

The Physicists Study Guide

The Physicists by Friedrich Dürrenmatt

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Plot Summary

The Physicists starts with the murder of a nurse in Les Cerisiers, a European mental institution. Inspector Richard Voss and the local police force investigate the murder scene, which is the drawing room of a villa within Les Cerisiers. This villa is the home of three mental patients who believe they are great physicists.

A man named Ernesti killed the nurse. Ernesti believes he is Albert Einstein, and he frequently plays the violin as the real Einstein did. This has been the second murder of a nurse at the same villa. Three months ago a man named Beutler, who believes himself to be Sir Isaac Newton, killed a nurse. The Inspector cannot arrest anyone because they are legally insane and the residing Doktor, Fraulein Mathilde Von Zahnd, has a very sympathetic and blameless approach with her mental patients.

The third physicist, named Johann Mobius, believes he is visited by King Solomon, and he takes dictation about physics from Solomon. The family of Mobius visits, including his ex-wife, her new husband, and Mobius's three children. They are bidding a final farewell before they leave to do missionary work on an island in the Pacific Ocean. Mobius pretends to be violently insane, cursing the family and throwing a coffee table, so that he cuts ties with his family and spares them any further pain from trying to have a relationship with a madman. Nurse Monika reveals that she is in love with Mobius and wants to run away with him. The previous two murdered nurses also fell in love with a "physicist," and Monika is murdered like the others for getting too close.

In Act II, the Inspector returns to investigate the murder of Nurse Monika. Again, he can do nothing because Mobius is insane. A series of revelations follow. Newton reveals to Mobius that he is in fact a secret agent named Kilton, who faked insanity in order to infiltrate the villa. His mission is to bring Mobius and his great scientific discoveries back to his country for military purposes. Similarly, Einstein reveals himself to be a secret agent for another country, Eisler, who has pretended insanity for the same reason. It turns out that Mobius also merely pretended to be insane, but for a different reason: In the era of nuclear weapons, he wished to hide his dangerous scientific discoveries from a world that might destroy itself with such knowledge. While both Newton and Einstein urge Mobius to side with them and share his discoveries, Mobius convinces the men to keep the knowledge hidden for the benefit of mankind and continue to pretend insanity.

In a final revelation, the matronly Doktor reveals herself as the only insane one, one who truly does receive visions of King Solomon. She has manipulated the physicists, and has secretly gathered all of Mobius's knowledge for herself by copying his manuscripts. She plans to conquer the world per Solomon's commands using this knowledge. The physicists are doomed to a sane life in the madhouse, while the Doktor continues her insane plans in a world that thinks she is sane.



Act I, Part I

Act I, Part I Summary

The playwright sets the scene and provides background information in a lengthy introduction. The setting is the sanatorium called "Les Cerisiers" owned by Fraulein Doktor Mathilde von Zahnd. She is famous throughout Europe, not only for her deep family history and aristocratic background, but for her reputation as a celebrated psychiatrist. Her sanatorium houses wealthy people from all over Europe suffering from mental disease.

The surrounding town is unnamed, but is said to be a crumbling, sleepy little town. Old World buildings and architecture are giving way to the "hideous edifices" of insurance companies and other signs of contemporary corporate Europe. Despite this, the surrounding landscape is said to be peaceful and pretty, and so the sanatorium has a reputation for being relaxing and a sanctuary away from the "hurly-burly of modern life."

Most of the mental patients at Les Cerisiers are housed in a separate new building (unseen in the play). The play's focus is a portion of the "old" section of Les Cerisiers known as the villa. Only three patients are left to live in the villa, three "physicists"—mental patients who believe they are famous scientists. Doktor Zahnd believes it is healthy for these men to live together and interact, given they have similar psychoses.

These men previously had a reputation for being "lovable lunatics," quite mad but harmless and non-violent. However, the quiet villa has been rocked by two recent events. Three months ago, one of these physicists strangled an attending nurse to death, and just recently the same type of murder occurred with another physicist.

As the play opens, the "Kreutzer Sonata" can be heard being played on a violin. The murdered nurse is sprawled out on the floor, and the room is in disarray, indicating there had been a struggle. Several police enter and begin examining the crime scene. These men include Guhl, the stenographer, and Blocher, the photographer. Inspector Richard Voss then enters. Guhl gets prepared to take dictation and notes, and Voss casually takes a cigar from his coat to smoke. The matron or governess of the establishment, Marta Boll, enters. She informs Voss it's not "usual" to smoke inside the villa, and he refrains from smoking. Voss is further gently admonished for asking for brandy instead of tea to drink.

We learn that Irene Straub is the name of the murdered nurse, and that Ernst Heinrich Ernesti is the murderer. Ernesti believes he is famous physicist Albert Einstein, and he is referred to as Einstein for the play. While the Inspector insists on calling Einstein a murderer, the Matron insists on referring to him as simply unwell.

Nurse Straub was strangled with a lamp cord. The event is eerily similar to an event three months ago, in which a man thinking himself Sir Isaac Newton strangled another



nurse in the same way. The Inspector feels it's high time to stop the practice of having only female nurses around these madmen. The Matron counters that the dead nurse was a wrestler and practitioner of Judo: neither man nor woman can compete against the strength of a madman.

The Inspector wishes to question Einstein about the murder, but the Matron does not want to interrupt his carefully controlled routine, which presently involves playing the violin. The doctor is in fact accompanying Einstein on the piano, in a comic touch. The Inspector agrees to wait until the performance is over; meanwhile the police wrap up their work and take the body out.

After everyone is gone except the Inspector, from another room emerges Newton, wearing a full wig and the costume of Newton's time. Newton expresses regret at the recent murder, but when the Inspector confronts him about his own murder of Nurse Moser three months ago, Newton does not consider the murders equal. For Newton, killing Nurse Moser was simply a necessity, because he must carry on his work and his love for Nurse Moser interfered with his thinking about science and gravitation.

Newton then shares a secret with the Inspector. Removing his wig, Newton confides that he only pretends to be Sir Isaac Newton and that he is actually Albert Einstein. He only pretends to be Newton so as not to disturb Ernesti, who believes he is Einstein. Newton (this guide will persist in calling him Newton, as that is his title in the play) guesses that the Inspector is mad about not being able to arrest him for the murder of the nurse, or perhaps for his hand in inventing the atomic bomb. Newton counters that it is the Inspector who is a criminal, for the Inspector uses science—such as the flipping on of a light—without understanding the theory behind it. On the contrary, Newton believes he has a vast knowledge of the universe and how it works at a fundamental level. To not have this understanding is for Newton a crime. Newton exits, leaving the Inspector in a state of befuddlement.

Fraulein Doktor Mathilde von Zahnd (hereafter, the Doktor) enters, fresh from her piano playing with Einstein. The Doktor, referring to a portrait on the wall, talks a little about her stern, unloving father, and then proceeds to have a smoke with the Inspector. The Inspector tells her that Newton thinks he's Einstein, but the Doktor presumes to know better: she believes Newton, deep down, thinks he's Newton. The Inspector gently scolds the Doktor for letting two murders happen under her watch, and the Doktor counters that it would not be humane to lock up madmen for only the potential of violence. The Doktor says that medical science has come so far with drugs that now madmen can be as gentle as lambs, and it simply wouldn't be right to punish the mentally ill, who can't help themselves.

Einstein enters. He seems to have a faint recollection about his murdering of the nurse, but the Doktor tells him to think nothing of it and go back to bed, which he does. The Doktor confides to the Inspector that medicine has no explanation for the sudden murderous violence of the two men. There is one connection, however: both men, before they went mad, were working with radioactive chemicals, and the Doktor feels radioactivity may have something to do with their insanity.



The Doktor tells the Inspector that only three men are housed in the villa, and the third man, named Johann Mobius (who has been at the villa the longest), also thinks himself a physicist. The Inspector gets the Doktor to agree that she will hire male nurses in addition to female nurses for the villa, and then the Inspector leaves, hoping he won't have a third visit to the asylum.

Act I, Part I Analysis

The playwright takes pains to describe the setting as a Europe in transition. Old World architecture is giving way to the "hideous edifices" of insurance buildings and other soulless buildings. This creates already an uneasy feeling. And it echoes the "fly in the ointment" premise of the play, insofar that a quiet, cozy little sanctuary full of "lovable lunatics" has been marred by a string of violent murders.

The a brief exchange with the Inspector preparing to smoke and drink and the Matron scolding him creates some dark comic moments. In the middle of a murder investigation and at the heart of the murder scene, the Inspector is being rebuked like a child about his petty vices. The Inspector's general sarcastic, detached attitude is indicative of a stereotypical British "stiff upper lip" and it helps to advertise the play as a dark comedy rather than a more serious drama.

There are other subtle comic touches such as: the Doktor's rationale for putting the three physicists together so that they have something to chat about (rather than any thoughtful medical reason); the wordplay wherein the Inspector calls the event a "murder" while the Matron and Doktor insist it be called an "accident"; Guhl's giggle when the Doktor states that Ernesti believes he is Albert Einstein; the Doktor's insistence to play piano with Einstein rather than have him submit to the Inspector's questioning; and many more. By applying these subtle comic interactions, the playwright allows the audience to laugh while simultaneously delivering relatively serious material about nuclear fears and a pessimistic view of mankind.

Newton's taking off of his wig and confessing to the Inspector that he really believes he is Einstein is the first in what will be a long pattern of reveals and revelations. This "unpeeling" provides much of the interest of the play: the audience is given one scenario which is then quickly turned on its head, forcing the audience to try to separate the real from the make-believe, the sane from the insane.

The Inspector and the Doktor have a disagreement about the ideal treatment for the murdering madmen. The Inspector wishes to punish them with jail, while the Doktor feels they are not responsible for their actions. In fact, the Doktor foreshadows Act II's discussion of the proper place of science and the duty of the scientist when she points to scientific and medical advances in the treatment of the mentally ill as the reason to not jail the men. The Doktor claims newest medicines can make even the most violent madmen "gentle as lambs." The fact that two murders have happened and a third is on its way does much to discredit this claim. Again, no one can be trusted, and the audience must be skeptical of everything.



Act I, Part II

Act I, Part II Summary

The Matron enters. She resists the idea of having male nurses, but the Doktor's word is final. The Doktor then greets some visitors: Frau Lina Rose, madman Mobius's ex-wife, her new husband, missionary Oskar Rose, and Frau Rose's three young sons (by Mobius), Adolf-Friedrich, Wilfried-Kaspar, and Jorg-Lukas. Frau Rose introduces Oskar to the Doktor, and admits she felt she had to move on from the tragedy of Mobius's madness by marrying another man.

The reason for the family's visit: the Rose family is about to move to the Marianas Islands in the Pacific Ocean for Oskar's missionary work, and Frau Rose wanted the boys to see their father Mobius one last time. The Doktor admits that Mobius is neither worse nor better, and that no amount of medicine or treatment is seeming to help. Mobius believes King Solomon visits him, and he cares nothing for his former wife, his children, or the outside world.

Frau Rose reveals she met Mobius when he was a boy of fifteen. They fell in love and worked hard to support Mobius's academic pursuits. Mobius was nearing a professorship when he fell mentally ill. Though Frau Rose has worked very hard for Mobius's continued care at the villa, she confesses she can no longer afford the Doktor's premium prices. The situation makes Frau Rose cry, but the Doktor comforts her and states that Mobius will always have a place at the villa, no matter what Frau Rose can pay. Frau Rose is extremely grateful.

The Doktor leaves the family to visit Mobius. It's clear Mobius has trouble remembering his former life as he is introduced to Frau Rose and his children. The youngest tells Mobius he wants to be a physicist like him, and Mobius becomes angry and says he forbids him to pursue the profession. Mobius believes physics made him mad and caused him to have visions of King Solomon. Mobius meets Oskar and thinks him a good man to succeed as a father where he failed.

The boys play Mobius a little music on recorder flutes, and this enrages Mobius. He tells them to go away. After Oskar says that even King Solomon would enjoy such music, Mobius tells them that the King Solomon he knows is not the regal, wise king of old, but a shattered, naked old man crouching in the corner of his bedroom. When the Psalms of Solomon are mentioned, Mobius recites a "psalm" he learned from his own version of King Solomon. It involves the solar system and mankind's exploration of it, and it depicts mankind as spreading its filth and hate all across the cosmos. It's a very despairing vision of mankind. Mobius's insane rage increases: he throws a coffee table and yells at his family to leave, cursing them to sink into the sea once they arrive at the Marianas. The Matron and a nurse, Monika, come in and subdue Mobius as the frightened family quickly departs.



Finally, Mobius is alone with Nurse Monika. Mobius reveals he "put on" his whole violent outburst, so as to cut ties forever with his family, and so they do not think they are missing anything by never seeing him again. Further dialogue reveals that Monika is in love with Mobius. She regrets that the next day she is being transferred outside of the villa to make room for the male attendants. Monika doesn't believe Mobius is sick, and to her it doesn't matter that Mobius sees King Solomon, blinded by love as she is. Mobius wants Monika to rid herself of such foolish love for a madman.

Einstein visits. His own situation with Nurse Irene eerily resembles Mobius and Monika's. Nurse Irene fell in love with Einstein, and he urged her to leave him, but she could not. This led to Einstein strangling her. Monika doesn't heed this warning and simply urges Einstein to return to bed, which he does. Mobius again urges Monika to reconsider loving a madman, but Monika tires of devoting herself to service as a nurse: she wants to devote herself to one man, and she baldly states she wants to sleep with Mobius and have children by him.

Monika also reveals that she has convinced the Doktor to free Mobius, and that the Doktor considers Mobius's mental illness one in which he can exist in normal society. Monika has secured a job in a neighboring city, and she has even convinced Mobius's old physics professor to evaluate the work Mobius has done while confined. Monika wishes to marry Mobius and start a new life. Mobius is underwhelmed and hesitant to accept this good fortune. Monika believes that, as God sent Mobius King Solomon to reveal truths, God sent Mobius Monika.

Mobius responds by strangling Monika to death with curtains he tears from the wall. Newton hears the struggle and enters to find Monika dead and Mobius flatly admits to killing her.

Act I, Part II Analysis

The appearance of Frau Lina Rose provides the occasion to provide backstory about the most important physicist, Mobius. Mobius claims to see visions of King Solomon, and indeed his backstory mirrors the life of the famous Biblical king. Like Solomon, Mobius was a man of great wisdom and potential. He was a promising scientist in academia who was about to be awarded a professorship, and who was probably destined for greatness. But like Solomon, Mobius strayed. Whereas Solomon strayed from God in order to worship false idols, Mobius strayed to visions of King Solomon, a scenario the world believes is insane. So both Mobius and Solomon had great falls from grace due to personal flaws.

Mobius acts the part of the insane person, looking dazed, forgetful, and disoriented as he greets his ex-wife and three children. He then belies the label of the "lovable lunatic" by tossing a coffee table and cursing his family. Per the process of "unpeeling" that governs the play's action, this behavior is later revealed to be false in Mobius's dialogue with Nurse Monika: he only acted insane to cut ties with his family for their own sake. Mobius is thus revealed to be the most complex of the physicists, the most three-



dimensional. Unlike Newton's purely comic/perfunctory confession that he secretly believes he is Einstein, Mobius's reveal has an emotional truth and a certain tragic edge.

Einstein half-asleep, near-ghostly appearance during Mobius and Monika's scene is a damning foreshadowing of the murder of Monika to follow. Einstein's story of unrequited love and his "mercy killing" of the nurse who loved him perfectly mirrors the relationship Mobius and Monika have, and it comes as little surprise when Mobius strangles Monika with the curtain cord.

Like most every character, even a minor character like Monika has a "secret life": she tires of being the self-sacrificing nurse, and she longs for the comparatively selfish act of raising a family and running away with her lover. Nothing is what it seems in this closed little universe.



Act II, Part I

Act II, Part I Summary

Act II begins much like Act I. There's another dead body at the villa and the police are busy gathering evidence, taking photographs, and taking statements. They conclude it was another strangling, this time with the curtain cord.

The Inspector again speaks with the Doktor, and this time their attitudes are reversed from Act I: the Doktor insists on calling the event a murder, while the Inspector wishes to merely call it an accident. The Doktor feels the murder will result in the closing of Les Cerisiers and will ruin her reputation as a psychiatrist. To heap on addition woe, Nurse Monika was her best nurse.

The Inspector watches as three new (and very muscular) male attendants speedily prepare dinner for the physicists. The Doktor states that the men are all boxing or wrestling champions, and this seems to satisfy the Inspector about Les Cerisiers taking proper precautions around the madmen.

Mobius enters and laments over Monika's body. The Doktor is very angry at him, and Mobius apologizes. Mobius reveals that it was King Solomon who whispered in his ear the command to kill Monika. After once more apologizing to the Inspector and assuring him the situation is in hand, the tired and disillusioned Doktor exits. Mobius expects to be arrested by the Inspector, but on the contrary, the Inspector seems to delight in being unable to arrest Mobius on account of his mental illness. In the Inspector's words, "justice is on holiday," and the Inspector experiences an unexpected lightness and joy. The Inspector leaves.

Newton enters, and enjoys the fine gourmet meal of liver and dumpling soup set up by the male attendants. Mobius has no appetite. Newton now confides that he believes himself to be neither Newton, nor Einstein, nor even the name he used before that. Newton states that he is a man named Kilton, and that he works for a secret government agency. Mobius has heard of Kilton's work in physics, and he is the author of a seminal work. He went undercover to discover if any of the physicists in the villa were really geniuses, and if so, to recruit them for secret government work. Newton killed the nurse only because she discovered his secret identity. After getting to know Mobius and reading his work, Newton believes Mobius is a genius-level physicist, and he intends to escape the villa with Mobius shortly.

Einstein enters and contributes to the revelations. He claims he is also not mad, but also a secret agent with a different Intelligence Service, and his name is Joseph Eisler. Mobius also knows Eisler to be a famous physicist. Eisler was sent on the same mission, and so now it's a competition for Mobius. At this point, Newton pulls a gun on Einstein, and Einstein does the same. Both men agree to settle the matter without guns,



and they put the guns down. Einstein next reveals he also killed Irene for the same reason Newton killed his nurse: Irene found out about his secret identity.

All three men put the matter aside temporarily and enjoy dinner. The male attendants return, and as part of the new security measures they take attendance and then place prison bar-like grilles over the windows. The male attendants leave for the night. The physicists check their rooms and see they also have bars over the windows, steel bars with special locks. They feel like prisoners.

Act II, Part I Analysis

Act II begins identically to Act I: the Inspector arrives at the villa for the latest nurse murder as the police do their work on the murder scene. Again, the murderer is not in doubt, and again the Inspector can't do anything about it. This time, however, attitudes between the Inspector and the Doktor are reversed. The Inspector has essentially resigned to his powerlessness and he confides that when "justice is on a holiday" he finds it surprisingly delightful. And the Doktor's optimism about mental illness and treatment has given way to pessimism: she believes the latest murder means the end of Les Cerisiers and an end to her world-class reputation as a psychiatrist.

The grand feast prepared by the new male attendants for the three physicists is referred to as a "gallows feast," indicating that they are enjoying it under dire circumstances. In fact, the feast serves as a sort of "last meal." After the meal, they will no longer enjoy the laid back, cozy confines of a villa filled with nurses who lust after them. The women have been replaced by strong, large males, more security guards than nurses, and the physicists will be doomed to a life much more resembling prison than a resort holiday. The feast is also a gallows feast insofar that the physicists casually mention the murder of the nurses and the deliciousness of the liver and dumpling soup in the same sentence, enhancing the dark comedy aspect of the play.

Newton then Einstein reveal their true identities as secret agents recruited by their respective governments. On the face, these identities sound as ridiculous as claims to be great dead physicists, and so again the audience reacts with a healthy dose of skepticism. However, the presence of the guns and the men's standoff grounds these newest claims in reality; the play then turns in a serious direction.

The prison is completed when the male attendants put bars on the windows. This provides a very real and very visual sense that the physicists are trapped. Ironically, the prison is largely of the physicists' own making: they committed murder, and so have each fulfilled the stereotype of the violent madman who should be locked up and who cannot be trusted.



Act II, Part II

Act II, Part II Summary

Einstein and Newton are more intent than ever to escape the villa, but Mobius does not wish to go: he is resigned to his fate. Newton states that it's Mobius' responsibility as a scientific genius to share his knowledge with the world in order to better lives. Mobius remarks casually that he has essentially solved physics, and come up with (in modern parlance) the "theory of everything," a "Principle of Universal Discovery" in Mobius's words to explain all physical phenomena. This has all been dictated to him by King Solomon.

The other physicists have different reactions to this revelation. Newton states that it is a scientist's duty to release such knowledge to the world, irrespective of possible consequences (such as the atomic bomb, or worse). It is not a scientist's job to corral mankind into the correct choices, but only to share knowledge. On the other hand, Einstein believes the scientist must withhold information and use it as leverage to gain power, to play the game of politics because knowledge is dangerous in the wrong hands. Einstein and Newton conclude that their views are irreconcilable, and that the matter must be settled with violence, and so they reach for their guns.

However, Mobius tells them that he burned his manuscripts prior to the police arriving, so they wouldn't discover his work. Einstein and Newton are floored: fifteen years' work up in smoke. Mobius tries to reconcile the situation in order to decide between the two men, but after questioning, both Einstein and Newton appear to only be offering another sort of prison for Mobius, scientific work under closely guarded conditions at the whim of a country and its government. Mobius prefers the madhouse.

And finally, Mobius reveals he never had visions of King Solomon at all. He made it up in order to be declared mad so that his genius would go unrecognized. In the age of the atomic bomb, his knowledge could result in the extinction of mankind, and so he made the moral decision to hide as a madman. He killed Nurse Monika because she believed in his genius, and he wished to remain hidden. He declares that the only possible solution is for all three of them to remain in the villa forevermore. In fact, all three men deserve it, because all three men are murderers.

Though Newton and Einstein loathe the idea, all three men vow to remain in the madhouse, and to once again put on their facades of madness, not only to hide scientific knowledge but to atone for their sins. They go back to their rooms.

The male attendants return, along with the Doktor. They swap out the family portrait on the wall for another portrait. The Doktor summons all three physicists, who are "acting mad" as usual. The Doktor has her own revelation: she heard the conversation they just had, and she has seized the spies' radio transmitters. She reveals that King Solomon has spoken to her, and that he has chosen her to fulfill the mission Mobius refused to



carry out. It is the Doktor who is mad. For fifteen years the Doktor has painstakingly gleaned information from Mobius, photocopying his notes and manuscripts. She has become rich and powerful from exploiting Mobius's scientific discoveries for commercial gain, and now she plans on conquering the world using Mobius's Principle of Universal Discovery. Mobius's worst fear is realized: his knowledge will lead to the ruin of mankind at the hands of this madwoman. There is no escape for them of course, or any way to reveal this truth: that the world considers them violent and insane. In fact, in the most damning revelation, it was the Doktor who subtly persuaded each nurse to court each physicist. She knew who the men were all along, and she manipulated the whole situation so they would murder and thus the world would never believe their story.

The play ends with the men resigned to their madhouse forever. Breaking the "fourth wall," each physicist addresses the audience in turn, giving them a brief biography of Newton, Einstein, and King Solomon, respectively.

Act II, Part II Analysis

This section provides the meatiest thematic content or message of the play. Newton and Einstein represent opposing views of the scientist's role in society, with Mobius in the uneasy middle. Newton believes a scientist should share knowledge freely with no regard for the consequences; Einstein believes a scientist can and should impose conditions on knowledge, withholding it and making thoughtful decisions as to how knowledge should be released. Mobius does not like either option: he simply wishes to retreat inside the villa indefinitely, not sharing the knowledge no way or another. This position presents a sort of paradox that is explored by the play: in order to be truly free, the scientists must be confined in the asylum, and in order to pursue the sanest course of action by saving mankind from itself, the physicists must submit to the label of "insane" applied to them by mankind.

In the end, as a final twist in a series of twists, the scientists fail spectacularly to hide their knowledge, indicating that such a "head in the sand" approach is naive at best and foolish at worst. The Doktor has carefully manipulated them from the start. Her Act I statement to the Inspector that her patients are what she believes them to be proves prophetic: she knew their true identities all along. Her evil schemes prove that mankind cannot handle scientific progress, and that no matter what is tried, science will be used for evils such as the atomic bomb and the newest military machines and weapons.



Characters

Johann Wilhelm Mobius

Mobius is a mental patient under the care of Fraulein Doktor Mathilde Von Zahnd in the villa of an institution called Les Cerisiers. He is one of three mental patients, along with Herbert Georg Beutler and Ernst Heinrich Ernesti, who live in the "villa" portion of the institution: all other patients have been moved to a (never seen) new building in the vicinity. All three mental patients believe they are physicists.

Mobius had a promising career as a physicist, and was near to obtaining a professorship. In his life before coming to Les Cerisiers he was married (to Frau Lina Rose) and had three children. He then began to have visions of King Solomon, and he claimed that King Solomon visited him. These persistent visions caused him to be institutionalized.

In Act II, the audience is introduced to an entire different reality for Mobius. He claims his visions of King Solomon were all pretend, and that he intentionally faked insanity because his scientific knowledge was too dangerous to release to the world. By living in a madhouse, he is saving mankind from dangerous science. He is thus revealed to be a moral, sensible person, and perhaps one of the most sane characters in the play by the end of the Act II reversal.

Fraulein Doktor Mathilde Von Zahnd

The Doktor is a world-famous psychiatrist, and sole caretaker and inheritor of the Les Cerisiers mental institution. She is described as frail, old, and hunchbacked. She is the last in a long line of distinguished nobility, who carefully preserves her family's history through portraits on the walls.

There are essentially two faces to the Doktor. In Act I, she is portrayed as motherly, kind, and empathetic. She wishes to do no harm or enact any punishment in respect to the mental patients, even after they've murdered, because she believes they have no control of their actions and are in fact victims of mental illness without any blame in the murders. She is also kind enough to keep Mobius as a patient even after his ex-wife, Frau Lina Rose, cannot afford to pay her premium rates.

In the final Act II reveal, everything the reader thinks they know about the Doktor changes. She is revealed to be a cruel, power-hungry megalomaniac, who has manipulated everyone in the play and who has used Les Cerisiers as a facade to hide her ambitions. She is not interested in the health of her patients: in fact, she has stolen Mobius's scientific knowledge as a means of acquiring power and wealth. Mobius's greatest fears are realized in the end: his precious knowledge has fallen into the hands of a madwoman bent on ruling not only the world, but the cosmos.



Police Inspector Richard Voss

The Inspector is the local police detective who arrives at Les Cerisiers to investigate one and then another murder. He enjoys smoking and a good nip of brandy. He is quite sardonic and deadpan, and provides a bit of wry wit and comic relief. He finds his inability to arrest the madmen for murder quite freeing and delightful.

Marta Boll

Marta is the matron of Les Cerisiers, who is responsible for managing the nurses and general day-to-day upkeep and maintenance of the facility. She is strict, and does not allow smoking or drinking under her roof.

Herbert Georg Beutler (Newton)

Beutler is a mental patient at Les Cerisiers who believes he is famous physicist Sir Isaac Newton. As it is revealed in Act II, this mental illness is put on: Beutler is in reality Alex Jaspar Kilton, a famed physicist turned spy for his (unnamed) country's intelligence agency. His mission is to bring Mobius back to his country in order for his government to benefit from Mobius's scientific discoveries.

Ernst Heinrich Ernesti (Einstein)

Ernesti is a mental patient at Les Cerisiers who believes he is famous physicist Albert Einstein. As it is revealed in Act II, this mental illness is put on: Ernesti is in reality Joseph Eisler, a famed physicist turned spy for his (unnamed) country's intelligence agency. His mission is to bring Mobius back to his country in order for his government to benefit from Mobius's scientific discoveries.

Frau Lina Rose

Frau Lina Rose was married to Mobius prior to his (alleged) going insane. She cares deeply for Mobius and is very saddened to see him in his unstable state. She has worked very hard for fifteen years to provide for Mobius's room and board, but with her marriage to Oskar, she can no longer afford to provide for Mobius.

Oskar Rose

Oskar is Frau Lina Rose's second husband after she divorces from Mobius. He is a missionary whose service takes him and his family to the Marianas Islands in the Pacific.



Blocher

Blocher is a member of the police department, and it is his job to photograph the crime scene. He arrives for each of the two murders, and his action involves snapping various photographs of the drawing room.

Guhl

Guhl is a member of the police department, and he is the stenographer, taking down statements and interrogations conducted by the Inspector. Thus he is always seen writing down what is said on his notepad.

Nurse Monika

Monika is one of the nurses at the villa. She loves Mobius, and wishes to run away with him. For reasons revealed in Act II, Mobius wishes to remain in the madhouse, and so he murders Monika with a curtain cord rather than go along with Monika's plan to start a new life and a new family.



Objects/Places

Unnamed Town

The play takes place in an unnamed Western European town. It is said to be picturesque and relaxing, but at the same time its Old World charm is slowly giving way to the "hideous edifices" of modern corporate buildings.

Les Cerisiers

Les Cerisiers is the name of the mental institution run by Fraulein Doktor Mathilde Von Zahnd. She has inherited it from her wealthy family. It has become a haven for rich Europeans who have fallen mentally ill.

Drawing Room of the Villa at Les Cerisiers

The majority of the action of the play takes place in this single room. It is described as a separate building on the campus of Les Cerisiers, and attached to the room are the three bedrooms of the three physicist mental patients. The two murders of the play occur in this room.

Cigarettes and Brandy

A bit of comic business is accomplished by various characters suggesting, refusing, or not being able to enjoy cigarettes and liquor. As the governess, Marta does not allow either vices, much to the chagrin of the Inspector. Later, the Doktor encourages the Inspector to smoke and drink, and Newton hides a flask of liquor in the couch.

Curtain Cord

Mobius rips the curtain from the wall and uses its cord to strangle Nurse Monika to death.

The Gallows Feast

The play acquires darkly comic aspects when the three physicists casually talk about their respective murders of nurses as they simultaneously comment on the deliciousness of the feast prepared for them.



Family Portraits

The Doktor preserves her family's history by hanging several family portraits. She views them, and this provides the occasion to describe one or another noteworthy ancestor.

Violin

"Einstein" plays classical pieces on the violin. This music can be heard throughout a significant portion of the play's action, even if Einstein happens to be offstage. In reality, this is Einstein's way of pretending to be insane. Einstein was known to play the violin, and so to realistically depict his insanity, he also adopts the violin.

Mobius's Manuscripts

For fifteen years, Mobius has worked out his groundbreaking scientific revelations, including the "Principle of Universal Discovery, in what he collectively referred to as his manuscripts. Einstein and Newton, when it is revealed they are secret agents trying to woo Mobius, badly wish to acquire these manuscripts, but Mobius reveals he burnt them. In the end, the Doktor reveals she secretly photocopied the manuscripts, so as to profit from the knowledge herself.

Radio Transmitters

As secret agents, Einstein and Newton each have radio transmitters, serving as their only link to the outside world and the government agencies they are working for. The Doktor strips them of these transmitters, and so they become prisoners of Les Cerisiers without any hope for escape.



Themes

Fear of Nuclear Proliferation

The *Physicists* was written in the early 1960s—after the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan in World War II and during the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States (a time when nuclear war and the possible destruction of civilization felt like a very real possibility). One theme of *The Physicists* involves the fear of what mankind is capable of and how scientific progress can be used for evil, particularly if it is in the hands of a powerful government.

The playwright invents the "Principle of Universal Discovery," as developed by Mobius, as the latest and greatest scientific advance that could have even more devastating effect than the atomic bomb. In the end, all three physicists are revealed to have been manipulated by the insane Doktor. The nightmare scenario they all fear has come true: science is in the hands of an insane woman bent on world domination. The Doktor may perhaps be standing in for the Soviet Union, the realization of fears that the communist country could acquire enough destructive power, through science, to conquer the world.

The *Physicists* betrays a generally pessimistic worldview in light of this fear. If the Doktor's insanity and Einstein and Newton's power grabs are any indications, mankind is not mature or ethical enough to handle scientific knowledge and progress. In this way, the choice of King Solomon as Mobius's inner demon is appropriate. King Solomon is famous for being wise and great but overreaching and turning away from God, and thus ending his life in despair and destitution. The playwright intimates that the rapid scientific advances of the mid-20th century is coming at a similar price for mankind.

The Responsibilities of the Scientist

Related to fears of nuclear war during the Cold War, the playwright is quite explicit in using each physicist as a way to introduce different viewpoints concerning the responsibilities of the scientist in the modern world in which knowledge can be power and also destruction (e.g., the atomic bomb). In Act II, after Einstein and Newton have revealed themselves to be government agents, the three physicists squabble over what to do with Mobius's scientific discoveries.

Newton believes that knowledge is a good unto itself, and that it is the scientist's duty to share knowledge freely no matter what the consequences. With this approach, the scientist would not use knowledge as leverage or a way to gain power, but he would simply disseminate it in as broad and indiscriminating a way as possible. Einstein counters that this is foolish, because knowledge so freely distributed could easily fall into the hands of evil people. Einstein instead proposes that the scientist should play politics with knowledge, withhold it for the greatest advantage to self and country.



Mobius breaks down both reasonings by stating that, in either scenario, the scientist is not a free man. In both instances, he is beholden to a particular government or country. Mobius instead chooses a third route, and that is withhold knowledge altogether, to share it with no one, and that in fact is why he is in a madhouse, to hide from the world.

In the end, it seems there is no right answer. The machinations of all three men fail miserably, and the nightmare scenario of insane Doktor Von Zahnd using knowledge to conquer the world comes true.

The Meaning of Identity

In some ways, *The Physicists* is an exercise in characters peeling away masks, only to reveal yet another mask underneath, to the point where the audience/reader has grave doubts about the credibility of anyone, and also has doubts about easy labels like "sane" and "insane." The Doktor appears to be a matronly and altruistic caregiver, but in the end she is revealed as a power monger who claims she has been chosen by King Solomon to conquer the world. In essence and in a literal sense, the inmate is running the asylum.

Mobius initially has the most obviously "insane" symptom of seeing King Solomon and taking commands from him. However, Mobius turns out to be the most sane and most moral character in the play, as he tries (unsuccessfully) to hide knowledge from those who would use it for destruction and personal gain. However, as a "madman" in an asylum who has murdered a nurse—despite relatively good intentions—Mobius is trapped by how the world views him, as are Einstein and Newton. The Doktor knows she has beaten the men because as "madmen" they will never be believed, even though they speak the truth.

Similarly, the Doktor can continue to use her cultivated identity as an old and harmless caregiver to her advantage as she conquers the world. Even though the Doktor is "insane" because she really sees King Solomon, she is revealed to be the shrewdest of the bunch, and certainly much more shrewd than the naïve secret agents who have been trapped in a prison of their own making. In some ways, "insanity" as a concept is shown to be a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. Because the physicists play insane, the world believes they are insane, and appearance becomes reality by the end.

Style

Point of View

The Physicists keeps its focus on the single drawing room of the villa of Les Cerisiers. The play opens with a second murder at the villa having been already committed in the room. The action revolves around the events taking place in the drawing room. This creates a sense of claustrophobia that ties in neatly with the idea of the sanatorium as a sort of prison.

The fact that the play opens "in media res" with the police investigation and the murder scene creates a sense of mystery in the audience. The audience/reader creates a series of questions: who has been murdered? By whom? Why? The audience is aligned with the Inspector as he questions the Matron and has a dialogue with Newton. As the Inspector uncovers more about the villa, so in turn does the audience.

This premise is also important in that it tricks the audience into forming certain conclusions about what's going on that are then turned on their head by Act II. The notion of the "lovable lunatics" who innocently think they are men of science is completely destroyed by the end, with twist upon twist that culminates in the tame Doktor's reveal of evil and megalomania. While the term "unreliable narrator" is perhaps better applied to a novel, nonetheless there is a certain unreliability at play with The Physicists. Nothing is what it seems and multiple false personas are peeled away as the play progresses.

Setting

The entirety of The Physicists takes place in the drawing room (with accompanying bedrooms in the background) of the villa at the mental institution Les Cerisiers. Depending upon the director's particular vision, the set would likely have a sense of being cave-like and claustrophobic, a physical aspect that would nicely parallel the theme of freedom that evolves throughout the play.

At the beginning of the play, the playwright gives careful instructions that the furniture be upturned and the set otherwise disheveled, in order to suggest that there was a struggle with the murder of the nurse. The beginning of Act I mirrors Act II in this sense. At the end of Act I, Mobius tears the curtain from the wall in order to strangle Monika, and there is a violent struggle; thus, the furniture pieces at the beginning of Act II would also be in a state of disorder.

The setting importantly changes when the new male attendants place bars on all the windows. These bars give a very literal feeling of being in prison. Characters, especially Mobius, refer to the "madhouse" as a prison of sorts, and these bars make such notions a reality. The bars also foreshadow the Doktor's own schemes and her literal imprisonment of the now "sane" physicists. By the end the Doktor even admits that the



room is no longer a mental institute, but her "trust," the place where she keeps wealth, in this case the knowledge of Mobius. The physicists have thus been turned into mere instruments or tools that the Doktor will use to control the world.

Language and Meaning

Language provides important moments of characterization. When the Inspector refers to the "murder" that starts Act I, the institutional figures (the Matron, the Doktor) object to the phrase and insist the Inspector instead use the euphemism "accident." This shows a difference in point of views. The Inspector is simple and sensible, making no distinction between a sane person taking a life and an insane person taking a life. The Matron and Doktor feel that insanity is a disease and that the insane are victims of circumstance that cannot control their actions. Their insistence on using the term "accident" gets at this sense that the killers had no intent behind their actions, but were simply acting on insane impulse. Similarly, the Inspector uses the term "murderer" whereas the Matron and Doktor prefer the term "assailant," neutralizing the extremely negative connotations that accompany "murderer."

There is a reversal of this word play in Act II, however. The Inspector returns for the second murder, and he has learned his lesson, using the terms "accident" and "assailant." However, the Doktor, with all due cynicism, now prefers the terms "murder" and "murderer." At this point, the Doktor feels her reputation is ruined and that Les Cerisiers may close. Because the newest murder has affected her personally, perhaps the Doktor, in her anger, now sees the "murders" for what they are.

Additionally, the playwright uses language to force the audience/reader to question basic concepts like freedom, truth, and identity. What is the proper term for the men housed in the villa: mental patients? Madmen? Lunatics? Or are they simply ill? What is the nature of the institution? Is it a sanatorium, a madhouse, an asylum, a sanctuary? In the end, with the final twist, it is a literal prison.

Very declarations of identity are also questioned and made to be suspect. Is Beutler really Sir Isaac Newton, a man named Beutler who believes he is Newton, or really Kilton the spy pretending he is Beutler pretending to be Newton? When the characters confess their secrets, there is a good amount of doubt in other characters as well as the audience.

Structure

The Physicists is divided into two Acts. Act I starts "in media res" with two murders having already been committed at Les Cerisiers. One was committed several months ago, and one was just committed. By opening with the police investigation, the playwright allows the audience/reader to discover the circumstances surrounding the murder and the characters along with the Inspector.



There are many structural echoes both within acts and between acts. Act I culminates with Mobius's murder of Monika. With what the audience has learned about the other two nurse murders, this third murder is relatively expected, as all three involve a nurse in love with a madman. Directly prior to this murder, Einstein even briefly appears to provide very strong foreshadowing of the murder in the form of his own story with the nurse he killed.

Act II begins just as Act I, with the Inspector's arrival and the police investigation of a nurse murder. There is a strong sense of *deja vu*, of the past repeating itself. The madmen are in fact helpless in the face of this march of history, as suggested by the last twist with the Doktor's own insanity being revealed.

(False) identities are peeled away only to reveal additional falsities. Beutler is Newton, but he confides to the Inspector that he really thinks he is Einstein. The Doktor assures the Inspector that Newton does not really believe that. In Act II, however, it is revealed that Newton is in fact neither of those identities, but a secret agent. Structurally, the play is a complex series of unreliable reveals and revelations. This maintains interest and keeps the audience/reader guessing.

Quotes

"[T]he town for the most part steers clear of the hurly-burly of modern life. So the landscape is, in a superficial way, restful to the nerves." (Act I, page 1)

"NEWTON: I simply can't stand disorder. Really it was my passion for order that made me become a physicist. To interpret the apparent disorder of nature, in the light of a more sublime order." (Act I, page 6)

"DOKTOR: It is I who decide who my patients think they are. I know them far better than they know themselves." (Act I, page 10)

"MOBIUS: I have met Solomon face to face [...] He has cast away his purple robe [...] Now, here in my room, he crouches naked and stinking, the pauper king of truth, and his psalms are horrible." (Act I, page 21-22)

"MOBIUS: If you're in a madhouse already, the only way to get rid of the past is to behave like a madman." (Act I, page 24)

"EINSTEIN: She wanted to take me away into the country. To Kohlwang. She wanted to marry me. She even obtained permission for the wedding from Fraulein Doktor von Zahnd herself. Then I strangled her. Poor Nurse Irene." (Act I, page 26)

"INSPECTOR: Well, I'm damned!

DOKTOR: Satisfied?

INSPECTOR: Envious. If we had them with the police . . .

DOKTOR: Their wages are astronomical.

INSPECTOR: With all your industrial barons and multi-millionaires you can certainly afford such luxuries." (Act II, page 33)

"INSPECTOR: All at once I'm enjoying myself. I could shout with joy. I have discovered three murderers whom I can, with an easy conscience, leave unmolested. For the first time in my life justice is on holiday—and it's a terrific feeling." (Act II, page 35)

"NEWTON: Nurse Dorothea no longer considered me to be demented; Fraulein Doktor von Zahnd thought I was only slightly touched; to prove my total insanity I had to commit a murder. I say, this poulet a la brouche is simply superb." (Act II, page 37)



"MOBIUS: Extraordinary. Each of you is trying to palm off a different theory, yet the reality you offer me is the same in both cases: a prison. I prefer the madhouse. Here at least I feel safe from the exactions of power politicians." (Act II, page 44)

"MOBIUS: Are those murders we committed to stand for nothing? Either they were sacrificial killings, or just plain murders. Either we stay in this madhouse or the world becomes one. Either we wipe ourselves out of the memory of mankind or mankind wipes itself out." (Act II, page 45-46)

"DOKTOR: Now I shall be mightier than my forefathers. My cartel will dictate in each country, each continent; it will ransack the solar system and thrust out beyond the nebula in Andromeda. It all adds up, and the answer comes out in favor, not of the world, but of an old hunchbacked spinster." (Act II, page 51-52)

Topics for Discussion

What does the Doktor believe (or at least say she believes) in Act I, in regards to the mentally ill and how they should be treated? Are any of the physicists responsible for their murders in her eyes?

Why does Newton believe that the Inspector is a criminal?

Compare and contrast Einstein and Newton's views of the responsibility of the scientist.

At the time of the murder, why does the audience/reader believe Mobius kills Monika? How does this reason change (for the audience) as more is revealed about Mobius in Act II?

Why has Mobius created the lie of seeing King Solomon?

What is Mobius's view of his own scientific discoveries? What does he try to do (or not do) with his knowledge? Does he succeed?

How does the Inspector feel about being unable to arrest the murdering madmen?