

Welcome to A Level Law

12 Angry Men Summary

The play is set in a New York City Court of Law jury room in 1957. The play opens to the empty jury room, and the Judge's voice is heard, giving a set of final instructions to the jurors. We learn that this is a murder case and that, if found guilty, the mandatory sentence for the accused is the death penalty. After these instructions, the jurors enter.

The men file in and decide to take a short break before deliberating. They complain that the room is hot and without air-conditioning; even the fan doesn't work. All the jurors presume the obvious guilt of the defendant, whom we learn has been accused of killing his father. Eventually, the twelve sit down and a vote is taken. All of the jurors' vote "guilty," except for the 8th Juror, who votes "not guilty," which, due to the requirement of a unanimous jury, forces them to discuss the case.

The jurors react violently against this dissenting vote. Ultimately, they decide to go around the table, explaining why they believe the boy to be guilty, in hopes of convincing 8th Juror.

Through this discussion we learn the following facts about the case: an old man living beneath the boy and his father testified that he heard upstairs a fight, the boy shouting, "I'm gonna kill you," a body hitting the ground, and then he saw the boy running down the stairs. The boy claimed he had been at the movies while his father was murdered, but couldn't remember the name of the movies or who was in them. A woman living across the street testified that she saw the boy kill his father through the windows of a passing elevated train. The boy had, that night, had an argument with his father, which resulted in the boy's father hitting him twice. Finally, the boy has an extensive list of prior offenses, including trying to slash another teenager with a knife.

There is a strong rallying against the defendant. 3rd Juror compares him to his own son, with whom he was estranged, and 10th Juror reveals strong racist tendencies against the defendant.

When a discussion about the murder weapon, which was identified as the knife purchased by the defendant, a "one-of-a-kind" knife, begins, 8th Juror surprises the others by presenting an identical knife he had purchased in a pawn shop two blocks from where the boy lived a few nights prior, shattering the claim that the knife was so unique and identifiable.

8th Juror makes a proposition that the other eleven of them could vote, and if all of them voted "not guilty," he would not stand alone and would go along with their guilty verdict. They agree to this and vote by secret ballot. The vote is 10 "guilty" votes and 1 "not guilty" vote, and so the deliberation continues.

Immediately, the jurors turn on 5th Juror, accusing him of having changed his vote out of sympathy for the boy. 9th Juror stands and admits to having changed his vote because he'd like to hear the arguments out.

8th Juror calls into question the validity of the testimony of the old man living downstairs. 9th Juror provides the possibility that the old man was only testifying to feel important. 8th Juror concludes by saying that even if he did hear him say, "I'm gonna kill you," that very well could be taken out of context as just a figure of speech. With this 5th Juror changes his vote to "not guilty," and the vote is 9-3 in favour of guilty.

After another heated discussion which raises the question of why the boy would have returned home, after killing his father, they take another vote. This time, 5th, 8th, 9th, and 11th vote "not guilty," and the deliberation continues.

After a brief argument, 8th Juror brings into question whether or not the downstairs neighbour, an old man who had suffered a stroke and could only walk slowly, could have gotten to the door to see the boy run down the stairs in fifteen seconds, as he had testified. 8th Juror recreates the floor plan of the apartment, while 2nd Juror times him, and they conclude that he would not have been able to reach his door in fifteen seconds.

3rd Juror reacts violently to this and ends up attacking 8th Juror, shouting, "God damn it! I'll kill him! I'll kill him." 8th Juror asks, "You don't really mean you'll kill me, do you?" proving his earlier point about how people say, "I'll kill you," when they don't really mean it.

Act II resumes in the same moment we left off with in Act I. After everything calms down, the jurors resume deliberations. Another vote is taken, and the jury is now six to six. They take a break. During this break, it begins to rain outside. Also, they are able to turn the fan on, cooling off the room.

When deliberations resume, 8th Juror attempts to break apart the testimony of the arresting police officer that the defendant was unable to name the movies that he had claimed to have seen that evening. He asserts that possibly the defendant just forgot the names of the films and who was in them "under great emotional distress."

Upon further discussion about the switchblade, it becomes questionable whether or not the defendant would have made the stab wound, "down and in," which would be contrary to his knowledge and experience with how to use such a knife.

The jurors take another vote, and it is now nine to three, all but 3rd, 4th, and 10th Juror are in favour of 'not guilty.' This launches 10th Juror in a massive bigoted rant, which ends with 4th Juror scolding him back into his seat.

9th Juror calls into question the eyewitness testimony of the woman living across the street, as she wore glasses but chose not to wear them in court, calling into question whether or not she would have been wearing them in bed, when she saw the murder through her window.

Now, the vote is 11 to 1, and 3rd Juror stands alone. At first, he stands firm, saying that he will be the holdout to make this a hung jury. He launches himself into a final massive rant against the boy that descends into nonsense. 8th and 4th Jurors make a short final plea, and 3rd Juror finally concedes, saying "All right. Not guilty." The Foreman informs the Guard that they have reached a verdict, and the Jurors leave the courtroom.

12 Angry Men Glossary

Abstain - Refrain from (in this case, voting).

Acquit - To find a defendant 'not guilty' of a charge.

Bigot - Someone who is intolerant of someone else's beliefs, opinions, race, ethnicity, or other differing characteristic.

Burden of proof - The requirement to prove one's own case over another. In America, the burden of proof is on the prosecution, meaning that they must prove their case beyond a reasonable doubt.

Coroner - One who examines a dead body.

Cross-examine - To question a witness called to testify for the other side.

Defendant - Someone who is charged with a crime and brought to trial.

Deliberate - To discuss the facts of a case and come to a conclusion or guilt or innocence.

Elevated Train - An above-ground public transportation train system.

Evidence - That which is used to prove a point or case (in a court of law).

Homicide - Murder

Hung Jury - When a jury cannot come to a unanimous decision, and the case must be retried in front of a new jury.

Premeditated - Planned or thought out.

Prosecutor - A lawyer who presents evidence in court to try to prove the defendant guilty.

Reasonable doubt - The standard of evidence required to convict someone of a crime in America.

Switchblade knife - A special kind of pocket knife with a blade contained in the handle which opens automatically by a spring when a button, lever, or switch on the handle is activated.

Trial - The public forum in which a case is tried before a judge and jury.

Unanimous - All members in agreement.

Verdict - The decision of guilt or innocence issued by a jury after a trial.

12 Angry Men: A Juror's Responsibility

Points of discussion

What is the responsibility of a juror?

Concept of Responsibility Introduction

Twelve Angry Men examines the connection between **civic responsibility** and **democracy**.

Consider this quote ...

"Most people do not really want freedom, because freedom involves responsibility, and most people are frightened of responsibility." - Sigmund Freud

Do you agree or disagree with the quote and why?

Focus on the part of the quote that reads "**freedom involves responsibility**", and come up with examples of how this applies to your own life.

Consider the following point regarding the jury system ...

Responsibility can be the difference between life and death.

A Juror's Responsibility

What is your knowledge of the jury system? Have your parents or guardians served jury duty? Do you have knowledge of the jury system from movies or television shows such as *Judge Judy* or *Law and Order*.

Conclusion Thought

Jurors must come to a trial without preconceived notions as to the guilt or innocence of the defendant.

It is also their duty to base their verdict solely upon the evidence, without prejudice or sympathy.

Writing Task

Does the jury system provide ultimate justice?

According to Auld LJ: "**The jury is often described as 'the jewel in the Crown' or 'the corner-stone' of the British criminal justice system**" (Auld LJ, 2001, p.1). Lord Denning's view of the jury is of equally advantageous opinion: "**Let it not be supposed that this court is in any way opposed to trial by jury. It has been the bulwark of our liberties too long for any of us to seek to alter it.**" (Ward v James [1965] 1 All ER 563 p. 14). Juries provide a barrier against political oppression, whilst bridging the divide between the court system and the public. However, there are problems involved in using lay people in criminal fact-finding.

Write **500 words** on why either we should maintain the jury system or abolish it.

Whether you see the jury system as an advantage or a disadvantage to the criminal justice system, you must back up your arguments with examples where the jurors help or hinder the process of justice.