

Example of reginald roses twelve angry men as a metaphor for democracy essay

[Law](#), [Evidence](#)



The play *Twelve Angry Men* was first presented as a television broadcast in 1954 on CBS. Despite its obvious adaptability to the stage, and several presentations on the London stage, it took half a century before the play actually appeared in Broadway. The play itself revolves around a jury that has to deliberate on the guilt or innocence of a teen accused of stabbing and killing his father. However, the play is less about the “mystery,” which is never really resolved, than it is about the struggle that goes on in the jury room between these twelve men. In many ways, the actions and words of the men in the room are typical of the debates going on in society at that time, and that are still going on today, about race and assumptions of guilt. The men with their varying views and personalities can be seen as representative of segments of society then and now.

The play starts with the judge instructing the jurors who are about to retire for their deliberation. The judge makes it clear that a unanimous vote will be required to find the defendant guilty and that the death penalty will be invoked if he is. The play then moves to the jury room in which the action for the majority of the play takes place (Rose 9).

The cast of characters is primarily restricted to the twelve jurors, with the voices of the judge and the clerk and brief appearances of the guard providing the only contact with the outside world. The jurors in the play are never named, even in the script. Instead, the author Reginald Rose chooses to assign them only numbers in the script. The namelessness of the characters actually serves to make their innate characteristics even clearer to the audience as the play progresses.

Once in the jury room, the jurors take their places at the table. As demonstrated by a preliminary vote, eleven of the jurors already believe that the defendant is guilty. Several are in a hurry and eager for a quick decision so they can leave to get back to their lives (Rose 11). However, juror Number Eight is unconvinced. He bases this on the concept of “reasonable doubt.” From Number Eight’s perspective, they have not demonstrated the defendant’s guilt using this demanding criteria. At the same time, Number Eight is not suggesting that the teen did not kill his father. As Number Eight says,

I just want to talk for a while. Look—this boy’s been kicked around all his life. You know—living in a slum—his mother dead since he was nine. That’s not a very good head start. He’s a tough, angry kid. You know why slum kids get that way? Because we knock ‘em over the head once a day, every day. I think we owe him a few words (Rose 15).

The result of this split is that the jury now begins reviewing the evidence, with the others hoping to convince Number Eight he is wrong, or to browbeat him into going along anyway. At first, the evidence seems stacked against the defendant. A woman in another building claims to have seen the murder actually happen. An elderly male neighbor claims to have heard an argument, the sound of something heavy falling and the defendant fleeing from the building. The defendant purchased a knife like the one used in the killing a few days before the murder. The final piece of evidence is that the defendant claimed to be at movies he could not remember the names of.

One by one, Number Eight casts doubt on all of the pieces of evidence, such as by pointing out the fallibility of eye witness testimony when he makes clear that the female witness normally wore glasses and might not have seen what she thought she did. For the supposedly rare knife that was used, Number Eight pulls out an identical one he bought in a shop in the boy's neighborhood.

During the series of votes that follows, the jurors who were sure of guilt gradually shift their opinions. In the end, all vote not guilty. However, the most interesting feature of the play is not the "detective work" that goes on in the jury room, but the conflicting personalities with their prejudices and preconceptions.

Although some critics might see the characters in *Twelve Angry Men* as simplistic, obvious caricatures, this is not really the case. It would be more accurate to describe the jurors as representing American archetypes, such as the Southern bigot, the slick businessman, the wealthy patrician and the newly arrived immigrant. Juror number Eight, in his near perfection, seems to represent the liberal conscience in the group (Triplet C2). In this capacity, he also seems to be the voice of the playwright speaking to his other characters.

Some of these other characters, such as juror Number Three and juror Number Ten, appear to bring a great deal of anger and even psychological issues with them into the deliberations. For example, Number Three seems to resent Number Eight in a way that suggests a personal connection that does not exist. Some who have analyzed the play see this as some sort of

father figure resentment. This may be why the character seems ready to kill Number Eight at one point (Garfinkle 172).

A fascinating part of the play comes near the end when Number Ten launches into a racist tirade that eventually causes all of the other men in the room to turn their back on him and stop listening to him (Rose 36). The point here is more subtle than it appears on the surface. While Number Eight believes he can reason with virtually everyone in the room, the only response in the end to Number Ten is to ignore him. Rose (it is the author speaking here through Number Eight) is saying that, while idealized American democracy is built on discussion and compromise, some issues and some people are beyond compromise.

The final scene, in which Number Three stands alone, beautifully juxtaposes his actions and courage against that of Number Eight, who at the beginning of the play stood alone in his views. This is addressed directly in the play when Number Nine points out that, “ It takes a great deal of courage to stand alone” (Rose 60). When Number Three yields he is tacitly admitting that he lacks the courage of his convictions.

Modern critics often object strenuously to “ morals” in a play, particularly if the moral is actually about “ morals.” Modern plays are usually filled with tired, jaded characters who feel little if any commitment to, or interest in, the world around them. Twelve Angry Men, perhaps because it was written in a different age, has a message. That message is ultimately one of hope, as well as a warning. If, in the ensuing years, we had actually resolved the issues this play addresses, such as violence and racism, it might be possible

to call it antiquated. However, these same problems are as much in the headlines today as they were when the play was first performed.

Works Cited

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