

Moliere's
The Imaginary Invalid

Study Guide

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The Imaginary Invalid

Welcome to *The Imaginary Invalid*. We hope that this study guide will help you further your understanding and enjoyment of one of Moliere's most popular comedies. The Orlando-UCF Shakespeare Festival has a strong belief in the relationship between the actor and the audience because, without either one, there is no theater. We hope that this study guide will help bring a better understanding of the plot, themes, and characters in this play so that you can more fully enjoy the theatrical experience.

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This guide was written to correspond to the following **Sunshine State Standards**:

The Arts

Skills and Techniques - The student understands and applies arts techniques, media and processes.

Creation and Communication - The student creates and communicates a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas using knowledge of structures and functions of the arts.

Cultural and Historical Connections - The student understands the arts in relation to history and culture.

Aesthetic and Critical Analysis - The student analyzes, evaluates, and responds to characteristics of works of art.

Language Arts

Writing - The student uses the writing process effectively.

Listening, Viewing, & Speaking - The student uses listening strategies effectively.

Language - The student understands the nature and power of language.

Meet the Characters

- ARGAN:** Head of the household. Argan is an older, wealthy gentleman. Most of his money, though, goes to treating his imaginary ailments. He is a serious hypochondriac and wants to marry his daughter to a doctor to always have one around.
- BÉLINE:** Argan's second wife and stepmother to both of Argan's children. She wants Angelique and Louison put into a nunnery and is waiting (secretly) for Argan to die so she can inherit.
- ANGÉLIQUE:** Argan's beautiful eldest daughter. She is in love with Cleante and can not stop talking about him. She is young and impetuous.
- LOUISON:** Argan's youngest child and Angelique's sister.
- BÉRALDE:** Argan's brother. He is intelligent and has little patience left for his brother's foolishness.
- TOINETTE:** Argan's maid. She practically runs the household and has no problem with telling Argan (or anyone else) when he is being foolish.
- CLÉANTE:** A handsome young gentleman. He is in love with Angelique. While very romantic and full of good intentions, he is not very bright. He is willing to do anything to win Angelique.
- MR. DIAFOIRUS:** A respected doctor who is not overly concerned with the results of his 'cures' or the actual health of his patients.
- THOMAS DIAFOIRUS:** Dr. Diafoirus' son who will soon become a doctor himself. He is the nephew of Mr. Purgon. He also wants to marry Angelique. He has almost no personality or thought of his own.
- MR. PURGON:** Argan's favorite physician.
- MR. FLEURANT:** Argan's preferred apothecary.
- MR. DE BONNEFOI:** A notary.

Plot Summary - The Imaginary Invalid

Brief Summary

Argan is a rich man with severe hypochondria. He decides to marry his eldest daughter, Angelique, to a young doctor from a family of doctors in order to have them always around to tend on him for free. She, however, is in love with another young man named Cleante. When Angelique refuses, Argan gives her four days to agree or become a nun. Hilarity ensues as Cleante, Toinette the maid and Argan's brother, Beralde, all try to change his mind. Eventually he is convinced when, while pretending to be dead, he discovers that his new wife is only in it for the money, but his daughter truly loves him. He consents to her marriage with Cleante. Beralde convinces Argan to become a doctor and treat himself.

Act I

The play opens with Argan, a severe hypochondriac, going through the bill from his apothecary (the pharmacist) item-by-item. He only pays out about half of what is on the bill. That done, he hollers for his maid, Toinette. When she doesn't appear immediately he shouts and calls her names until she arrives. Toinette isn't interested in putting up with Argan's temper, so she mocks his rage. Eventually he gives up trying to scold her and asks her to call in his daughter, Angelique. Angelique is ready to talk to him, but Argan must take a short walk first on his doctor's orders.

While he is out, Angelique takes the opportunity to gush to Toinette. We quickly find out that she has been talking almost non-stop about the qualities of a young man named Cleante since she met him at a play six days ago. She expects Cleante to ask her father if he can marry her within days.

Argan returns and expects to surprise his daughter when he tells her that someone has asked to marry her. He is shocked to find that she not only knows about it, but couldn't be happier. Unfortunately, Angelique is thinking of Cleante, while her father has promised his daughter to Thomas Diaforious, the son of a respected Paris doctor who is soon to be made a doctor himself.

Toinette asks him why, with all of his money, Argan would want a doctor for a son-in-law. He replies that since he is always ill, he thought it would be a good idea to have a doctor in the family. Then he could have Thomas Diaforious' services as doctor all the time, not to mention his father and uncle's services for free. Toinette will not take his hypochondria seriously and tells him that she knows Angelique will never agree to that marriage. More than that, Toinette downright forbids the union to happen! This is amazing gall for a servant, and Argan becomes so incensed that he chases Toinette around the room threatening to kill her. Finally he stops, exhausted, and claims he is dying.

Hearing the disturbance, Beline runs in. She soothes Argan talking to him as one would to a child throwing a fit. Once his new wife has calmed him, Argan asks if she's contacted a notary. He intends to change his will to include (and heavily favor) Beline. She dramatically begs him not to think of such things, but just happens to have the notary on-hand and available. She says she doesn't care about the money but double-checks the value all the same.

Meanwhile, outside the study, Toinette and Angelique have a chance to talk in private. Toinette warns Angelique that her stepmother is plotting to get her inheritance, but Angelique doesn't care, so long as she is allowed to marry as she wishes. She begs Toinette to find a way to tell Cleante of the intended marriage.

Act II

Cleante shows up at the door, surprising Toinette. He has come pretending to be a substitute for Angelique's music teacher. Argan decides that he wants to watch the music lesson, spoiling everyone's plans. When Angelique comes in she is shocked to find Cleante there. She manages to cover her reaction. Then Argan invites Cleante to stay as a guest as Angelique is introduced to her fiancée, Thomas Diaforious.

When Mr. Diaforious and Thomas enter, Mr. Diaforious tells Thomas to begin. Thomas asks if he should start with the father and, once his father tells him to, he greets Argan with a florid prepared speech. Once finished, he asks his father if that was satisfactory and if he should continue. He has a fancy prepared speech ready for every member of the family.

Everyone has a seat and Argan praises Thomas. Mr. Diaforious says that he is very pleased with his son. He says that as a child he was never very bright or exciting and he never has had any wit or liveliness, but he has sound judgement. He may be dull and a bit dim, but he is tenacious and careful and sound of judgement. What Mr. Diaforious is most happy about in his son, though, is that he blindly adheres to the ancient medical beliefs and refuses to believe the new modern ideas like "circulation of the blood."

Argan asks if Thomas is to become a doctor for the rich at court. Mr. Diaforious says he much prefers to treat the common people. With ordinary people you aren't so accountable to anybody and, as long as you follow procedure, you don't have to worry so much about the result of your doctoring. The rich are much more difficult since they actually seem to expect to be cured.

Argan then tells Cleante to help Angelique sing a song for the party. He gives her a scroll of music with no words and tells everyone that it is a short piece from an improvised opera. Cleante then sings his love and his questions to Angelique in the guise of this opera. She answers him in the same form, telling him that she really loves him and despises the man her father wants her to marry. Their song continues until Argan stops it, thinking it dreadfully inappropriate. He sends Cleante away.

Argan tells Angelique to pledge herself to Thomas, but she refuses. She suggests that they ought to get to know each other first. Argan won't hear any of that, though. He says that there will be plenty of time for that after they're married. As for Thomas, it is enough for him that his father has instructed him to be in love with her. Angelique tries to argue the point with him, but it is like arguing with a brick wall. A brick wall that is a good debater and uses Latin.

Argan gets angry with Angelique's willfulness and all of the fighting where nobody is paying him any attention. He tells Angelique that she has four days to decide. Either she marries Thomas, or she goes into a convent.

Angelique runs out and Beline decides to go to town for a while. Argan is left with the two doctors and begs them to examine him. It is very obvious they have no idea what they are doing. They make up lies good enough to convince Argan the hypochondriac, though.

On her way out, Beline stops to tell Argan that she saw Angelique talking with a young man who ran away as soon as they were spotted. She tells him that his youngest daughter, Louison, saw everything. Argan calls Louison to him for an interrogation. After much coaxing and Louison faking her own death, she tells him that the man claiming to be Angelique's music teacher came to her window and told her over and over how he loved her.

Argan's brother, Beralde comes to visit him. He is not impressed with Argan's claims about how sick he is. Beralde tells his brother that he has a match for Angelique. At the mention of his daughter's name, Argan flies into a rage and Beralde calms him by telling him about a dance troupe that has come to amuse him. There is a dance interlude as gypsies dance and sing about the joys of young love and the pain when it proves false.

Act III

Now that they have both enjoyed the interlude, Beralde wants to have a chat with his brother, but Argan insists he must take a short walk first. Once Argan is gone, Toinette begs Beralde not to give up on helping his niece. He says that he'll do everything he can. Toinette hints that she has a plan herself, but can't tell what it is because her master has returned.

Now that Argan has returned, Beralde first asks his brother why he would want to send his daughter to a convent. Beralde points out that sending them to a convent was Beline's idea. He suggests that she might want the children out of the way for her own reasons, but Argan gets angry and leaps to her defense. Then he asks Argan why he would want to marry his daughter to a doctor so unsuited for her. He says that if the doctor is good enough for him, he is good enough for Angelique. Beralde has had enough. He points out to Argan that he is one of the healthiest people he knows and that his infatuation with doctors and apothecaries is bad for him and everyone else. The doctors, he says, don't know anything about the workings of the human body and therefore can do nothing to cure it. The doctors are only educated enough to give fancy Latin names to the things they don't comprehend. They will kill their patients with the best of intentions, but they'll still be dead. Beralde believes that all one can do is rest and let nature take its course.

Mr. Purgon's assistant comes in with a new remedy for Argan. Beralde asks Argan not to take it- to put it off until tomorrow, but this makes Mr. Purgon's assistant, Fleurant, very angry. He runs off to tell the doctor about this interference.

Beralde tries once again to get his brother to give up his addiction to doctors, but Argan claims to be too sick. Just then Mr. Purgon enters, having been told that his cure was sent back. He is furious and rages at Argan. He refuses to treat Argan any more and says that within a few days Argan will go from one horrible disease to another and finally die. With that, he storms out.

Left with Beralde again, Argan cries and says that he can already feel his system shutting down. Beralde thinks he is crazy and tells him so, but Argan won't listen. He is sure that he's already dying. Toinette comes in and says that a new doctor has arrived who wants to treat Argan. She doesn't know who the man is, but says that he looks exactly like her. Argan is desperate and consents to see him.

Toinette comes in dressed as a doctor and claims to be one of the world's greatest doctors who has come to see Argan: one of the world's most illustrious patients. He tells Argan that all of his previous doctors were idiots who have totally miss-diagnosed him. Argan tells him everything that has been proscribed, and Toinette (as the doctor) contradicts every one, saying his doctors were idiots.

Beralde then tries to convince his brother, since he has already fallen out with Purgon, that he should consider a different marriage for his daughter. But Argan wants her put into a convent as a punishment for her willfulness. Beralde suggests that the real reason is that Beline wants it. Argan begins to get angry again, but Toinette steps in and says she has a solution to prove to Beralde how much Beline loves her husband. She suggests that Argan lie down on the couch and pretend to be dead. Then everyone will see how she really feels about her him by her grief. Everyone thinks this is a great plan.

Beralde hides as Beline comes in. She finds Toinette crying and Toinette tells her Argan is dead. Beline doesn't waste a tear, but is, instead, overjoyed that Argan is finally dead. She calls him horrible names, then asks Toinette to help her cover-up his death until she can get her hands on his money. With that Argan gets up and surprises Beline. He shouts that he's glad to have found her out as she runs off. Just then they hear Angelique coming and Toinette suggests he do the same thing to find out how she feels.

When Angelique hears that her father is dead she is inconsolable. She cries and says that she has lost the dearest thing in the world to her. She is even more upset because she has lost him when he was still angry with her. Cleante comes in to comfort her, but it is no good. She tells Cleante that they can never get married now. Since her father's last wishes were that she be a nun, that's just what she's going to do.

With that, Argan gets up and hugs his daughter. She and Cleante are both delighted that he is alive. Argan agrees to their marriage, saying that she and Cleante can marry as long as Cleante becomes a doctor. He agrees, but Beralde stops him. He suggests that Argan should just become a doctor himself. Argan likes that idea and Beralde says he knows a number of people who can make him a doctor that very night.

He invites the gypsy dancers back and they perform a ceremony in song and dance that, they claim, makes Argan a doctor.

Medicine in Moliere

Much of Moliere's criticism of contemporary doctors was very warranted. Far from being interested in advancing medical science or their own knowledge, they felt that any deviation from the ancient Greek concepts was horrendous and insulting. Moliere points this out when Mr. Diaforious and his son condemn the new ideas about blood circulation. Many new ideas about the workings of the human body and the way to treat disease were totally rejected by these doctors. French physicians in the seventeenth century were well-educated in Latin and rhetoric, but had very little schooling on anatomy or surgery.

The French doctors of Moliere's time believed that medicine had been invented by the Greek God Apollo. Once it had been created by Apollo, his son Asclepius improved medical science and gave it to the humans. After Asclepius gave the invention of medicine to mortals, the art of healing was improved and perfected by the ideas of two Greeks, named Hippocrates and Galen. After their discoveries, thought the doctors of the time, no more should, could or would be found. Further exploration into the workings of the human body was considered sacrilegious and beneath the dignity of a true doctor.

The Greek philosophers (and, therefore, the French doctors) believed that the earth was made up of four elements: fire, water, air, and earth. These elements directly corresponded with four elements within the human body. These elements were known as the "humors", and these humors were thought to determine every part of a person, from their physical nature to their personality. The four humors were blood, black bile, yellow bile and phlegm. It was thought that an imbalance in these humors caused a person to get sick. Therefore the way to cure illness was to resolve that imbalance.

There were two main methods used for treating an imbalance in the humors. One favorite method was known as "purging". Purging relied on enemas and laxatives to clean out the system and get rid of the "bad humors". Excessive dosing of laxatives and frequent enemas were favorite cures of most respected doctors in seventeenth century France. It was thought that these treatments could reduce the amount of bile in the system and flush out whatever toxins might be causing sickness. Many of those patients died of dehydration. King Louis the XIV was given such a strong "purgative soup" by his physician that he spent the rest of the day suffering from its effects (reportedly eleven times in eight hours). After the "cure" wore off he claimed to be "somewhat fatigued" and retired early.

The other popular method for curing illness was bleeding. It was thought that the blood carried toxins and that by bleeding out enough of these toxins, the body would be cured. The doctors did not content themselves with simply bleeding a patient by cutting a vein, instead they often found far more creative methods. Leeches were frequently placed on a patient and allowed to drink their fill. Another popular method was to make small incisions in the back and then to place burning-hot cups over the incisions. As the air inside the cup cooled, it would contract and create a vacuum. This vacuum would draw the blood from the wounds. While all of these were terribly unpleasant, none were helpful at all.

Doctors would rarely lower themselves to actually touching the truly sick. If an operation was deemed necessary the doctor would look-on and give directions as surgery was performed by local butchers.

With all of this, who could blame the playwright for his frequent jabs at the profession? As Moliere himself said, "Nearly all men die of their remedies, and not of their illnesses."

Moliere's Death

More than one of the most popular playwrights of his day, Moliere was also a very famous actor. He often performed roles in his own plays. *The Imaginary Invalid* was his last play. Moliere had been suffering from a serious pulmonary condition for quite some time and it had now become so severe that he could no longer perform. He was too weak for the activity required on stage and a persistent cough made it impossible to disguise his illness. Rather than give up the profession, Moliere instead created the character of Argan for himself. Argan, as a hypochondriac, allowed Moliere to perform nearly the entire play from his chair. And the cough which Moliere could not stifle would be Argan's proof and reminder of his illness to anybody nearby. The playwright wrote himself a role that he could perform even in his infirmity. It is ironic that the very ill Moliere chose to play the role of a hypochondriac. Other characters spend the entire play telling him that he is not sick at all! The sick artist played a healthy man faking illness.

His last comedy opened to rave reviews. It was declared to be one of his most vivacious comedies and his performance as Argan was widely praised. All of Paris laughed at the comedy and at the doctors whom it mocks.

On the day of February 17th, 1673, before the fourth performance of *The Imaginary Invalid*, Moliere was so weak that his wife, Armande, and some of his other close friends begged him to remain home in bed and cancel the performance. Moliere reportedly replied "can I refuse to go on when so many persons' bread depends upon it? I should reproach myself for the distress I might cause them, having sufficient strength to prevent it." Rather than considering his quickly failing strength and health, he thought only of the poor people involved with the play who would not be paid were he to cancel the show. Again, it is ironic that such a man would have created the role of a petulant, demanding and self-centered miser for himself.

Moliere made it all the way through the show until the last line that Argan speaks as he is being made a doctor in the final interlude. Then a coughing fit seized him as the play ended and he was rushed home just after the curtain closed. The exertion had proved too much for the actor and playwright. No doctors would attend on him because he had so often poked fun at their profession, but Moliere would have refused their services anyway. Similarly, because of his play *Tartuffe*, which mocked certain undesirable aspects of the clergy, no priests would consent to see him. Moliere was attended at the last by two nuns to whom he had given shelter. He died that afternoon.

Actors of the day were considered second-class citizens at best and were often excommunicated and refused burial on consecrated land unless they were willing to repent their lives and profession. Moliere, proud of his work, would do no such thing. Eventually Armande, his widow, petitioned the king to give Moliere a respectable burial and last rights. A long-time patron and fan, the king agreed.

Discussion Questions

1) Status:

Who has the highest status in the household? How do the other characters react to them? Does their status change? What does this person do to cause this status change?

2) Blame and Gullibility:

Argan is fooled over and over again in this play. He is fooled by his doctors, his wife, his maid, and who else? How much blame does Argan bear for the way he is fooled and used? Is he blame free because of his gullibility?

3) Illness and Psychology:

Do you think Argan truly believes that he is sick? Why does he create these medical problems for himself? What does Argan really want that causes him to act sick?

4) Tough Love:

Who cares the most about Argan in this play? Who demonstrates the most concern? Is it the same person? How do the people who *really* care about Argan show their feelings?

5) Physician Heal Thyself:

At the end of the play Argan believes he has been made a doctor. Will this cure him? What effect do you think this ceremony will have on Argan in the future? How will this effect his daughter and Cleante? How will it effect his brother and Toinette?

Complete Learning Plan

This Learning plan is designed for **grades 7-12**.

Objectives: Moliere's characters live in a world of heightened emotions. This is a useful tool that is frequently utilized in theater. For the characters in the play, everything they say and every moment can be life-or-death. Every feeling is expressed in a much larger fashion than it would be in every-day life. This exercise is intended to help students connect with characters using heightened emotions and find the comic potential that is inherent to this style.

Standards and Benchmarks:

Grades 6-8: LA.A.1.3, LA.C.1.3, LA.C.2.3, LA.C.3.3, TH.A.1.3, TH.D.1.3

Grades 9-12: LA.A.1.4, LA.C.1.4, LA.C.2.4, LA.C.3.4, TH.A.1.4, TH.D.1.4

Materials Needed: Students will need the A-B scene along with one of the subtext sheets provided.

Suggested Lesson Plan:

- 1) Pair students to perform a two-person scene. Choose one partner to be "A" and one to be "B"
- 2) Hand out two A-B scenes to each pairing. Allow them 3-5 minutes to look over the scene. They should notice that it is very simple and has almost no inherent emotion or story.
- 3) Choose one subtext script for each group or allow them to choose one for themselves. Give each student a copy of that subtext scene. **For more advanced students-** allow them to create their own heightened subtext to perform.
- 4) Explain that the subtext on the sheet is the thought, the emotion, or what they are *actually* trying to convey when they use the lines in the A-B scene.
- 5) Have the pairs rehearse their scene. First using the subtext, then trying to get across the same intentions and emotion using only the lines in the A-B scene.
- 6) Students should perform their A-B scene for the class. You may want to see if the class can guess what the subtext was, or what each scene was trying to communicate.
- 7) Encourage students to go even further with heightened emotions. Have students perform their scene multiple times until they have gone as far as you feel they can. Encourage them to be silly and wacky in the performance. Look for broad physical gestures, loud voices, and extreme facial expressions. This is one of the points of heightened emotions .

Assessment: Students should be assessed on the amount of effort they put into communicating the subtext of the scene. How far are they willing to go? If they find the humor in big physical gestures and extreme expressions, they have succeeded.

Basic A-B Scene

A: Good Morning.

B: 'Morning.

A: How's it going, buddy?

B: Fine, just fine. And you?

A: Oh, you know. Great.

B: Really? What's going on?

A: Nothing.

B: Nothing?

A: Yeah, nothing.

B: Nothing?

A: I said nothing.

B: Okay, okay. Sorry I asked.

A: Don't be. It's alright.

B: Okay. Thanks.

A-B Scene Subtext 1

B forgot to put on pants this morning before School.

- A:** Good Morning.
Oh my gosh!! You totally forgot to put your pants on before you came to school this morning!!!
- B:** 'Morning.
AAAUGH! Don't look at me!! I know, I know!
- A:** How's it going, buddy?
This is about the funniest thing I've ever seen in my life!! Are you insane?!?!
- B:** Fine, just fine. And you?
I've never been so embarrassed in my entire life! Won't you help me?!
- A:** Oh, you know. Great.
No way! This is just too hilarious!
- B:** Really? What's going on?
Come on! You have to do something!
- A:** Nothing.
Not a chance! What could I do anyway?
- B:** Nothing?
I'm dying here!!
- A:** Yeah, nothing.
I don't care!
- B:** Nothing?
PLEEEAAAASSSSEEEE!!!!
- A:** I said nothing.
This is way too good! HAHHAHAHA!
- B:** Okay, okay. Sorry I asked.
I should have known better than to ask you! Jerk!!
- A:** Don't be. It's alright.
Yeah, you probably should have! HAHHAHAHA!
- B:** Okay. Thanks.
Thanks for nothing!!

A-B Scene Subtext 2

A and B both forgot to study for their Math final worth 90% of their grade.

- A:** Good Morning.
Hey, did you study for the final today?
- B:** 'Morning.
No! I completely forgot!
- A:** How's it going, buddy?
How do you think you're going to do?
- B:** Fine, just fine. And you?
I'm totally going to fail! It's all over! What about you?
- A:** Oh, you know. Great.
I'm gonna fail too! My parents are going to kill me!
- B:** Really? What's going on?
Do you know any of the study questions at all?
- A:** Nothing.
Not one! I'm so getting an "F"!!
- B:** Nothing?
You have to help me! Think!
- A:** Yeah, nothing.
I told you I don't know any of them!
- B:** Nothing?
You sure you don't remember? I can't fail this class!!
- A:** I said nothing.
I don't even remember what subject it's in!!
- B:** Okay, okay. Sorry I asked.
There must be some way to get out of this!!!
- A:** Don't be. It's alright.
Too late!! There's the bell!!
- B:** Okay. Thanks.
Oh, we are so dead!

A-B Scene Subtext 3

B is A's parent who catches A sneaking back into the house early in the morning.

- A:** Good Morning.
Oh no! What are you doing up?!
- B:** 'Morning.
I've been up worrying all night.
- A:** How's it going, buddy?
How much trouble am I in?
- B:** Fine, just fine. And you?
I am more angry with you than I have ever been! What do you think?
- A:** Oh, you know. Great.
Come on! This isn't a big deal!
- B:** Really? What's going on?
WHAT?!?! What on earth were you out doing all night?
- A:** Nothing.
I won't say!
- B:** Nothing?
How DARE you! You sure you want to go there?
- A:** Yeah, nothing.
I am not telling you anything!
- B:** Nothing?
Do you want to know how much worse this can get? This is your last chance!
- A:** I said nothing.
No way! Forget it!
- B:** Ok, ok. Sorry I asked.
Fine, have it your way! But you are grounded... permanently!
- A:** Don't be. It's alright.
I know, I know. It's not fair, though!
- B:** Ok. Thanks.
Get to your room before it gets any worse!