

HUMBLE BOY

By Charlotte Jones

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A STUDY GUIDE

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THE PLAYWRIGHT. With an honors degree in English Literature from Oxford University and a diploma in acting from the Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art, Charlotte Jones is that rare hybrid among British theater artists: someone who combines a classical university background with hands-on training in performance. The result can be seen in the skill with which she merges wide-ranging literary references in her work with a solid understanding of the requirements for a successful show: an engaging plot, vivid characters, and a sure sense of comic timing.

In *Humble Boy*, the elaborate parallels to *Hamlet* are hard to miss. In Jones's play, an overweight young scholar, Felix Humble, returns from the university to attend his father's funeral, only to find out that his mother has taken up with another man. This, of course, is exactly the situation of Shakespeare's Hamlet, who, "fat and scant of breath," must deal with similarly depressing problems. But what might be just a labored parody of a classic play becomes instead, in Jones's hands, a theatrical tour-de-force, filled with witty repartee, passionate confrontations, and otherworldly encounters—just like the original. We can probably trace this success to the fact that, like Shakespeare, Ms. Jones began her career in theater as an actor, learning from first-hand experience what keeps a scene alive on stage.

Only a few years before the premiere of *Humble Boy* in 2001, Charlotte Jones was, according to *The Guardian*, July 18, 2001, "a struggling actress frustrated by the lack of roles she was asked to play." As a result, she decided to step to the other side of the curtain, and take up playwriting, a craft that would allow her to meld her literary education with her experience on

stage. As she told *The Guardian*, “when I was acting - that's how I learned how to write. For some writers, going into a rehearsal room is a revelation, but not for me.” Of course, Ms Jones knew “how to write” when she was earning honors in literature at Oxford. What she really means is that being an actress taught her how to adapt that literary background to the demands of the medium of theater.

Now in her early 40s, Charlotte Jones has gone on to write several more successful plays, including *The Dark* (2004), *The Lightning Play* (2006), and, in collaboration with Andrew Lloyd Webber, a musical version of Wilkie Collins’s gothic classic, *The Woman in White* (2004).

THE SETTING. *Humble Boy* takes place in the present day in the garden of the Humble family’s middle-class home in rural England. It was in this garden, shortly before the action begins, that Felix Humble’s father, James, a passionate naturalist and bee-keeper, died suddenly, apparently from a heart attack. His son Felix has come home from Cambridge University to attend his father’s funeral, a return that sets the plot in motion.

During the course of the action, as allusions to *Hamlet* multiply, we will come to realize that this garden setting itself refers to Shakespeare’s play: Hamlet’s father also died in his garden—or, more precisely, in his orchard, allegedly bitten by a venomous snake, but in reality poisoned by his younger brother. There is no hint of murder in *Humble Boy*, but we do discover late in the play that the ostensible circumstances of James’s death are quite different from what actually happened, just as they were with Hamlet’s father.

The setting is also notable for what’s not there: James’s bee-hives. His wife, Flora, has had them removed immediately after her husband’s death, and Felix feels their absence almost as keenly as he does the loss of his father, whose identity was so closely entwined with his beloved bees.

THE PLOT. The play is divided into two acts, the first comprising four scenes, the second consisting of a single long scene. This reflects the structure of the action, which unfolds as a number of short incidents leading up to an extended climax and resolution.

The first scene, set in early June, takes place in the Humbles’ country garden, as do all the scenes in the play. Felix Humble enters, declaring, in the first line of the play, that, “The b-b-b-bees have gone.” The stammering Felix then mulls over the removal of the hives by a group of bee-keepers, costumed—in Felix’s view—like astronauts. Felix asks Mercy, a “timid, mousy” family friend, if she knows what the collective noun for such a group might be. As he is playing his word games his mother, Flora, enters in a state of “incandescent . . . rage” because Felix has “absconded” from his father’s funeral service, where he was to have delivered the eulogy. Instead, the tribute was given by a “tedious entomologist” who compared her “husband’s career to the life cycle of an aphid.”

We learn that Felix, grown “fat and unkempt,” has a history of nervous ailments, that he is taking pills to help him sleep, that he in his turn bears a grievance against his mother for

summarily disposing of the bees, for purging the house of his father's belongings without consulting him, and for failing to wear black as a widow should on the day of her husband's funeral. But, then, Felix himself is dressed in white, an expression of his odd self-distancing from the reality of his father's death.

As Flora leaves to join the post-funeral reception in the house, Felix is joined by Jim, "the gardener," who engages him in conversation about the exceptionally hot, dry weather, the naming of roses, and bees—of which, we learn there are still some left in the garden. Not the honey bees from the vanished hives, but a nest of everyday bumble bees, whose existence they agree to keep secret from the bee-loathing Flora. Felix then leaves to join his mother at the reception, planning no doubt to partake of "the funeral baked meats" on offer.

The second scene begins two weeks later, on the day of the summer solstice, June 21. As Jim the gardener exits quietly, George Pye enters, a loud, "beefy" man, carrying a jug of Pimms (a mixture of gin and various fruit flavorings), and listening to Glen Miller on a Walkman. We learn that he and Flora are romantically involved, and that George regards Felix with contempt. He plies Flora with compliments about her appearance in general and her nose-job in particular, and presses her to agree to marry him, producing a ring to emphasize his point. Flora, pleased to be flattered, nonetheless hesitates to accept George's proposal, informing him, confusingly, that her agreement to throw a party at the end of summer celebrating their engagement "is not a yes."

Felix arrives oddly dressed, a tank-top he acquired at Mercy's thrift shop pulled over his cricket whites. The eccentricities we encountered in the first scene seem to be growing, as his mother notices when she advises Felix to "calm" himself. But he can hardly refrain from mocking his mother's suitor, making fun of George's motor-coach company, and of his philistine confusion of astrology with astrophysics—Felix's academic specialty. The hostility between the two mounts, each making clear his disdain for the other, until Flora asks her son "to stop this now." As George is making his exit, he turns on Felix with a vehement admonition:

I don't give a s**it if you p**s your life away but you keep away from my daughter.
You've f***ed her life up once already and you're not doing it again.

So Felix has a troubled past history with George's daughter, a background that helps us to understand the bad blood between them. With George gone, Flora begins to listen to his Walkman, while Felix describes a lurid suicidal fantasy to her—which she, wearing headphones, cannot hear. Meanwhile, Felix—and we with him—have begun to hear a vaguely threatening humming sound, faint at first, but growing louder as the scene nears its end. Flora exits, and as the "humming increases to a terrible pitch" Felix wraps the garden hose around his neck, as if he were preparing to hang himself.

The third scene moves us forward to mid-July. Felix, however, remains in place, the hose coiled around his neck. Jim the gardener enters and sees this odd sight. Embarrassed, Felix tries to

explain away the hose as a sort of intellectual device, a metaphor for superstring theory, which is a central element in his astrophysical research.

The conversation moves from cosmic esoterica to a discussion of the weather, the habits of bumble bees, and Felix's neurotic inability to make decisions about the next steps he should take in life. Mercy enters, and Felix begins taunting her for "orbiting" around his mother. When Mercy begs him to stop, he turns his thoughts back to astrophysics, attempting to describe to her the intricacies of string theory and his quest for an "elegant supersymmetry" which buzzes in his brain like the "music of the spheres"—a phenomenon whose discovery would finally allow him "to rest." Mercy assures him that he will have his breakthrough moment, but Felix worries that he "will go through life just missing it." Newton's breakthrough moment, he reminds us, came when he saw an apple fall from a tree. But, unlike Newton, Felix has never seen an apple actually falling—an omen, perhaps, that he will never meet with his moment of ultimate insight.

Flora enters, and she and Felix bicker about her influence on his life, she asserting that he blames her irrationally for his shortcomings. She reminds him of the day she and his father dropped him off at boarding school, when she kept waving at him as the car drove away to reassure him that she "wouldn't go away." She then presents him with a gift, an earthenware honey pot containing his father's ashes which she expects him to scatter. Felix is appalled, and declares that he does not have his mother's facility "for letting go." This unleashes a bitter rebuke from Flora, who accuses him of being "a selfish boy" who has never talked about his father because, "you think that you are better than him. . . . He was only a teacher after all. . . . What did he ever achieve, compared to you?"

When he refuses to scatter the ashes, she tries to grab them and do the job herself. But in the middle of their struggle, George Pye signals his presence by sounding his car horn offstage, and Flora prepares to join him for a night out. Felix begs her not to leave, but she dismisses his pleas, informing him of her intention to throw a lunch party later in the summer—presumably to announce her engagement to George. Left alone on stage, Felix begins to hear again the strange humming from the previous scene. He considers the ashes and "*cradles the pot to him,*" at which point the humming stops. He exits, and moments later an apple falls from a tree in the garden.

Scene Four begins with that falling fruit. Immediately afterwards, Rosie Pye, George's daughter, enters, picks up the apple, and takes a "huge bite out of it," reminding us fleetingly of Eve in the first garden. Felix then arrives, still toting his father's ashes, and is startled by Rosie's presence. She slaps him across the face at once, telling him that she has "been saving that up for a long time. . . . We can be friends again now." It's been more than seven years since these former lovers have seen one another, and in that time Rosie's life has changed dramatically. She has borne a daughter, named Felicity—after Felix, the child's absent father—and has put herself through nurse's training. Felix's life, by contrast, has stalled at a place where thoughts of failure and suicide haunt him. After they exchange information about their respective situations, Rosie proposes a session of lovemaking—minus the love—as a sort of therapeutic

reconciliation. Felix at first rejects the idea, but slowly finds himself drawn into the scheme, becoming “awkwardly passionate,” only to be interrupted by the return of George and Flora from their night out.

As Felix and Rosie hide, George, “fairly drunk,” presses his amorous attentions on Flora, who seems uninterested. When Flora exits, George proceeds to urinate on the desiccated garden, sprinkling the dead man’s ashes in the process. After he in his turn exits, Rosie and Felix emerge from their hiding place. Felix objects to his mother’s carrying on with George, declaring she is being taken advantage of in her grief. At which point Rosie informs him that her father and his mother have been at it for years, “five or six at least.” Felix is aghast at this news, but Rosie insists that it’s none of his business, and that their parents are “old enough to know their own minds.

She then tells him about her—and their—daughter, seven-year-old Felicity, insisting that Felix is the father, a fact he has not previously confronted. Flora, it turns out, has led her son to believe that the child was fathered by one of the many men Rosie took up with in the wake of her failed love affair with Felix. But Rosie will not let him believe this comforting deception, and exits having dropped this stunning bit of information in his lap. As he stands alone in the garden, Felix begins to hear the humming again. Jim, the gardener, enters, equipped for slug-hunting, to which Felix responds by pointing to himself as a specimen of that pest. But Jim’s presence seems to calm Felix, and as he shines his flashlight around the garden, the humming stops, and the first act comes to an end.

As the second act begins it is late summer, and preparations for the long-planned lunch party—presumably to announce the wedding plans of George and flora—are afoot. Mercy fusses with the tureen of gazpacho soup she has made, adjusting the seasoning. She notices the pot of ashes on the table, and thinking she has found the pepper, sprinkles them liberally into the soup.

George participates eagerly in the arrangements, joshing with Mercy, and seeing to the wine. Flora declares her anxiety about the event, clearly expecting Felix to do something to disrupt the proceedings. Rosie arrives, and she and Flora confront one another for the first time since the breakup between her and Felix. Clearly Rosie resents Flora’s having led Felix to believe that some other man is the father of Felicity, but the rising tension between them is disrupted when Felix arrives, dressed in one of his father’s old suits, which is ludicrously too small for him.

The tone of the gathering steadily deteriorates, growing ever more rancorous and hostile. Flora complains that her late husband brought her from London to rural England “to rot my life away,” and that bearing Felix, “robbed me of my figure.” Felix stirs the conversational pot by asserting that his mother has lost her sense of smell in consequence of her husband’s death. George rejects this idea, and tells Felix to jump off a cliff, a suggestion that prompts Felix to begin a discussion about the best method of committing suicide. Suggestions include inhaling carbon monoxide, swallowing pills, putting one’s head in a gas oven, and jumping into a black

hole, the latter being Felix's choice. He believes this would in effect recycle his physical remains into another universe, thereby bestowing immortality on him.

Felix next berates his mother for her years of infidelity to his father, only to have Flora inform him that her husband knew about and accepted the situation. "You are desperate to turn this into a tragedy . . . but you will not be able to do so," she declares dismissively. And she dispels another misapprehension about her husband: he did not die in his garden of a heart attack, but of an extreme allergic reaction to a bee sting. His own beloved insects killed him, an embarrassing end for an entomologist.

Bickering then erupts about the paternity of Rosie's daughter. Flora doesn't want to believe her son is the father because she doesn't want to be a grandmother. George doesn't want Felix to have sired his granddaughter. And Felix wants some assurance that Rosie has been telling him the truth about Felicia's conception. When Felix rises as if to depart from the luncheon, his mother commands him to remain, invoking her maternal authority. Felix declares that null and void because she doesn't love him, the neurotic's classic lament. Mercy begins to weep, which provokes Flora to attack her as a leech on her life.

As the social wounds bleed, Felix demands that all present end the carnage and eat their soup. Mercy, the cook, then pronounces a tearful and lugubrious blessing, following which everyone begins to consume and praise the gazpacho—almost a Eucharistic moment, considering that James is one of the ingredients. But when Flora directs that the pot of her husband's ashes be removed from the table, Mercy realizes that she has seasoned the soup with the dead man's remains, and hastily declares the gazpacho to be "contaminated," though she doesn't say by what, and confiscates everyone's bowl.

Following this moment of confusion, Rosie, George, and Felix find themselves alone together on stage. George recalls his father's experiences as a World War II flyer who developed the uncanny ability to foresee the deaths of his fellow airmen, a power that eventually got him dismissed from the RAF for "lack of moral fibre."

Felix then reminisces about his father's views on beehives, which he viewed as "the blueprint for a Utopia in which the sexual impulse would cease to exist." But Felix takes issue with this assessment, seeing in these insect colonies "a world in which men are totally useless. The women do all the work and the men . . . die." Rosie then invites Felix to disprove the uselessness of men by becoming a meaningful father to his daughter. Doubting, as ever, his own capacities, Felix rejects the offer, but after Rosie exits, we see him rehearsing a lesson in astronomy with little Felicity, a suggestion that he might face up to his responsibilities after all.

When Flora returns, Felix informs her that he is finally terminating his summer-long visit, and adds a surprising bit of news about his father: a letter has arrived from the Royal Entomological Society crediting the dead man with the discovery of a new species of bumblebee, which he has chivalrously named after Flora, his wife. So James Humble made his mark after all on the world of science—a small and belated mark, to be sure, but an achievement nonetheless.

George returns to the scene, only to be told by Flora that she won't marry him after all because she has become reconciled to her unfulfilled life. "I have tried my hardest to break out but I cannot. . . . I am in a state of terminal disappointment." George is at first disappointed, then enraged at this development, feeling that Flora is acting out of snobbery, and convinced that Felix has somehow talked his mother out of the marriage.

In his semi-drunken fury, he sneeringly compares Felix to Icarus, the promising young genius who flew into the sun on wax wings and destroyed himself—seemingly a warning of dire possibilities in store for the astrophysicist. Then, as he is about to take his leave, George picks up a hoe from the garden and charges at Felix with it. Felix defends himself with a variety of other garden tools, the scene erupting into a ludicrous version of the sword-fighting finale of *Hamlet*. Just as George is about to strike his victorious blow, however, he is attacked by a vagrant bee, and driven from the scene.

At the same moment Jim the gardener arrives, wittily describing George's departure with an allusion to another play by Shakespeare: "Exit, pursued by a bee." The original line, "Exit, pursued by a bear," is from *The Winter's Tale*, and is perhaps the most famous stage direction in Shakespeare's work. When Flora hears Jim's voice, she reacts "strangely." And for the first time we realize that none of the characters except Felix has previously responded to Jim's presence. "Please tell me you can hear him," Felix begs, and when Flora confirms that she can both see and hear the gardener, we understand that this is actually the ghost of the dead James Humble, who, like Hamlet's deceased father, has been visiting his son.

Despite her earlier bitterness about the diminished life she has led as a result of marrying James, Flora greets her husband's ghost with amazement and love. As Felix makes a tactful exit, his parents re-enact their initial meeting, a chance encounter on a London street that resulted in love at first sight. They begin to hear music. Flora apologizes for her shortcomings as a wife, and James recites the names of all the flowers he has planted for her in his garden. Flora's sense of smell returns as she takes in the scent of the roses to which James leads. At this moment he exits, and the music turns to the humming sound that has haunted Felix throughout the play. Felix returns, and tells his mother that he has always longed for the possibility "of another life. . . . The land of milk and honey"—a yearning that first developed on the night that he and his father watched the first moon-landing together on television. "He held my hand and he gave me the courage to defy physics and fly. . . ." Hence, his career in astrophysics, and hence his disappointment in himself for remaining earthbound.

At this instant of insight Felix finally scatters his father's ashes. He and his mother stand in silence, sharing the experience. Finally she asks him if he is going to leave now, and return to Cambridge. He answers equivocally—"In a little while"—and she presses him to stay the night. With matters still unresolved, Flora exits, leaving Felix alone on stage. "He smiles," and we hear the sound of a "bee humming somewhere in the distance." With this reminder of his father buzzing in his head, he pronounces his final line: "Let be"—exactly the words Hamlet speaks the moment before he begins his fatal fencing match.

THE CHARACTERS. As we have seen, the basic situation in *Humble Boy* resembles that of *Hamlet*: a young man returns from university to attend his father's funeral only to learn that his mother is involved with another man with whom she has long been cheating on her husband; meanwhile the young man encounters his father's ghost. As the plot goes, so go the characters, several of whom are modeled on Shakespeare's originals.

FELIX HUMBLE is this play's Hamlet. Like the original, he is about thirty, "fat and scant of breath," troubled by his father's death, contemptuous of his mother's new mate, paralyzed by indecision, wounded by a disastrous love affair, loquacious, witty, insulting, intellectually sophisticated, socially disruptive, and, on occasion, an odd dresser. And also like Hamlet, he bears an unsuitable name. "Hamlet" means something like "dullard" or "idiot," wildly inappropriate designations for drama's most relentless cogitator. And Felix means "happy"—which he most certainly isn't.

Unlike Hamlet, who is incomparably articulate, Felix is a stutterer, particularly troubled by pronouncing the letter "b." Since his father was a bee-keeper, we can see in this speech defect an involuntary recoil from the memory of the man whose funeral he deserted. We might also note that Hamlet bore his father's name, and passionately admired his deceased parent. By contrast, Felix Humble—conspicuously not named after James—has a hard time finding glowing memories about his dead dad.

The elder Hamlet was a famous warrior who, if his son is to be trusted, boasted "Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself, / An eye like Mars to threaten and command. . . / a form indeed / Where every god did seem to set his seal / To give the world assurance of a man (III, iv, 57-63)." Hamlet repeatedly praises his father, both in soliloquies and in conversation with other characters. Not Felix. When called on to deliver the eulogy—the speech of praise—for James, he absconds, leaving the man un-memorialized by his son. In fact, Felix "can't remember . . . feeling like he was my father." He discovers that his father's "true nature is . . . difficult to pin down. Decent. Upright. Upstanding. . . Respectable. But not b-brave. . . No, brave doesn't come into it." Whereas Hamlet looks back in awe at his parent, Felix finds only pallid memories of James.

One memory does glow. As he tells Rosie, Felix and his father watched the Apollo moon landings together. As the countdown proceeded, James took his son's hand and "it's like a charge passes from him to me, like he super-adrenalates me." But Felix doesn't know what to do with this memory at this point in the play. It's only a brief flash of light in a past filled mostly with shadows where his father should be.

His mother goes so far as to accuse him of looking down on his father: "I know why you couldn't speak about your father. Because you think that you are better than him. . . He was only a teacher. . . Oh, and he dabbled in bees. . . a pathetically small life. What did he ever achieve compared to you."

Though Felix and Hamlet have differing views of their dead fathers, both are vexed with their living mothers. Gertrude elicits a rant from her son which includes, among other sexual insults, the charge that she and her new husband “live / In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, / Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty (III, iv, 91-94).”

Felix never goes that far with Flora, but he does accuse her of not loving him, and he is unsparing in his mockery of her would-be new husband, George Pye, demanding to know what she sees in him. When she tries to throw a genteel luncheon party to celebrate her engagement, Felix shows up, like a revenant, dressed in one of his father’s absurdly ill-fitting old suits, attempting to disrupt the proceedings—as if imitating Banquo’s ghost at Macbeth’s feast.

His anger at his mother is fueled by her disloyalty to his father, a lifelong betrayal that goes far beyond her adulterous affair with George Pye. In her disdain for the country life that James has foisted on her, in her bored indifference to his scientific enthusiasms, she has in effect declared a divorce between them that has lasted nearly the entire length of their marriage. Moreover, Felix blames his alienation from his father on Flora. Family life for him “was always about her. She b-burnt more br-brightly. Eclipsed him. . . . It’s like my mother was the big force. . . . And my father was the little force, fizzing away quietly on a microscopic level.” The word “eclipsed” is especially significant here, denoting an actual blotting out of one object by another.

Felix has also lost touch with his profession, finding himself intellectually stalled, and fearing that the moment of scientific revelation will pass him by. He longs, like Newton, to experience the jolt of insight represented by the proverbial falling apple, but he despairs of its ever happening to him.

He is also disconnected from his own child, the daughter he fathered more than seven years earlier. He dreads facing the responsibilities of parenthood, even as he reckons with parents of his own who seem distant and shadowy. If his own father is merely an emotional smudge from his past—fully present only in the memory of a single night watching moonwalkers on television—then what chance has he of being more than a nullity to his daughter?

Lost connections define Felix’s life as he returns home for his father’s funeral, and with these losses come thoughts of suicide, the breaking of all attachments. Hamlet’s most famous utterance—“To be, or not to be”—is about choosing life or death. But Hamlet doesn’t kill himself, and neither does Felix. Instead, Felix moves through the play clutching an old honey-pot filled with his father’s ashes—as if desperate to find some bond with the man who gave him life—and some reason to cling to that gift. The buzzing he hears in his head—like the sound of bees, or the vibration of cosmic strings—is a reminder both of his dead father and of his stalled attempt to figure out the structure of the universe.

Throughout the play, like Hamlet, he communicates with his father’s ghost. But whereas Hamlet’s father brought him life-shattering revelations about murder, adultery, and the torments of Purgatory, James talks amiably about the weather, the garden, and bees—subjects

requiring no ghost come from the grave to chat about. In fact, Jim the gardener's visits are so mundane that it's not until the last moments of the play that we realize that he is the shade of the late James Humble. But he does have one crucial exchange with his existentially-baffled son:

Felix I just can't seem to—I can't seem to ask the right questions . . . I need to make a decision about what I should do next.

Jim You want to stop asking all the questions.

Felix But it's so hard—with my work, I must question everything. I must—

Jim Felix, you know, bumblebees shouldn't be able to fly. Aerodynamically they're too big, their wings are set up all wrong. They don't obey the laws of physics. But they fly anyway.

This moment points to the end of the play, when Felix, having seen his parents' spectral reconciliation, and having braced himself for the ordeal of meeting his daughter, finally begins to experience the connections that have been eluding him. But these connections, like his father's ghost, or like Rosie Pye, come to him unbidden. Making decisions and asking questions have gotten him nowhere. It is the ghost who proposes an alternative course of action, or rather inaction—a wise passivity. Stop asking questions, he counsels. Instead be like the bee: just let your existence happen, advice Felix seems to embrace as he speaks his last line: "Let be."

To "let be" is to put aside plans and self-tormenting doubt and to embrace life in its unpredictability. In *Hamlet*, every cunning plan designed by every crafty character ends in disaster. Hamlet's play-within-the play—"The Mousetrap"—catches the conscience of the king, but also alerts Claudius to the fact that his nephew knows about his crime, and so will have to be killed. The trap catches the trapper. Hamlet finally wearies of these self-defeating schemes and questions. "To be, or not to be" becomes "Let be." He abandons the endless interrogation of life and embraces fate—a force that leads him to the poisoned tip of Laertes' sword.

Felix, beginning to live up to his name, will certainly not experience anything so dire. He forswears suicide, and scatters his father's ashes, releasing his spirit to "[a] better place. . . The land of milk and honey." Felix can let go of the ashes because he is beginning to find a life worth clinging to. Once again he remembers the night of the moon landing, this time recalling that his father "made me want to fly. . . [H]e gave me the courage to defy physics and fly anyway." Hamlet's father swore him to a mission that led to his death. Felix's father returns from death to remind his son that he can fly. Two different fathers, two different plays—one a tragedy, one not. *Humble Boy* turns out to be the comic version of *Hamlet*. Instead of walking into an assassination, the brilliant and troubled young man at the end of this play stands smiling in his father's garden, facing a future filled with happy possibilities.

If Felix is the Hamlet of the piece, then **FLORA** is Gertrude, though she bears far less resemblance to the original than her son does to the melancholy Dane. T.S. Eliot calls Hamlet's

mother “negative and insignificant,” a kind of cipher whose behavior seems incommensurate with the intensity of wrath it causes in her son. She’s consistently loving towards Hamlet, even after his brutal tongue-lashing, and she never says a word—good or bad—about her late husband, seeming quite clueless about the fact that he was murdered by his brother.

Flora, on the other hand, begins the play “incandescent with rage” at her son and makes frequent barbed comments about her deceased spouse. A sample: “I married your father and he brought me here to Moreton-in-the-mud to rot my life away.” She is energized by resentment against her husband for blighting her life, and against her son for ruining her figure and disappointing her hopes. She also knows that her husband was killed by one of the bees he loved and nurtured—not quite fratricide, but a betrayal nonetheless.

Is her name appropriate? “Flora” means “flower,” that which attracts bees. She was certainly powerfully attractive to her bee-keeping husband, who fell in love with her at first sight. That ardor cooled, however, and she now believes that she has been “doubly unlucky” in her life: “To marry a biologist and give birth to a physicist.” So she is the flower that resents the bee. And she quite literally dislikes the insects themselves, removing their hives from the garden at the first possible opportunity following James’s death.

She is also a flower with no sense of smell, although she has been paying elaborate attention to her nose, which she has had remodeled in a fit of vanity. Could it be that losing one of her senses is the price she has paid for this narcissism?

Like Gertrude, she has been conducting an adulterous affair, though not with her husband’s brother. On the other hand George is a kind of father-in-law *manqué* to Felix—his daughter’s grandfather, after all— which does connect him to James in a semi-familial relationship. So there is a distant echo of the incestuous entanglements of *Hamlet*. What attracts Flora to George is evidently his vast difference from her quiet, studious, entomological husband. George is a retired business man—not quite a captain of industry, but certainly the commandant of his own bus company.

Their adulterous affair is supposed to mature into marriage—at least George supposes it will. But in the end George discovers that he just another bee being told to buzz off by the flower that attracts him. Instead, Flora decides that she must put an end to desire.

To want things has always been my gravest error. I am going to stifle it. . . . When I was little I always thought that I was marked out, special, that I was on the verge of something momentous happening. I used to tingle with anticipation.

But those expectations have vanished, and now she finds herself, “in a state of terminal disappointment,” a condition not to be alleviated by marrying George. Like her son, she has lost her way, and her connections to the other people in her life are breaking. She is hostile toward Rosie and calls her friend Mercy a leech; her husband is dead, she has rejected her suitor, and her son believes that she doesn’t love him.

But just at the moment when George exits, leaving her to her disappointed existence, the ghost arrives. In *Hamlet* Gertrude doesn't see her husband's ghost, despite its presence in her bedroom. But in this play, Flora and her dead husband re-enact their ecstatic first meeting, and then recite a litany of floral names, she in English, James in Latin. The religious atmosphere mounts as James, like a visiting saint, performs a cure on his stricken wife, restoring her sense of smell so that Flora can experience flowers once again—can resume being herself. But it's only when she has stopped wanting things that the miracle occurs. Like Felix, by deciding to “let be” she finds fulfillment.

Like Claudius, **GEORGE PYE** is a take-charge character with a can-do attitude.

The first time we meet Hamlet's uncle, he is strenuously engaged in being king—slapping down invaders, dispensing patronage, and ordering his grieving nephew to man-up and stop moping. Likewise, George Pye arrives on stage in a flurry of energy, “jiggling along” to the music on his walk-man, “conducting the plants of the garden, as if he were Glen Miller. . . . dancing all the while.” But he also pricks his finger on a thorn as he tries to pick a rose—as if nature were chastising him for bringing the mechanical buzzing of the Walk-man into the garden that has been deprived of the music of the bees.

He is fiercely determined to move his relationship with Flora out of the shadows of adultery and into the uplands of marriage: “I've been waiting in the wings for a long time now. . . . And it doesn't come naturally to me. I'm not a back-seat driver. . . . We can wait a few months, but let's not piss about, the sooner the better. . . .”

George is an entrepreneur, the retired owner of a private bus company whose motto is, “Travel Pye if you want to fly.” Naturally, Felix despises him, mocking his slogan as misleading, since on his one trip on a coach owned by George, “[i]t was all curiously earthbound.” The promise of flight, Felix sneers, was sheer “Pye in the sky.”

But the contempt between these two is mutual. George first refers to his future step-son as a “little s**t,” and then—perhaps intentionally—identifies his line of work as “astrology” rather than astrophysics, a misunderstanding he persists in despite Felix's correcting him.

For George, all energy and drive (as befits the owner of a coach company), the spiritually paralyzed Felix is a constant irritant, an annoyance he must endure out of deference to Flora, much as Claudius must put up with the jaspery of the “mad” Hamlet. What George cannot overlook, however, is Felix's treatment of his daughter, Rosie, abandoned by Felix after the breakup of their difficult romance. So he is in the tricky position of hating the son while loving the mother, difficult emotions to balance. And it's especially hard to achieve a state of equilibrium when one is constantly in motion, as George is.

When Flora rejects him at the play's end, he is finally free to indulge his hatred of Felix fully. First he calls him a “fat lazy bumbling bastard” who has ruined everyone's life. Then he blasts

him with a retelling of the story of Icarus who, like Felix, was an intellectual high-flier on wings of wax which melted when he got too close to the sun. Icarus plunged to his death, and George urges Felix to pursue a similar course, wishing for him to die. But a mere curse isn't enough to satisfy George's rage against Felix. He moves to physical assault, grabbing a hoe and attempting to beat Felix with it. The only thing that stops him is the arrival of an angry bee, which drives him from the scene. Clearly the spirit of James has intervened to save his son from harm. But not before George/Claudius reveals his murderous intentions.

ROSIE PYE fills Ophelia's spot in the *Hamlet* template, and she is arguably the least like her Shakespearean avatar. After Hamlet abandons her and kills her father, Ophelia goes mad, falls off a tree into a brook, and drowns. Rosie, by contrast, deals with the breakup of her affair with Felix by taking up with a parade of other men—perhaps showing a touch of madness there—but then embracing a sane new life as mother, nurse, and soon-to-be midwife. Of course, Rosie's traumas don't quite match up to Ophelia's. Instead, they're the everyday stuff of disappointed romance:

I fell in love with you, you weren't as in love with me, you tried to be . . . you ran
Away . . . I didn't wash my hair for five months, blah, blah, blah, you failed to write, I got
angry, I got over it. In a nutshell.

Her emotional maturity enables her to call Felix to account for his shortcomings and to demand that he behave as a father to his daughter. She even challenges him to have sex with her precisely because she's not in love with him any longer. Instead she's interested in taking him out of himself; in a bit of fun; in capturing some of the magic of their past. Nothing too romantic; just a friendly roll in the hay. While Ophelia is pushed around by all the men in her life, Rosie has become a modern liberated woman, the kind of "single mom" glamorized by Murphy Brown.

MERCY has no obvious counterpart in *Hamlet*. Her role in *Humble Boy* is mostly to serve as a foil to Flora. The purpose of a foil is to make another character stand out by contrast, the way a sheet of silver or gold foil placed under a gemstone makes it more conspicuous. Where Flora is beautiful, vain, angry, and articulate, Mercy is quiet and self-effacing. She runs a thrift shop whose proceeds benefit Romanian orphans—an altruistic operation in keeping with her general character.

Her big moments on stage are four: when she mistakenly seasons the soup with James's ashes; when she becomes the object of Flora's cruelty; when she delivers the lugubrious grace at the luncheon; and when she realizes her error with the ashes and snatches the soup bowls away from everyone. Two of these moments are comic, and two are pathetic, a balance that reveals how Mercy's character hovers between contrasting emotional worlds. She is a tragicomic figure. To be tragic is to suffer greatly, to experience the loss of life's most important gifts. To be tragicomic is to be afflicted with suffering that is real, but smallish. As is the case with Mercy: it really is sad to be dependent for your social life, as she is, on a woman who despises you. But it's not the end of the world.

THEMES. This play swarms with bees. Why? Most obviously because James was a bee-keeper, and the hives he tended are conspicuous by their absence. Characters in the play define themselves in significant part by the attitudes they display toward the missing insects. The more sympathetic the character, the more bee-friendly he or she tends to be. George, for example, constantly grouses about the bees, and as he is about to inflict grievous harm on Felix he is chased ignominiously off stage by one of their number. Flora, on the other hand, becomes more apiphilic as her character softens and grows more sympathetic. Fondest of all of the departed bees is Felix, who laments their absence and hears bee-like buzzing in his head at crucial moments of the play.

Obviously, the sound reminds him of his dead father, but it is also connected with the mysteries of the physical universe that he is trying to unravel:

. . . it's the superstrings that will bring the forces together. The superstrings will give us a quantum theory of gravity—that's what I want what we all want . . . You know, I'm so close, I can hear them! I can hear the little vibrating strings inside my head.

So at its most fundamental level of existence, the cosmos itself buzzes like a swarm of bees.

This vision is consistent with much of the mythology that surrounds bees, their social lives, and the product of their famed busyness, honey. A number of times in the play, Felix cites or alludes to the Egyptian belief that “the first bee was created from a teardrop of the sun god, Ra. . . . The sun cried bees. . . . One minute it's raining cats and dogs. The next it's shining bees.” Descended from tears, bees suggest grief. But their association with the sun connotes grief's opposite, brightness and warmth; while their derivation from a god links them to immortality. So bees represent two sides of the coin of existence: the grieving associated with death, and the effulgent glow of eternal life.

Other myths connect bees with resurrection from the dead and depict honey as the nectar of immortality and a defense against evil spirits. These powers explain the presence in the tomb of Tutankhamun of pottery flasks which originally contained honey. This sacred substance would guard the dead king from harm, and would keep him alive in the netherworld. In other traditions, the bee represents the soul flying away from the body after death.

These mythic associations make bees an apt motif in a play about a grieving son, a father returned from the grave, and an old honey pot filled with a dead man's ashes.

The story of Icarus also pops up in the play. This is a myth that reminds us that the sun not only bestows life, but that it can kill us too. It's also a myth about a father who gives his son wings and enables him to fly. Unfortunately Icarus flies into the sun, his wax wings melt, and he plunges to his death. The father in the myth is Daedalus, the consummate artificer who designs and builds the labyrinth in which King Minos of Crete imprisons the monstrous Minotaur. Minos also decides to imprison Daedalus and Icarus, because they commit an act of betrayal. It

is while trying to escape from his Cretan prison on wings fashioned by his father that Icarus meets his doom.

At this point we recall that Felix's happiest memory of his father is of the night they watched the Apollo moonwalk together: "And in that moment, he made me want to fly. He held my hand and he gave me the courage to defy physics and fly anyway." On one level, this is a priceless gift from father to son. But if we look at it through the prism of the myth, we see that the gift is also dangerous. Inspired to fly, one can also plummet to earth; and in a sense, this is the peril Felix faces. His father made him want to ascend to the heights of astrophysics, to look the universe in the face and solve its mysteries. But like flying into the sun, challenging the enigma of existence can be fatal. Stalled in his attempt to achieve absolute understanding, Felix hovers, Icarus-like, on the verge of a mortal fall. Icarus is the archetype of the brilliant boy humbled by his fall. Like him, Felix is the Humble boy of the play's title.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.

1. Why is Felix so disturbed by the removal of his father's bee colonies?
2. Why are Felix and George hostile toward one another?
3. Is there a moment before the end of the play when we suspect that "Jim the gardener" is not who he seems to be?
4. What is the significance of the name "Felix?" How is it appropriate or inappropriate to his character? How is the name "Flora" appropriate or inappropriate to her character?
5. Are these names ironic in any way? And what is the meaning of irony?
6. Why do you think that bees are associated with immortality or the afterlife in many mythological traditions?
7. Why is the play called *Humble Boy*? Do these words accurately describe Felix's character?
8. Why does the author choose to set the play in a garden? Why does she spread the action out over a whole summer?
9. Why does the author have Mercy season the soup with James's ashes?
10. Why does Felix stutter? Why are his last words, "Let be?"