

Irving Berlin's *Holiday Inn*

Teaching Resources

Preparing students for Irving Berlin's *Holiday Inn*

Here is some background information, vocabulary, and thoughts about characterization that could make a field trip to see the show more meaningful for students. Discussion notes are provided to assist with a teacher-led discussion after the show, to help students draw connections with the concepts.

Show Synopsis

Irving Berlin's *Holiday Inn* tells the story of Jim, who leaves the bright lights of show business behind to settle down on his farmhouse in Connecticut ... but life just isn't the same without a bit of song and dance. Jim's luck takes a spectacular turn when he meets Linda, a spirited schoolteacher with talent to spare. Together they turn the farmhouse into a fabulous inn with dazzling performances to celebrate each holiday, from Thanksgiving to the Fourth of July. But when Jim's best friend

Ted tries to lure Linda to Hollywood to be his new dance partner, will Jim be able to salvage his latest chance at love? Based on the classic film, this joyous new 2016 Broadway musical features thrilling dance numbers, laugh-out-loud comedy and a parade of hit Irving Berlin songs, including "Blue Skies," "Easter Parade," "Steppin' Out With My Baby," "Heat Wave," "White Christmas," "Be Careful, It's My Heart," "Cheek to Cheek," "Shaking the Blues Away" and many more!



The 2016 Broadway production of Irving Berlin's *Holiday Inn* can be seen on Broadway HD (subscription or purchase required).



Scan to listen to the 2016 Broadway Irving Berlin's *Holiday Inn* cast album on Spotify.

The Composer and Lyricist: Irving Berlin

American musical theater composer Irving Berlin was born Israel Baline, in eastern Russia on May 11, 1888, the youngest of six children of Jewish cantor, Moses Baline, who brought his family to New York in 1893. When his father died a few years later, Israel left school and helped support the family as a busker, entertaining with skits and songs on the sidewalks of New York's Lower East Side. He changed his name to Irving Berlin in response to rampant anti-Semitism in the New York entertainment world. Although he never learned to read or write music, Berlin became a self-taught rudimentary pianist and moved from street entertainer to jobs as a singing waiter, and later as a song plugger in Tin Pan Alley. He wrote songs by first working out his compositions on the piano, and then playing them for somebody who could transcribe them into musical notation, a system he continued

to use his entire career. Irving Berlin's first hit song, "Alexander's Ragtime Band" in 1911, and his first major Broadway musical, *Watch Your Step* in 1914, initiated a musical career that produced 19 musical shows, 18 movie musical scores, and over 1,000 songs during the next 50 years. Among these were such classic hits as "Easter Parade", "There's No Business Like Show Business", and "White Christmas", which won the Best Song of the Year Academy Award in 1942. Perhaps his all time most successful shows were *Annie Get Your Gun*, 1946, and *Call Me Madam*, 1950, both starring Ethel Merman. After his most famous song, "God Bless America" introduced in 1939 by singer Kate Smith, became so popular that there were efforts to make it the new National Anthem, Berlin signed the copyrights over to the Boy Scouts and the Girls Scouts of America.

Irving Berlin biographical information quoted from: <https://www.kennedy-center.org/artists/b/ba-bn/irving-berlin/> (accessed 8/30/2025).

Vocabulary

Characterization: the creation of a fictional character

Protagonist: the main or principal character of a story or work of fiction

Character Foils: A literary device in which one character's traits, motivations, and values are made more apparent by another character's contrasting traits, motivations, and values. The contrast makes each character's qualities more evident.

Three-Dimensional Character (also called Complex or Round): A character with depth, complexity, and humanness. The character has thoughts, emotions, motives, inner struggles, and actions that the audience or reader can relate to.

Two-Dimensional Character: A character with little depth and complexity who mostly functions in the story to further the plot or interact with the protagonist. The best friend or sidekick is a classic example of a two-dimensional character.

One-Dimensional Character (also called Flat): A character with only one main attribute, no emotional depth, struggles, or growth.

Shakespearean Fool: In Shakespeare's plays, the "Fool" provides comic relief, but also comments on the events of the story or the actions of the characters. Shakespearean fools often speak truth through witty remarks and help the audience know how to think about what they are seeing.

Archetype: A recurring character, setting, or symbol, that holds universal meaning across time and cultures. Examples of archetypal characters include: a hero, orphan child, evil stepmother, benevolent king/queen, evil king/queen, etc.

Monologue: A speech by a single character

Score: The music for a work, such as a film or play.

Underscore: The music for a work which plays "under" or during dialogue.

Understanding Characters in Irving Berlin's *Holiday Inn*

Characterization

The traits and qualities, the motives and desires, and the values and priorities of a character are all important aspects of characterization. These elements are developed through the script and plot, through the actor's use of expression and movement, and also through the setting, props, costumes of the production. Students can discuss the characters in *Holiday Inn*, identifying which ones are complex, which ones are one-dimensional. Encourage them to look for what their traits and motivations are. Here are some ideas to get discussion started.

Jim

Jim is the protagonist. He is a three-dimensional character, and the audience is meant to sympathize with him. The audience sees Jim's inner thoughts and feelings, his desire for home and family, for deep relationships. We see his inner conflict between wanting to keep Linda close and wanting to let her thrive and succeed in performing. In the end, we see Jim learn to let Linda go, and we see he is rewarded with Linda's return to him.

Traits

Jim is an excellent singer.

Jim is loyal. We see that he values loyalty in friendship and relationships.

Jim is kind. He is tender-hearted (and so gets hurt feelings).

Motives

Jim's primary motivation is shown when he sings "The Little Things in Life," his proposal to Lila, and in his decision to move to the farm. He wants to step away from show business and have a wife, family, and "quiet life."

Ted

Character foil of Jim. Ted's opposite personality from Jim is symbolized through their two different abilities (singing and dancing). The contrast of the two characters helps the audience know about each one. Ted is a two-dimensional character. He's not as fully developed as Jim; the audience doesn't get to know him as fully or see his inner conflicts. However, Ted does experience character growth. By the end of the show, he shows loyalty to Jim, supporting Linda's return to Holiday Inn and Jim.

Ted's Traits

Ted is an excellent dancer and performer. He isn't interested in loyalty or forming deep relationships and seems to take for granted his friendship with Jim.

Ted's Motives

He's interested in his own self-promotion, in finding fame and success. Ted is motivated to find a dance partner who can perform with him, so he can be successful. He isn't interested in settling down in a relationship.

Linda

Linda is a three-dimensional character. The audience learns about her thoughts, motives, and struggles through songs such as "Plenty to Be Thankful For" and "Nothing More to Say." Linda's personality, priorities, and desires are understood more when contrasted with Lila, her character foil. Encourage students to think about what motivates Linda.

Lila

Lila is an example of a one-dimensional, or flat, character. She is mostly just seen as a flighty, self-centered performer. However, at the end of the show, we are given a glimpse of change in Lila, as she returns to perform with Ted. How does the show help the audience have some sympathy for Lila, even though throughout the show she is mostly a flat, shallow character?

Louise

Louise is an example of a comic-relief character. In many ways, she is like a Shakespearean fool archetype. In Shakespeare's plays, the "fool" is silly and funny, but speaks truth. Often the "fool" character is helping the audience to know how to think about what they are seeing. Louise is a "fix-it man." She fixes things at the farm, but she also is a literal "fix-it man," she wants to help her friends Linda and Jim. Her witty remarks are funny comic relief, but often reveal truth to the audience.

How Sets, Props, and Costumes Help with Characterization

Holiday Inn is set in the late 1940s, in the years following World War II. It was a time in America where young people like Jim, Ted, Linda, and Lila were figuring out what their life would be like after the war.

One tradition that may be unknown to students is that of the "Easter Parade." This tradition began in New York City along 5th Avenue in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral. Churchgoers dressed up for Easter would parade along the avenue after the Easter church service. Over time, this became a fun Easter tradition, and the people of the city would turn out in their best Easter clothes for it. The "Easter Parade" was so well-known that in the 1930s when Irving Berlin wrote a musical called *As Thousands Cheer* about newspaper headlines, "Easter Parade" was part of that show (as was "Heat Wave," which was the weather report). The song was used again in the Judy Garland-Fred Astaire film *Easter Parade*. The Easter Parade tradition continues in NYC to this day; it has become a costume parade and people enjoy wearing over-the-top hats and costumes. You can Google for photos of recent Easter parades.

There are several moments in the Broadway show Irving Berlin's *Holiday Inn* that are a homage to Fred Astaire, who played Ted in the film *Holiday Inn*, and who also starred in several Berlin musicals, including *Top Hat* and *Easter Parade*. Students can watch for a moment in the show when Ted dances with a lightstand. This is an homage to Fred Astaire's famous dance with a hat stand in the film *Royal Wedding*. Also, in Act 2 of *Holiday Inn*, Ted tap dances to "Say It with Firecrackers." Fred Astaire was famous for this tap dance, in which he used firecrackers to fill in for the "missing" taps when his dance partner didn't show up in time for the number.

Sets

The sets in *Holiday Inn* help illustrate the characters, and the different settings of nightclubs contrast visually with Jim's farm to create a stronger contrast between the two characters' life choices.

Props

The props in the show are an important part of the characterization and plot, forming part of the choreography. Moving boxes become part of a dance. Jump ropes and firecrackers are integrated into the choreography.

Costumes

The costumes in theatre help actors to fully be in character. The old proverb, "The clothes make the man," is true: costumes convey character and identity to the audience, and also help the cast members to "get into character."

Music and Orchestration: A Listening Guide

Irving Berlin's *Holiday Inn* has a big band sound and includes Berlin standards that are part of the "Great American Songbook."

Big Band Era

During the 1930s through the 1940s, "Big Band" orchestras were extremely popular. Recording artists such as Glenn Miller, Count Basie, Tommy Dorsey, and Duke Ellington led bands of 10-20 musicians, who would play jazz and swing. Singers such as Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra came to fame singing with big bands.

Great American Songbook

The 2016 Broadway musical Irving Berlin's *Holiday Inn* includes a parade of Berlin hits that appeared in many movies of the era. Although the show is adapted from the 1942 film, the show includes many songs from other Berlin musicals, such as *Easter Parade*, *Top Hat*, and *Call Me Madam*. Many of the songs in the show are considered part of the "Great American Songbook." They have been recorded, and continue to be recorded, by many artists.

Holiday Inn's Score

The score for Irving Berlin's *Holiday Inn* includes sections of underscoring in which the orchestra plays "under" dialogue. In this show, underscoring helps the audience's emotions engage with the characters' emotions. Underscoring is used strategically to emphasize dialogue.

Listening tip: During an Act 1 monologue delivered by Jim, who is speaking to Louise about his friend Ted, the underscoring stops just as Jim delivers a key line, "Every now and then it's a good idea to pause in our pursuit of happiness to just be happy." As the music falls silent, the audience's attention focuses in, emphasizing the importance of the line.

Discussion Questions for Irving Berlin's *Holiday Inn*

The following questions can be used to facilitate a discussion with students after watching the show, with the goal of helping them draw connections with what they saw on stage and what they learned ahead of time in class.

1. At the beginning of the show, Jim and Ted sing "I'll Capture Your Heart." Jim sings, "I'll capture her heart singing," and Ted responds, "Just wait until she gets a load of my dancing." How does this song set up the main conflict in the story? How does it set them up as character foils?
2. Lila's character is important to the story. Why is she considered a flat character?
3. What is motivating Jim? How does the production show the audience what is important to Jim? Think about the lines he delivers, the songs he sings, and the actions he takes in the early part of the show.
4. Review the definition of "Shakespearean Fool"? How is the character of Louise a little bit like this? Can you think of other examples of characters like Louise in other shows, films, or books?
5. How did the costumes help to develop the characters in the show? Compare and contrast the costuming for Linda and Lila. How do Linda's costumes convey her personality? How about Lila? What about Louise?
6. How did the sets emphasize the contrast between Jim and Ted?
7. How did the choreography integrate with the settings and props so that the dances "make sense" with the progression of the story (e.g. think about "Shaking the Blues Away" and how the partiers ended up with tap shoes and jump ropes).
8. How did the orchestra add to the audience's experience of the story and characters? What instruments did you hear?