

Beasley's Christmas Party

BY C. W. MUNGER

BASED ON A STORY BY BOOTH TARKINGTON

PLOT SUMMARY

STUDENT MATINEES COMING SOON!

- **Feb 7, 2012**
Tartuffe
- **Mar 27 /Apr 4**
Freud's Last Session
- **May 22, 2012**
Leaving Iowa

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Time Period: 1909
Setting: Wainwright, Indiana

Reporter Booth Tarkington has just moved to Wainwright, Indiana. He is excited to find out that the boarding house where he is renting a room is right next door to a house belonging to the Honorable David Beasley, a respected member of Congress who is currently running for Governor of Indiana.

Booth meets Miss Applewaite who used to be engaged to David Beasley years ago but broke off the engagement because she felt he had "no imagination." Both she and David are still single and living as neighbors but they never speak to each other. Booth soon learns that the rest of the townsfolk have a lot of respect for Beasley but he has a reputation for not saying much.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Booth Tarkington: A reporter
David Beasley: A member of Congress
George Dowden: Beasley's best friend
Old Bob: Beasley's servant
Simeon Peck: a local farmer
Anne Applewaite: Beasley's former fiancée

Knowing his neighbor as a silent man with no imagination, Booth is a bit shocked to hear Beasley having long conversations with invisible people. Is Beasley crazy? Is he fit to be running for governor?

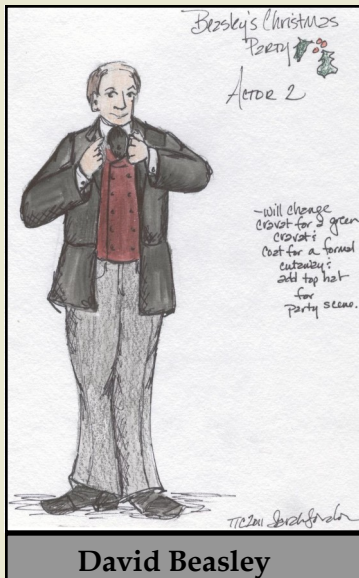
It turns out that David Beasley has recently adopted a child. Hamilton Swift, Jr. is an orphan confined to a wheelchair and has had little opportunity to play with other children. But to make up for a less an active body, Hamilton has a very active imagination. He has invented a whole society of imaginary friends .

David Beasley plays right along and welcomes Hamilton's "friends" into his house. Suddenly the silent man with no imagination is caring for invisible dogs, challenging imaginary athletes to jumping contests and throwing a full scale Christmas party for a host of invisible guests.

This is a side of David Beasley that the citizens of Wainwright have never seen before. Will it hurt his chances of being elected as governor? Or will this evidence of his kind heart make the voters (and Miss Applewaite) love him even more?

"David Beasley's the quietest man God has made...There are some rare people in this world that arn't all TALK..."
~Booth's Cousin

WHO'S WHO



CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

Booth Tarkington: the narrator of the play. He is a reporter who has just moved to Wainwright. This character is based loosely on the real life Booth Tarkington who was also a journalist early in his career.

David Beasley: a politician. He's currently running for Governor in the state of Indiana. Beasley is much respected by the people in Midvale but is known for being a silent man.

Hamilton Swift, Jr.: David Beasley's ward, a small boy confined to a wheelchair.

Simeon Peck: a local farmer who is campaigning against David Beasley's election.

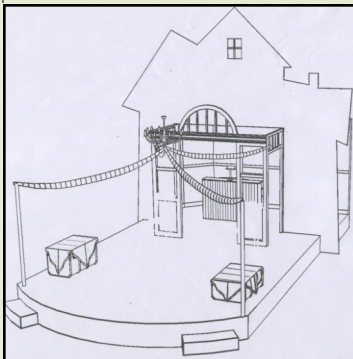
Old Bob: David Beasley's servant.

George Dowden: David Beasley's best friend.

"In all the time I've known him I don't believe he's ever asked me a single question--except when he asked if I'd marry him."

~Miss Applewaite

Miss Anne Applewaite: David Beasley's next door neighbor. She used to be engaged to Beasley but she broke off the engagement because she felt he had "no imagination."



SET AND COSTUME

The costume sketches for the characters above have fabric swatches attached to them. This gives the director and actors a more accurate picture of how the costume will look and feel.

The set design printed opposite is a simple outline of the stage. As you watch the play notice how the actors change the set to indicate different locations. Does the set look different by the end of the play?

BOOTH TARKINGTON

Newton Booth Tarkington, was an American writer best known for his Pulitzer Prize winning novels, *The Magnificent Ambersons* and *Alice Adams*. A native of Indiana, Tarkington's stories often focused on life in the mid-west among ordinary citizens pursuing the American Dream.

Born in July 1869, Tarkington grew up in a middle class family in Indianapolis. He spent his first two years of college at Purdue University, but later transferred to Princeton.

At Princeton University, he took the position of editor for the *Nassau Literary Magazine*. He was also voted most popular man in his class. One contemporary joked that Tarkington was "the only Princeton man who had ever been known to play poker (with his left hand), write a story for the *Nassau Lit* (with his right hand), and lead the singing in a crowded room, performing these three acts simultaneously."

Such a varied social life came at some expense to his studies. When his classmates graduated in 1893, their most popular member lacked the necessary credits for a degree. His later literary achievements, however, earned him two honorary degrees thus making Princeton University his official Alma Mater.

After college, Tarkington returned to Indianapolis and struggled for a while to making a living as a sketch artist and a free lance writer.



His break-through came in 1900 when his novel, *The Gentlemen from Indiana* became a best seller. From that point on, Tarkington was one of the most popular writers of his day. Two of his titles, *The Two Van-revels* and *Mary's Neck* appeared on the annual best-seller lists nine times. His short story, "The Cider of Normandy" was awarded the O. Henry Memorial Award in 1931.

His most famous works are the Pulitzer Prize winners, *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1922) and *Alice Adams* (1924). Along with John Updike and William Faulkner, Tarkington is one of only three novelists to receive the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction more than once.

The tone of much of Tarkington's work is satirical, but not cynical.

His comic studies of American life mocked the American class system and its foibles, the decline of 'old money' and the rise of 'new money', but were also cheerfully reminiscent of the simple Mid-West lifestyle at the turn of the century. Literary critic, Hamilton Basso once remarked that, "In [Tarkington's] books as nowhere else, we get an understanding of how that earlier, more stable world of clipped lawns, gabled houses, and long summer holidays seemed from the inside of those who, like Tarkington himself, looked upon it as the best of all possible environments in a none too perfect world."

Although best known for his writing, Tarkington also served in politics as a state representative and was a world traveler.

Tarkington began losing his eyesight in the 1920's and was blind during his later years, but he continued to write by dictating to his secretary. He eventually settled in Kennebunkport, Maine, but he never lost his fondness for Indiana. Booth Tarkington died in 1946 and was buried in Indianapolis.

Source for Quotations

"Tarkington, [Newton] Booth" From Alexander Leitch, A Princeton Companion, copyright Princeton University Press (1978). <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/CampusWWW/>

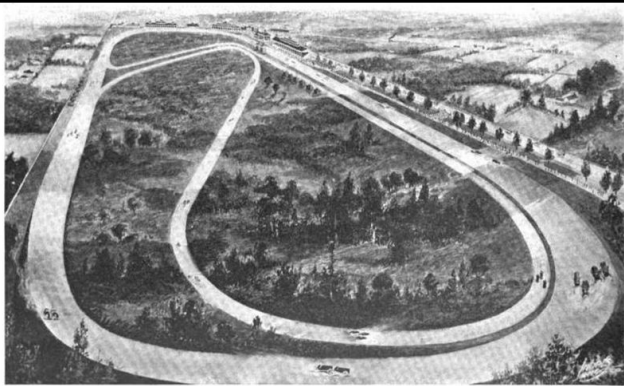
THE PLAY IN CONTEXT

Booth Tarkington set many of his novels and stories in his home state of Indiana. He is well known for his portrayals of ordinary Americans in the Mid-West at the turn of the century. However, Wainwright, described as the state capitol in *Beasley's Christmas Party* is a fictional town.

“..if a man is only FOR you, in this state, there isn't much in it and he may go back on it; but if he's FER you, he means it. Well, I'm FER Beasley!”
~Mr Meyers

The actual state capitol of Indiana is Indianapolis. Now the second largest city in the Mid-West, Indianapolis, was a thriving place at the turn of the century. The late 19th century was a time of change for most large American cities. The increased industrialism and the advances in technology were bringing more and more business and factories and workers into the city. But, in the Mid-West states especially, the agricultural economy remained very important.

Much of the industrialization in Indiana happened along the Lake Michigan shoreline in the late 19th cent. “Marshy wastelands were drained and transformed into an area supporting a complex of factories and oil refineries.



Bird's Eye View of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Which Will Be Completed July 15, and Formally Opened August 19-21

Indianapolis Motor Speedway Grand opening in 1909

As the 19th century drew to a close, industry continued to expand and the growing numbers of industrial workers in the state sought to organize through labor unions. Eugene V. Debs, one of the great early labor leaders, was from Indiana, and the labor movement at Gary in the Calumet area figured prominently in the nationwide steel strike just after World War I. Indiana was an early leader in the production of automobiles. Before Detroit took control of the industry in the 1920s, Indiana boasted over 300 automobile companies.”

The story of *Beasley's Christmas Party* does not deal with many of the current events happening at that time outside the town of Wainwright, but it is good to remember that all of these characters are living in a period of great change both for America and the world.

Sources for Page 4-5

Indiana, state, United States: History – Infoplease.com <http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/us/A0858787.html#ixzz1cVB0x8Vk>

Mott, Frank Luther, American Journalism A History: 1690-1960. The MacMillan Company: New York, 1962.

Ed. Ford, Edwin H and Emery, Edwin. Highlights in the History of the American Press. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1954.

JOURNALISM IN THE 1900'S

The turn of the century was a very exciting time to be a reporter. This was the time when the great newspaper millionaires like William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer II were at their most powerful. Both Hearst and Pulitzer owned multiple newspapers in cities across America but they are best known for their famously competing New York publications, Hearst's *New York Journal* and Pulitzer's *New York World*.

Newspapers like the *Journal* and *World* set the tone for the news reporting of the day in their fierce competition to increase circulation and beat the



completion to the "best stories." The reporting style known as yellow journalism was born. Yellow journalism focused on sensational exciting news stories; often stretching the truth in order to achieve their results. Reporters for the *Journal* and the *World* chased down stories of crime, disaster, scandal, gossip and anything else that would interest their public. Not only the content, but the style of newspapers also changed. In an effort to get the public's attention yellow journalism created large headlines, used lots of pictures (sometimes faked) and added colored comics and Sunday supplements to their weekend publications.

1900's. The front page of the *New York Journal* compared to the front page of *The New York Times* from the same era.

The press wielded an extraordinary amount of power during this era. Papers often chose sides during elections and ran stories in support of one candidate or attacking the opposing candidate. Hearst and Pulitzer were both known for their "crusading" stories which exposed injustice in the political system or fought for the rights of the workers against big business. Newspapers editors were, of course, well aware that the majority of their readers were working class people and that these kinds of crusades also sold lots of papers, but there is evidence that Hearst and Pulitzer genuinely believed it was the duty of the press to stand up for the "little man."

"I've got you newspaper men here, because I'm goin' to show you somp'n' about Dave Beasley that'll open a good many folks' eyes when it's in print."

~Simeon Peck

Compare

Notice the difference in the front page layout between the *New York Journal*, known for its "yellow journalism" and *The New York Times*, which was a much more conservative paper in the 1900's. Which front page looks more like a modern newspaper? What are some characteristics from the yellow journalistic style that can still be found in newspapers today?

ACTORS AND IMAGINARY FRIENDS



David Beasley talks with an "imaginary friend" (actors Lisa Peretti, Frank Lawler & Don Brady)

The plot of Beasley's Christmas Party involves lots of "imaginary friends". Creating an imaginary character for a play is very similar to creating an imaginary character for a story. It requires a lot of imagination! We asked actor, Don Brady (playing David Beasley) some questions about the imaginary characters in this play.

Who are some of the imaginary characters in this play?

There are many imaginary characters in this play. There is a Colonel, a somewhat hard of hearing Aunt and a boy who happens to be very good at athletics.

Can you describe one of these characters? What do you imagine that s/he looks like?

I like to think of the Colonel as the Grandpa in Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. You know, the long, grey, somewhat disheveled beard and hair, wearing an out of date uniform that doesn't quite fit right anymore.

When you are saying lines to an imaginary character, do you have to imagine what they are saying back to you?

Indeed! One of the most important parts of acting, and often the hardest part, is listening. In a real conversation you have to listen to what is being said so you can respond appropriately. As an actor you already know what you're going to say because you've memorized your lines. All you have to do is chime in with your line when the other person stops. But to actively participate in the conversation as if it has never happened before and to make it real for the audience you have to listen. Same as when dealing with an imaginary person. You have to hear what they are saying as if it's the first time. If you as the actor believe, the audience will hopefully/happily go on the journey with you.

What do you do as an actor to show the audience where the imaginary character is?

It's about the eyes. When I talk to real people I like to look them in the eyes, so it's deciding how tall the person is and figuring out where their eyes are. Then I imagine looking into their eyes when we talk. This give the audience an idea of the size of the person and where that person is. If the person is walking, I follow them with my eyes. In some cases, it might be a hand gesture such as a point or a wave. Also it's important that all the "real" actors are looking at the same place. That will help the audience figure out where the imaginaries are located.

Is it harder or easier to act with an imaginary character in a scene?

That's a loaded question. I've worked with some very difficult real actors. Imaginary actors don't step on your lines or upstage you, but real ones take up actual space and time. The toughest thing about working with imaginary characters is filling the space with their bodies. It's easy to establish where the character is supposed to be standing then forget and walk right through that space. Oops! A real actor would say ouch or yell at you...the imaginary ones are easier going but if you walk through them too many times the audience will start to be confused about where they are.

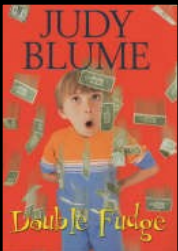
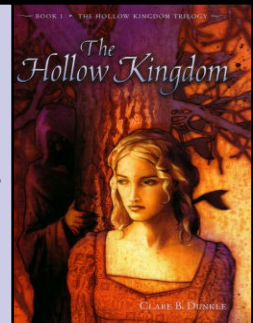
WRITERS AND IMAGINARY FRIENDS

Claire B. Dunkle

author of *The Hollow Kingdom*

"I think that characters who are in the book for a page or two still need to live real lives. They need occupations, places to go, and families to return to in the evening. They need their own favorite words and habits, something to call their own. In short, we can't let them realize that they have a walk-on part in a book: they, too, have to think like real people."

<http://www.claredunkle.com/Design/writecharacters.htm>



Judy Blume

author of *Double Fudge*

"I often interview my characters, ask them to write letters to one another, do background reading, and read through my entire manuscript again after I write each scene."

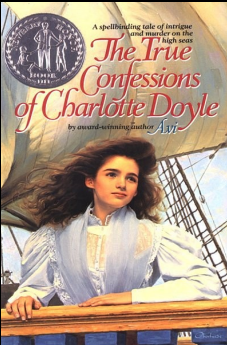
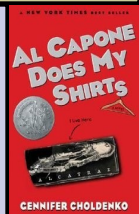
http://www.cynthialeitichsmith.com/lit_resources/authors/interviews/judyblume.html

Gennifer Choldenko

author of *Al Capone Does My Shirts*

"I guess one of the challenges for me [as a writer] is learning to love the characters that I don't agree with because if I hate a character I telegraph that early in the way I write."

<http://www.tne.uconn.edu/interviews/Gennifer%20Choldenko.mp3>



Avi

author of *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*

"The very last scene that I was writing for *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* was a two page scene in which Charlotte goes around saying goodbye [to the other characters on the ship] and as I was writing this all of the sudden the tears came to my eyes because I was saying goodbye to her too. So, you do get caught up in your characters in that way...they become in a funny way like family."

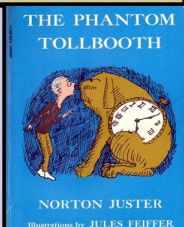
<http://www.tne.uconn.edu/interviews/Avi.mp3>

Norton Juster

author of *The Phantom Tollbooth*

"What I do when I write is I'll take a couple of the characters and just write long conversations--most of which never get into the book--just to get to know them."

<http://www.tne.uconn.edu/interviews/Norton%20Juster.mp3>



Compare

Whether its an actor creating a character for a stage or a writer creating characters for a story; storytellers know so many details about their "imaginary friends" that these fictional characters start to feel like real people. Read the quotes from the writers printed above. What are some of the techniques that these writers use to make their characters feel like real people? Have you read a book that made you feel like you really knew the characters? What was the name of this book and who was the author?

CREATING CHARACTERS IN CREATIVE WRITING

Ask each student to create an imaginary "friend". It can be a person, an animal, even an object, but it must be able to talk. Below are some suggestions for classroom activities that will help each student add details to their imaginary friend and translate those details into their writing

It's All About the Details

- Prepare a list of questions that each student must answer about their imaginary friend. (Ex: *What is their name? What do they look like? What do they wear? What do they like to do? What don't they like? What do they eat? Do they have a family? Etc.*)
- Ask students to draw a picture of their friend.
- Ask students to write a "letter of introduction" telling someone all about their imaginary friend.

What Would (____) Do?

- Divide students into groups of two. Each student must "interview" the other. Students take on the role of their imaginary friend as they answer questions.
- Give each pair of students a scenario (Ex: *One student must convince the other to run away from home. One student is being bullied and the other is trying to help them. One student wants to rob a bank but the other is afraid to. Etc.*) Ask students to talk with their partner and imagine how their characters/"imaginary friends" would feel/act in this situation.
- Each partner group prepares a scene based on their scenario in which they "act out" their imaginary characters. Present some of these scenes to the class

Putting Characters on Paper

- Ask the students to write a speech to be given to the class in the role of their imaginary character. Give each student a different topic. (Ex. *What I Want Most in the World is... or If I Were President I would.*) Remind the students that they are not answering these questions for themselves; they are trying to think about what their imaginary character would say.
- Make a list of all the imaginary characters created by the students. Ask the students to write a short story that uses at least two of the imaginary characters created by the class.