Twelve Angry Men

Reginald Rose
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**CHARACTER MAP**

- **Foreman**
  - Works with children from deprived backgrounds
  - Supportive

- **2nd Juror**
  - Nervous and unsure of his responsibilities
  - Polite

- **5th Juror**
  - Grew up in a deprived area; now a nurse in a hospital in one of the least affluent parts of the city
  - Antagonistic

- **4th Juror**
  - Keen to ‘stick to the facts’; uses more formal language than most jury members
  - Antagonistic

- **9th Juror**
  - Willing to discuss the case; bears no prejudice
  - Antagonistic

- **7th Juror**
  - Quick to condemn the accused, but willing to have a debate
  - Supportive

- **6th Juror**
  - Easily swayed
  - Antagonistic

- **10th Juror**
  - Aggressive and prejudiced
  - Supportive

- **11th Juror**
  - Thoughtful and precise
  - Supportive

- **8th Juror**
  - The only juror to vote ‘not guilty’ from the very beginning
  - Supportive

- **3rd Juror**
  - The final juror to change his mind
  - Antagonistic

- **12th Juror**
  - Highly impressionable
  - Antagonistic

- **Indicate a desire to debate the facts of the case**
OVERVIEW

About the author

Reginald Rose was born in New York in 1920, and served in the US Army during the early 1940s. He was married twice, and had six children. He began writing for television in the early 1950s, and later worked for all three of America’s major television networks. He also wrote for screen and stage, and continued to write, particularly for television, until the late 1990s. Rose died in 2002.

Awards

Among the many recognitions of Rose’s contribution to television and screen writing were Academy Award nominations for the film version of Twelve Angry Men – which he wrote and co-produced. He also won several Emmy Awards and, for Twelve Angry Men, an Edgar Allen Poe Award (Best Motion Picture), and a Writers Guild of America award (screen; Best Written American Drama).

Work

Rose wrote mostly for television, but he also penned several screenplays, including Crime in the Streets (1956), The Wild Geese (1978) and The Sea Wolves (1980). His stage plays include Black Monday (1962), Dear Friends (1968) and This Agony, This Triumph (1972). He had a deep interest in narratives of social justice, and he wrote about social issues he saw around him at the time. He made some controversial choices in his television writing, but at times bowed to pressure from studios to alter scripts so as not to offend or alienate certain audience sectors.

Twelve Angry Men

Although Rose wrote for numerous award-winning television series, and won several Emmy awards for his television writing, he is probably still best known for Twelve Angry Men, in all its various forms. He wrote the original teleplay version for the CBS network in 1954, expanded it into the film screenplay three years later, and eventually wrote several stage
versions. The revised stage version from the 1970s is the stage script with which we are familiar today.

Rose’s inspiration for the play *Twelve Angry Men* came from his own experience as a juror in a manslaughter trial. He was overwhelmed by the process and by the protracted deliberations of the jury, and decided the experience would make a good television drama.

**Synopsis**

A classic jury-room drama, *Twelve Angry Men* follows a jury’s decision-making process in a murder trial, tracking the gradual changing of eleven of the twelve jurors’ minds about their verdict.

*Twelve Angry Men* is set in New York in 1957, and the entire action of the play takes place on one hot afternoon and evening in the jury room of a court of law. The two single-scene acts cover exactly the period of time of the jurors’ discussion. The action is continuous with no change of location, which contributes to the play’s overwhelming sense of emotional tension and claustrophobia.

The twelve angry men of the title are the twelve men of the jury. They are identified in the script only by jury numbers (and Foreman), and there is no evidence that they even know each other’s names. This is indicative of the play’s focus on the case and its broader ethical implications, rather than personal details of individual characters’ lives. When details do emerge, they are only ever discussed with reference to their influence on the particular juror’s vote. The only other character who appears in the play is a guard who serves only a perfunctory and practical purpose in the text. Similarly, the defendant, victim, lawyers and witnesses in the trial are never named.

The play begins at the conclusion of the court’s exploration of the case, when the jury must retire to the jury room and decide on a verdict. The opening lines are the Judge’s offstage voiceover, reminding the jury of their duty and at the same time furnishing the audience with the basic details of the trial – including the important fact that the jury must reach a unanimous verdict.
Twelve Angry Men

We are introduced to the bare facts of the case (further details of the case emerge gradually), as the jury agree to a preliminary and informal vote. Eleven of the twelve jurors are convinced that the defendant, a young boy from an underprivileged socio-economic background, is guilty of fatally stabbing his father.

In this first vote, 8th Juror stands alone. He maintains that he is uncertain and therefore must vote ‘not guilty’. This decision introduces an important legal concept to be examined over the course of the play: for the jury to convict the accused, they must be confident, beyond reasonable doubt, that the defendant is guilty. While 8th Juror does not yet suggest that the defendant is innocent, he feels that there is reasonable doubt about whether the boy really committed the crime, and is therefore compelled to vote ‘not guilty’.

As the play progresses, jurors regularly call for informal votes (both secret and public) to see where opinion stands. With each vote, jurors become less certain, swayed by arguments and questions presented first by 8th Juror and later by others too. By the end of the first act, after three votes, two jurors have changed their minds so that the vote stands at 9:3, still in favour of convicting the defendant. 8th Juror is gently persuasive in the face of anger, frustration, criticism and challenge from other jurors – particularly 3rd and 10th. The tension and conflict increase as jurors begin to question their own beliefs and change their votes.

Details of the trial emerge in the course of the deliberations, helping us understand the jurors’ ‘guilty’ votes. But as witnesses and witness statements are questioned, the audience, like the jurors, finds itself increasingly open to doubt. For example, in the first act 8th Juror produces a switch-knife identical to the one presented as evidence in court. The prosecutors had argued convincingly for the uniqueness of this particular weapon, but 8th Juror’s ability to produce an identical weapon erodes the others’ confidence that the evidence proves the defendant’s guilt beyond reasonable doubt.

To change their votes to ‘not guilty’, 8th Juror must only introduce reasonable doubt into the other jurors’ deliberations; he need not demonstrate the defendant’s innocence. This makes his task easier, and
he proceeds to provoke doubt amongst his fellow jurors, slowly and patiently questioning a series of arguments, statements and pieces of evidence from the trial. Several other jurors also begin to question these previously accepted ‘facts’ until, near the end of the second act, eight jurors have changed their vote and now only three (3rd, 4th, and 10th) remain convinced of the defendant’s guilt.

At the height of the conflict, 10th, 4th and finally 3rd jurors change their minds. The denouement of the play is swift and tidy as the jurors reach a unanimous verdict of ‘not guilty’, before making their exit to deliver their verdict to the court.

Character summaries

Guard: A minor character; the guard enters several times to deliver exhibits from the case at the jury’s request.

Foreman: The Foreman of the jury, or principal juror, is in charge of running the proceedings in the jury-room. Although he is ultimately responsible for delivering the verdict, he has no more power than the others. Nor does he assert his position or appear more confident than anyone else; he simply fulfils his role of coordinating the group. He is the seventh juror to change his vote to ‘not guilty’. We learn that the Foreman is a football coach at a high school in Queens.

2nd Juror: A first-time juror, he is slightly nervous and anxious about the proceedings and about his responsibilities. He is the equal-fourth juror (along with 6th) to change his vote.

3rd Juror: 3rd Juror is married and has a twenty-year-old son with whom he has a troubled relationship. He runs a messenger service. Confident and sometimes aggressive, 3rd Juror describes himself (perhaps sarcastically, but seemingly accurately) as ‘the competitive type’ (p.54). He has been a juror before and thinks this case is clear-cut. He is resistant to 8th Juror’s arguments and is the final juror to change his vote.

4th Juror: The ninth (second-last) juror to change his vote. We learn that 4th Juror is a broker.

5th Juror: A fan of the Milwaukee baseball team, 5th Juror grew up in a
slum environment. He works as a nurse in Harlem Hospital (a hospital in a poor area). He is the second juror to change his vote.

6th Juror: A house painter, he is the equal-fourth juror (along with 2nd) to change his vote.

7th Juror: A fan of the Yankees baseball team, he is the fifth juror to change his vote.

8th Juror: The only juror to vote ‘not guilty’ at the first vote. An architect with two children, 8th Juror is generally calm, reasoned and rational. He stands by his position and eventually persuades all the other jurors to vote ‘not guilty’.

9th Juror: An older man and the first juror to change his vote.

10th Juror: 10th Juror runs garages for a living. Confident and assertive, he is the eighth juror to change his vote.

11th Juror: A watch-maker of German background, he is the third juror to change his vote.

12th Juror: 12th Juror works for an advertising agency and this is probably not his first experience on a jury. He is the sixth juror to change his vote. He changes his vote twice more: back to ‘guilty’ (p.54), and finally to ‘not guilty’ (p.57) near the conclusion of the play. He is the only juror to change his vote more than once.

Offstage characters regularly discussed

The defendant: A sixteen-year-old boy accused of fatally stabbing his father. He comes from an underprivileged socio-economic background and has a history of abuse by his father. He has a prior criminal record, including theft and violence, and has appeared in a Children’s Court and served time in a Reform School. The defendant may be a member of a racial minority but this is only ever hinted at.

The victim: The defendant’s (deceased) father. He had a history of gambling, violence, unstable employment and had been in prison. He is described as not ‘exactly a model citizen’ (p.23).

In the court room: The jury regularly discuss characters who were present in the court room, including:
• the prosecuting attorney for the case
• the defence counsel for the case
• the first witness (as referred to in the jury room): an old man living in the apartment below the defendant and victim
• the second witness: a woman living across the street; she could see from her window into the defendant/victim’s apartment
• further witnesses: neighbours from across the hall.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Social and historical context

Twelve Angry Men paints a portrait of a small portion of American society in the mid-1950s. Worldwide, economies had recovered from the Great Depression of the late 1920s and 1930s, and America had emerged victorious and strong from the second World War. The challenges facing American society were no longer to do with basic survival, but instead about negotiating America’s place in a global political environment. America was engaged in an ongoing conflict with the Soviet Union (the Cold War) which continued for many decades. This was a struggle for political and economic dominance between two very powerful nations, and was not always military, but often social, political and economic. At the same time, the nation was entering into an internal struggle, the Civil Rights Movement, which was concerned with ending racial discrimination and promoting freedom, respect and equality.

Rose’s play presents a situation of domestic conflict which echoes this backdrop of social and political conflict in 1950s America. In Twelve Angry Men, not only are there clashes of individual personality and belief, but there are glimpses of the class conflicts and philosophical challenges facing working-class Americans. An exploration of the legal system, Rose’s play does not so much critique as attempt to humanise the American constitutional judicial process for audiences.