, events are set in motion. Sarah Daniels, the new dean of students, tries in vain to defuse the rapidly escalating whirlwind of emotions stirred up among the administrators and students.

Sarah soon finds herself at odds with the rest of the school’s administrators, who are desperate to keep news of the event from reaching the media while demonstrating that they embrace “cultural and ethnic diversity.” Far from relieving tensions on campus, their attempts to be politically correct fan the flames of conflict.

The title is taken from the 1922 children’s book *The Story of Little Black Sambo*. This title has become synonymous with racial stereotypes and is an appropriate metaphor for American racism and the examination of a college administration thrown into paralyzing confusion.

*“Strauss: Tigers just kept chasing each other, faster and faster around the tree. They began spinning and spinning until they were just a yellow blur and they spun so fast, they spun themselves into butter.”*

## THE PLAYWRIGHT

Rebecca Gilman is a native of Trussville, Alabama (near Birmingham) where she was born 36 years ago. Living now in Forest park, a suburb of Chicago, she arrived in the Midwest by a circuitous path. She studied at Middlebury College in Vermont after graduating from Birmingham Central College in Alabama. After various digressions, Miss Gilman attended the University of Iowa where she received her Master of Fine Arts degree in playwriting. After moving to Chicago, she supported her writing with a variety of clerical jobs. Aside from a small production of one of her early efforts in Houston, none of her plays had been produced professionally by the mid-1990s.

In 1996, the Circle Theatre of Forest Park produced her play, *The Glory of Living*, “a dark and intensely violent work about a Texas teenage murderess who picks up homeless girls for her boyfriend’s sexual kicks.” The play caught the attention of the Goodman Theater in Chicago and Miss Gilman was offered its McPherson Award. *Spinning Into Butter* was commissioned by the Goodman Theatre as part of this award and premiered in its studio in the spring of 1999. The play had its New York premiere at Lincoln Center in the summer of 2000.

Rebecca Gilman is the recipient of the Robert L. Stevens Award from the Kennedy Center Fund for New American plays; the Osborne Award, given by the American Theatre Critic’s Association, London’s George Devine Award, and four Joseph Jefferson Awards for Best New Play (*The Glory of Living*, *Spinning Into Butter*, *The Crime of the Century* and *Boy Gets Girl*).

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## RACIAL AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY

In the play, Patrick is reluctant to declare any ethnic categorization until Sarah informs him that the Scholarship Committee will not accept “Nuyorican” as a group. He consents to “Puerto Rican” because the \$12,000.00 is a strong temptation.

Ethnicity (from the Greek word “ethnos” meaning people or nation) has come to mean “any group which is defined or set off by race, religion or national origin or some combination of these categories.” The persistence of ethnic/racial labels in our society is one of the basic issues of the play and seems to plague our nation as well as Belmont College.

The fault may lie with our Founding Fathers who stipulated in Article I of the Constitution that a census must be taken every ten years and stipulated how the enumeration was to be conducted. “...Explicitly in the case of the Indians and implicitly in the case of Black slaves, the census has always been entwined with race.” In 1978, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), which operates the Bureau of the Census, issued a directive entitled “Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting.” It laid down the five basic categories that are still in use today: “American Indian or Alaskan Native,” “Asian or Pacific Islander,” “Black,” “White” and “Hispanic.” In the 1990 census, a question or “objective indicator” was added to determine a person’s ancestry or ethnic origin. The examples included German, Italian, Afro-American, Croatian, Cape Verdean, Dominican, Haitian, Cajun, French Canadian, Korean, Lebanese, Mexican, Irish, Polish, Slovak among the 21 choices given. The reason for this addition is that many Americans feel uneasy about being assigned a racial or ethnic category by the government. Thus, the census and most other government surveys offered the choice of “self-identification.” Such an indicator fits well with the spirit of American individualism and satisfied advocates of affirmative action who argued for specific racial boundaries to protect the minorities they represent. So Patrick’s self-identification is “Nuyorican,” a subjective category he recognizes but the Scholarship Committee does not.

Peter Skerry in his book *Counting on the Census?* argues for the OMB’s categories. The census data provides us with important information, he says. For example, the larger a minority’s count, the more government resources individuals of that “designated minority” can claim. Other benefits for minorities include the ability to document discrimination or acquire equal employment opportunities. It is also a source of group pride. Though the OMB is not a political agency, it’s count of minorities gives specific groups more political clout than others. “The virtue here...is that previously excluded groups are now represented in the political process. The vice is that the process is generally more contentious and less civil.”

Those who oppose race/ethnic/gender identification argue for individual autonomy and personal authenticity. Robert Alter writes that a person requires a social context, but can operate with “individual uniqueness.. and modern individualism.” This statement underlies what African American student implies in the play when he says: “I don’t know why he did it. It’s not like we all think alike, just because we’re black.” In addition, Jim Sleeper offers a serious indictment on diversification. In his book, *Liberal Racism*, he argues that liberal “diversity” defaults on the American promise of equality by

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reinforcing the awareness of race and ethnicity. When we are asked to define ourselves by special national or racial groups, this practice “no longer curbs discrimination, it invites it... Racial etiquette begets racial epithets, as surely as hypocrisy begets hostility.” Father Andrew Greeley, a social scientist, has written a six-step paradigm for the American acculturation and assimilation process. His sixth step called “emerging adjustment [signifies] as easy acceptance of both the ethnic and American identities as completely compatible.” As optimistic as Father Greeley is, authors Paula D. McClain and Joseph Stewart, Jr. remain in doubt. In their book, *Can We All Get Along?* (Rodney King’s plea). They conclude that “issues of race were at the heart of the beginning of this nation and they remain central to the American political system in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”

As for colleges and universities such as Belmont, they remain in a difficult position. According to Jack Friedenthal, Freda Alverson Professor of Law at George Washington University School of Law in Washington, DC, schools cannot ask for student ethnicity data, unless they are privately funded by tuition or donation. In fact, scholarships cannot be awarded on the basis of ethnicity, so Belmont is either private or Patrick is to receive a scholarship based on talent. Most college applicants have a race/ethnic section, but it can be marked optional or “decline to state.” Yet colleges want, even covet, racial and ethnic diversity for public funding dollars and future recruitment of students.

If such is the situation in higher education, then how can we avoid ethnic labels? Our best hope is in what they much maligned census reveals: “We are intermixing as individuals to the point where group barriers are breaking down...”

## PERSONS MENTIONED IN THE PLAY

**Jean Toomer** (1894-1967): African American author who lived during the Harlem Renaissance. His works include *Cane* (1923), *Essentials* (1931) and *The Flavor of Man*.

**Rainer Marla Rilke** (1875-1926): Prague born poet who wrote Romantic poetry. His works include *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, *Book of Hours* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*. He believed a poet must accept reality in all its aspects.

**Toni Morrison**: Pulitzer and Nobel Prize winning author of such novels as *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, *Beloved* and *Jazz*.

**Ayn Rand** (1905-1982): Russian-American playwright, screen writer, novelist and philosopher. Her play *Night of January 16<sup>th</sup>* was produced in 1932. Her novels, *We the Living*, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* were published between 1933 and 1957. Thereafter, she wrote and lectured on her philosophy, Objectivism. One of the principles of this philosophy is anti-altruism. Rand found the dictum that you must surrender your own interests for the sake of others ridiculous. Such reasoning explains why she would think social work a needless profession.

## POLITICAL CORRECTNESS: DEFINITIONS AND ORIGINS

“Sarah: Because it was patronizing. To the minority students.”

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*Patrick: You know, I didn’t correct you before, when I was in here before, but its ‘students of color,’ not ‘minority students.’”*

Patrick’s response to Sarah is an example of “political correctness.” *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines the term as:

**1.** Of, relating to, or supporting broad social, political, and educational change, especially to redress historical injustices in matters such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. **2.** Being or perceived as being overconcerned with such change, often to the exclusion of other matters.

Other writers define it in different ways:

- Political correctness may be viewed as “an equilibrium pattern of expression and inference within a given community where receivers [assign] undesirable quantities to senders who express themselves in an ‘incorrect way’ causing senders to avoid such expressions.” Glenn Loury, an African American professor at Boston University.
- Political correctness is a “label slapped on an enormous range of liberal views...from environmentalism to multiculturalism to abortion rights.” John K. Wilson of Chicago University.
- Political correctness is slavish adherence “to language that is neutral of any sexist, racist, ageist or any other ist connotations.” John E. Van del Wetering of New York State University.
- Political correctness is using “Language is such a way so as not to be offensive to others” especially in sensitive areas of race, ethnicity and gender. Laurence R. Marcus in *Fighting Words*.
- Political correctness is “an ideological narrowing, intolerance and silencing of dissent, commonly attributed to the left by the right.” Michael S. Cummings.

Finally, *The Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook* defines politically correct as “culturally sensitive; multiculturally unexceptionable; appropriately inclusive. The term ‘politically correct,’ co-opted by the white power elite as a tool for attacking multiculturalism, is no longer ‘politically correct.’”

Just as writers cannot agree upon one standard definition, no one can concur on the origins of the term. Laurence Marcus states that political correctness has been a part of the American landscape from its earliest days. When Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson were banished to the frontiers of Rhode Island and Connecticut, respectively, it was because they did not agree with the politically correct religion of Massachusetts. John K. Wilson says the term first appeared in 1793 in a Supreme Court case of *Chisholm vs. Georgia*. Justice James Wilson wrote an opinion objecting to the wording of a common toast, “to the ‘United States’ instead of ‘to the People of the United States’ is the toast given. This is not politically correct.” Justice Wilson felt the people, not the states, held the real authority of the country and therefore, a toast to the states was not politically correct. The phrase was not heard again until the 1930s, when political correctness was “a sarcastic reference to adherence to the party line by American communists.” Richard Feldstein in his book supports this argument and adds that the term had a moral connotation when used by Jews to “condemn members of the Communist party who sided with Hitler.” Wilson writes that the term re-emerged in the 1960s when the Black Power movement traced some of its practices to Mao-Tse Tung, founder of Communist China and his frequent references to “correct”

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ideas. During the 1980s, conservatives began to take over this liberal phrase and exploit it for political gain, expanding its meaning to anyone who expressed radical sentiments. “And the conservatives not only appropriated ‘politically correct’ for their own attacks on the radical Left, they also transformed it into a new phrase .. political correctness.”

Thus, in its murky past, a phrase that began without disapproval or deprecation became negative and uncomplimentary in the eyes – or mouths – of others.

## **DEBATING POLITICAL CORRECTNESS: THE PROS AND CONS**

*The impact of the political correctness has been felt on college campuses where scholarships, inquiry and curricula have been affected. The controversy has become so entrenched that it has fostered two groups of professors, the National Associations of scholars, who hold an old view; and Teachers for a Democratic Culture, who support political correctness and multiculturalism.*

Those who favor political correctness in college curricula point to the “Eurocentrism” of society, the domination of culture by males of white European descent. Catherine R. Stimpson, past president of the modern Language Association, wonders why we cannot be students of Western culture and multiculturalism simultaneously. Our traditions show a mingling of cultural borrowings. She says: “Multiculturalism promises to bring dignity to the dispossessed and self- empowerment to the dis-empowered, to [recover] the texts and traditions of ignored groups, to broaden cultural history.” Moreover, differences are a part of our lives because “we are establishing new patterns of a common culture, new global economic and communications systems.” In additions, multiculturalism gives a true picture of who we are- a people struggling to reach and recognize each other.

John Searle, a philosopher at the University of California, speaks to “the canon” of literature that must be read by college students. He says this “canon” is a product of the Western Civilization that has oppressed women, slaves, serf populations and ethnic and cultural minorities. Searle argues that human beings are what they understand themselves to be; and inherited cultural is essentially what makes human beings human. People are their culture. What they are they have to learn to become. Searle believes that students should know their own cultural traditions and its evolution. In the United States, the dominant tradition has been European. “However, you do not understand your own traditions if you do not see them in relation to others. Works from other cultural traditions need to be studied as well.” Multiculturalism does not just give information about other cultures; it places that information within a world context. Consequently, students see themselves within a panorama or world and social formations.

Henry Louis Gates Jr., the W.E.B Dubois professor of humanities at Harvard, says that the canon of Western literature teaches values, but those whose values do not necessarily reflect or represent a person of color. He urges the reform of the core curriculum “to account for the comparable eloquence of the African, Asian and Middle Eastern Traditions...to begin to prepare our students for their roles as citizens of a world culture....” Campus Speech Should be Subject to Proper Etiquette” is an article written

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by Judith Martin (Miss Manners) and Gunther Stint. They agree that education is possible without the order that prevents intimidation and Mayhem. Children must be “taught to sit still, refrain from taunting their classmates, show respect for their teachers and wait their turn to talk, or they will never be able to learn.” If there is etiquette in legislatures (Roberts’ Rules of Order) and in courtrooms, then there should be etiquette on college campuses as well. “Members of the university community should always have the opportunity to attack ideas...but not to attack people.”

Critics of political correctness claim it curtails free speech and traditional scholarship. Gerald Gunther, professor of Law at Stanford University, says, “Speech should not and cannot be banned simply because it is ‘offensive’ to substantial parts of... a community.” Suppressing such words is a violation of the First Amendment that guarantees us free speech. The late Supreme Court justice William O. Douglas, writing for a majority opinion, supported his view: “A function of free speech [is] to invite dispute....speech is often provocative and challenging. That is why freedom of speech [is] protected against censorship or punishment.”

Political correctness has prompted many universities to adopt “speech codes” in an effort to do something about racist, sexist, and homophobic speech. Nat Hentoff, a writer for the Village Voice and Washington Post, feels that “once you start telling people what they can’t say, you will end up telling them what they can’t think”. As a result, many students do not get involved in class discussions because they are afraid of political correctness righteousness. Politically moderate students often feel intimidated by the political correctness police and fear of being labeled “racist”, “sexist” or “sellout.” Speech codes also hamper the free trade of ideas that is central to higher education...because it restricts, rather than expands the educational environment. Give and take, exposure to new ideas, and an incentive to think through an argument” is stifled.

Critics of political correctness also contend that the movement is responsible for “the dumbing down” of the curriculum, especially in the humanities. Allan Bloom writes in the closing of *The American Mind* that “the humanities are embarrassed by the political content of many of the literary works belonging to them. They have had to alter the content for the sake of openness to other cultures.” As a result, a sort of academic self-censorship is being practiced. Many courses have been dropped from college catalogs and some professors tape their lectures to assure they have not said anything politically incorrect. “The premium on correctness gives rise to a paradoxical impact: no language” writes Russell Jacoby in *Dogmatic Wisdom*. When students can’t keep up with the appropriate terms of the times, they retreat to their own groups. This “Language breakdown” prevents any meaningful dialogue between different races or ethnic groups. Jacoby concludes: “Reforming language is not new, but reforming society by reforming its language reflects a post modern world.... In easing the pain, [correct] talk may forget the disease.”

*“While the concept of political correctness has made us more sensitive to how we perceive each other, there’s also a danger that the rhetoric will be allowed to mask some of our really angry feelings. People are now often afraid to articulate what they actually feel about each other.”*

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## AN ARTICLE AND INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Contributed by Charleszine Terry Nelson

This play takes place at a small liberal arts school in Belmont College, Belmont, Vermont. All of the action takes place in Dean Sarah Daniel’s office over a five-week-period. The play begins with Dean Daniels offering a scholarship designated for a “minority student” to a young man from New York. When she explains that she must have him declare an ethnic designation and she suggests Hispanic, he rejects the label because it really does not truly explain ethnicity. He is Nuyorican (a person of Puerto Rican descent who lives in New York City). Reluctantly, he agrees to a Puerto Rican designation.

Dilemma number two further complicates her job when the Dean announces to a group of administrators that Simon, an African American student, had found threatening racist notes taped to his dorm room door. Dean Daniels is charged with the task of restoring harmony to the campus. The white administrators, faculty and students all rush to advance their various self-serving agendas as they attempt to air the problem. How they address the situation evolves into a compelling story that explores racism, white guilt, political correctness and institutional problem-solving. The story is told in an honest, brutal, and often humorous manner that forces audience members to confront their attitudes toward race.

According to Rebecca Gilman, from an interview by Tom Creamer and Teresa Brandcamp, the central incident in the play – Simon getting a racially threatening note on his door – something that happened when she went to Middlebury College in Vermont. Gilman always wanted to write about it but never knew how to approach it. Only after reading an article about the psychologist, Jessica Benjamin who discusses objectifying people did she find a way to voice marking people as “other.”

Re-occurring themes of objectification and political correctness appear in this work. Making assumptions about how other people think and behave based on their gender, race or any other attribute is known as objectification. Gilman agrees that objectifying people keeps us from thinking of them as equals who are worthy of our respect. Simon who never appears onstage, is known through the characters objectification of him.

Political correctness is defined as safe jargon because it makes deeper, unexamined prejudice, ignorance or underlying, bad feelings. It is a simple form of good manners. Gilman states that good things come out of our being sensitive about the way in which we speak to other people and how we want to be named by other people. However, when it’s taken to an extreme, people won’t say what they really feel because they do not want to be labeled insensitive.

Rebecca Gilman takes the title of her play from *Little Black Sambo*, a children’s book written and illustrated by an Englishwoman, Helen Bannerman. She said, “The title made a nice metaphor, *Spinning Into Butter*, for the play because the white people in the college administration are all like the tiger, fighting over who’s the grandest in the jungle. They become so discombobulated by what’s going on and

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are thrown so much out of whack that they chase their own tails and go in circles around and around until they spin into butter.”

The seven characters in this play are drawn from contemporary America: they are accessible, well-meaning and offensive at the same time. The dialogue can seem abrupt or startling, and it is filled with guilt and shame. This is truly an American play said Director, Anne-Marie Cammarato.

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITES BEFORE THE PLAY

### Define the following:

Nuyorican	Dichotomy	The World Bank
Hispanic	Mea culpa	Salon
Latino	Assimilated	Quorum
Muslim	Pragmatic	Pedagogy
Serbs	Plantation mentality	Proxy
Fundamentalist	Paternalism	Native Son
Puritanical	Noble savage	Mary Dalton
Bourgeois	Braunschweig, Germany	Sanskrit
Passive-aggressive	Bosnia	Toni Morrison
White guilt	The Cherry orchard	Eurocentric
Patronizing	Anton Chekhov	Patriarchal
Being denied agency	Ayn Rand	Articulate
“old world”	Rainer Maria Rilke	Jean Toomer
Tokenism	Fredrick Douglass (1818-1895)	Harlem Renaissance
Diminutive	Henry Louis Gates, Jr.	Pearl S. Buck
Anesthetized		Epiphany

### Discussion Questions

Labeling/Stereotyping: Subtle unconscious generalizations that one makes about a person or group of people before getting to know him or them. Often, we make conjectures about a person based upon the generalizations and labels we have accepted about people that they know, hangout with, look like or with whom they share the same talents. We also tend to categorize as the same those people who share the same general age, ethnic background, gender, religion or neighborhood.

1. Make a list of instances where you have labeled an individual for one of the reasons mentioned above or another similar reason. Do you think your label impacted how you interacted with the person?
2. Make a list of times you have realized that you have been labeled. For example as a silly female, as a dumb jock. When you realized that you have not been judged on your own merits, what were your feelings?
3. How might a person who complains about being labeled be perceived by others? Sometimes the perception is that they are overacting or overly sensitive. Students who complain may be stereotyped as “whiney.” What other labels can you think of?

### AFTER THE PLAY

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Discuss the viewing. Refresh students with definitions.

Topic to discuss: Equivocation. Provide examples of how students can equivocate. Role playing can be done, with one student using the skills of equivocation in a discussion about the world being round or flat.

## **Colorado Model Content Standard in History.**

History 3.2 Students understand the history of social organization in various societies.

If teachers are interested we have copies of numerous classroom activities to do after the play viewing, all provided by the educational department of the DCPA.