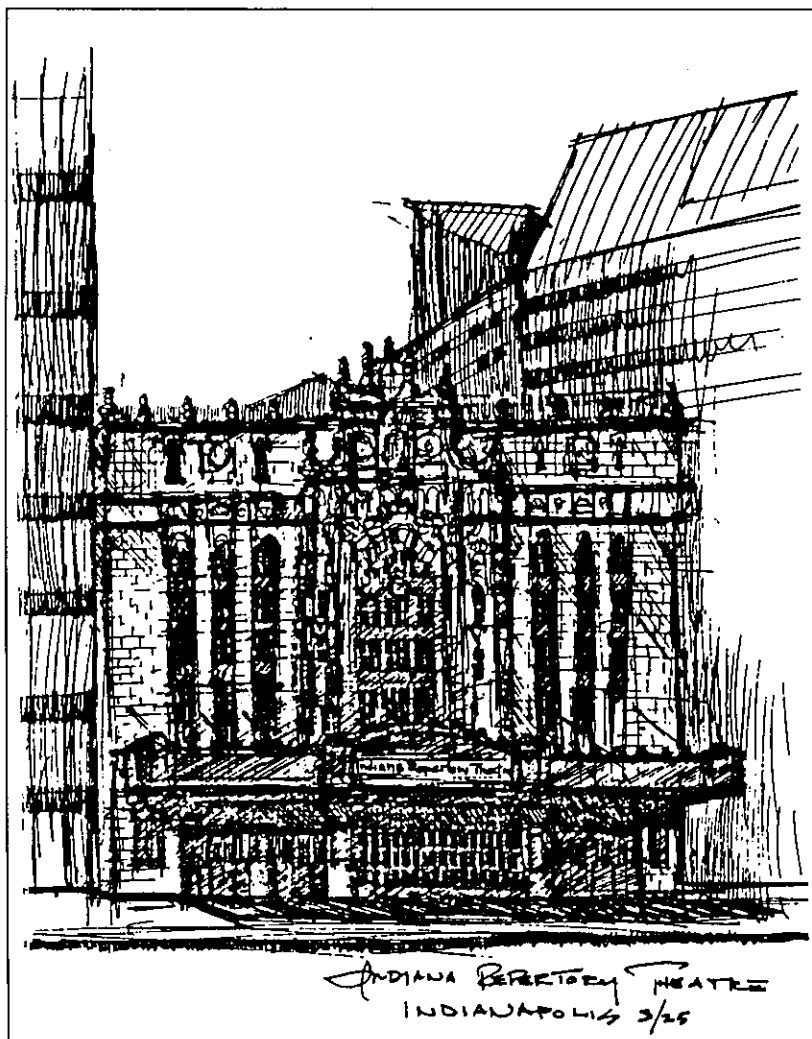


# Study Guide



## Indiana Repertory Theatre

**The Great Divide**  
by William Vaughn Moody

Indiana Repertory Theatre  
Oct. 26-November 19, 1988

**IRT's Educational Program  
is underwritten by Target Stores**

Cover Art by G. W. Mercier

## IRT Revives Hoosier Playwright's 1906 Play *The Great Divide*

"Give me a cave and a cup of water on the mountain of the muses, and let me die unproduced. If I must write plays, buy me a burglar-proof safe, with a time lock set for A.D. 2006, to keep them in," wrote a depressed William Vaughn Moody after wincing through a dress rehearsal of his new play in Albany, N.Y. on September 10, 1906.

Moody's misgivings were echoed by the critics who panned the play during its try-out run. Despite their damning reviews, it opened in New York at the Princess Theatre on October 3, 1906, and lo and behold, became a landmark in American theatre history.

*The Great Divide* ran for 266 performances on Broadway, on tour it chalked up 1000 engagements across the U.S., and subsequent productions were mounted in London and Paris. Can we assume the elated Mr. Moody traded his cup of water for a glass of champagne?

Hailed by scholars as "the first modern American drama," the play was relegated to the pages of anthologies and given terse but consistent mention in virtually every chronicle of American theatre history—until Tom Haas, Artistic Director of the Indiana Repertory Theatre got his hands on it, that is. In October and November, the IRT is staging the first major professional revival of *The Great Divide* since 1920.

Haas, who is directing the production, articulates his enthusiasm for Moody's stagecraft: "I think *The Great Divide* is Moody's reading of late Ibsen in a very American world. Ghent is Ibsen's 'mysterious stranger,' but both Ruth Jordan and Stephen Ghent are very American characters. The complexities of these two are enormous. The reverberations of 'the Great Divide'—east and west, woman and man, head and heart—puddle and parallel constantly through the play."

A New Englander by birth, Jordan moves to the Arizona desert with her brother and sister-in-law. Ruth's infatuation with the gorgeous, gaping desert landscape reveals her spirited, freedom-loving nature—in contrast to her staunch, Puritan upbringing and morals. Left alone in the cabin one night, Ruth is attacked by three drunken cowboys bent on rape. She begs Stephen Ghent, apparently the least drunk of the three, to save her from his comrades in exchange for a promise to marry him. Despite Ghent's subsequent success as a gold miner and his devotion to her, Ruth cannot reconcile the tarnished circumstances of their marriage. She earns enough money in secret to leave him and returns to her family home in Massachusetts. Ghent pursues her, and in the final scene, both characters recognize the merging of their east-and-west ideologies and morals—and their mutual love.

In outline, the plot may appear to reek of old-fashioned melodrama, but on its feet, Moody's tight structure propels the action forward with dynamic intensity. Act I's attempted rape scene was undoubtedly portrayed more by suggestion back in 1906, but in the IRT production it becomes a brutal and genuinely terrifying ordeal for Ruth. Haas's graphic staging of the attempted rape reflects the entire production's realistic style—one that Haas believes is inherent in the play—testament to a critic's claim that Moody might have been another Eugene O'Neill, had he lived beyond the age of 41.

The same magnificent landscape that inspired Indiana native William Vaughn Moody to compose his play after a trip to Arizona in 1904 compelled Haas to produce it. After several years of keeping the script on a back burner in his mind, Haas journeyed for the first time to Arizona in 1987. "The minute I saw the canyons, I thought, 'This is *The Great Divide*.' Between the canyons and the desert—the impact is inexplicable. The desert is so alive, it vibrates. Ruth talks about the 'sublime abstraction' of the West, but she can't quite articulate it. Ghent embodies the impact of the landscape as a symbol of the expansive American West."

The IRT translated this impact into a panoramic backdrop of three-dimensional, textured mountains set against a vast cyclorama of sky. These ever-present peaks intentionally dominate the downstage cabin interior of Act I and the facade of Ghent's adobe house in Act II. Only in Act III, which takes place in the conservatory of the Jordan home, are they obscured by a scrim. But during the play's closing moments when Ruth and Ghent reconcile, scene designer G. W. Mercier's majestic landscape reemerges from the darkness, creating a visual climax to complement Moody's dramatic one.

Part of Haas's attraction to *The Great Divide* stems from his interest in producing rediscovered American classics. During his eight-year tenure at IRT, Haas has focused his repertory on classic American work—both the famous and the forgotten. "The forgotten classics give us a sense of where we came from," Haas says. "For the Royal Shakespeare Company it's *King John*; for us it's *The Great Divide*."

## THE GREAT DIVIDE--a synopsis (a funloving retelling of the story of the play in Western lingo)

Ruth Jordan was the kinda gal you'd think was born in the middle of the Arizona desert, but the truth was she was brung up in Medford Corners, Massachusetts, by people who didn't know a burro from a hole in the ground. Her brother Philip brought Ruth and his wife Polly out to harvest cactus fiber, and Ruth took to her new life like a pig to a mud waller. Her sister-in-law was a critter of a different color, though—she was forever talking about taking a trip back to civilization, and finally she got her way. She took off for Frisco on the same night that Philip went to pick up supplies. That night turned out to be a fateful one, on account of Ruth decided that she'd stay behind to look after the homestead. Winthrop Newbury, the young doc that had growed up with Ruth back East and still had a hankering for her, was called out to treat one of the hands who'd fallen off his horse, and Ruth was left alone.

A pack of drunken desperados happened across the place and forced their way in, aiming to use Ruth for their pleasure. She picked out the least omery of the gang and promised to go away with him if he'd save her from the others. Which is just what the feller did, buying off the one called Shorty with a chain of gold, and sending the other one off with a bullet in his britches. Ruth begged him to let her out of the deal, but he maintained he'd held up his end of the bargain and promised he was gonna make something good out of this night. Didn't seem like she had much choice, so Ruth left her brother a note explaining that she'd run away to get married, and they went off into the Arizona night.

Well, it turned out the feller had a gold mine to his name—which was Stephen Ghent, by the by—and he took Ruth there, marrying her along the way. They lived simply for some 8 months, scrimping and saving, but then the mine started booming, and Stephen started making plans to build a new-fangled house for his wife, one the architect promised would fit right in with the surroundings. She was having none of it and told him he couldn't buy her love no matter how much he was willing to spend. They'd had some tender times, the two of them, but she couldn't forget that she'd been forced to marry him, and that memory would forever keep them from being happy.

About that time, who should blow in but Philip, Polly, and Winthrop, looking like a tribe of tumbleweeds. They'd seen her down at the new Buena Vista hotel selling some rugs and baskets and had trailed her home. Philip was furious with her for deserting them, and informed her that since that night the Cactus Fiber business had gone bust. They were headed for Massachusetts and wanted Ruth to come with them. Ruth declined and made out like she was happy as a pack-rat in a grain bin. But after they left, she told Stephen she'd been selling her craftwork to earn enough money to buy a chain of gold—the same chain he'd traded for her that night they'd met. She'd tracked down Shorty, and now she was hoping that Stephen would take the chain back and let her go free, not just for her sake, but on account of the baby she was carrying. When he heard that, Stephen lit up like a Christmas tree and told her that he'd never let her go. But when Philip came back, Stephen relented and left it up to Ruth to choose her own destiny. In tears, she took her brother's arm and they headed for home.

Back in Massachusetts, Ruth had her little boy and looked after the little rooster well enough, though she never seemed to get much joy out of mothering. She moped around the house as if her favorite pony had the hoof-and-mouth. Polly and her mother were worried about her, so they sent word to Stephen, hoping he might come out to Medford Corners and make things right. Turned out that Stephen was already there—he'd followed Ruth when she left Arizona six months before, holing up down the road and bribing the cook for news of his wife and young 'un. He'd given Ruth's mother money so she wouldn't lose her house, and now he wanted to give Philip back the old Cactus Fiber business, which Stephen had bought up and turned profitable again.

He was also hoping that Ruth would give their marriage another chance. She'd been taught that you never stopped paying for your sins and that no good could come from bad, but Stephen held that Ruth had turned his life around and he wanted a chance to prove it to her and to their son. Ruth looked into the face of the man she called her husband and wrassled with the questions that had tormented her ever since the night they'd met. Between the two of them there'd always been a great divide, on account of how they'd been brung up and how they'd come together. But there was something in each of them that longed to cross over all the things that separated them, saddle up a couple of pintos, and ride off together into the sunset.

[This article was contributed by Arts Indiana Editor in Chief N. J. Stanley, whose interest in IRT's revival of *The Great Divide* has prompted her to write about the play and the production for several periodicals.]

WILLIAM VAUGHN MOODY  
(8 July 1869-17 October 1910)

PRODUCTIONS: *A Sabine Woman*, 12 April 1906, Garrick Theatre, Chicago; revised as *The Great Divide*, 3 October 1906, Princess Theatre, New York, 238 (performances);  
*The Faith Healer*, 19 January 1910, Savoy Theatre, New York, 6.

BOOKS: *The Masque of Judgment* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1909);  
*Poems* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1901);  
*A History of English Literature*, by Moody and Robert Morss Lovett (New York: Scribners, 1902);  
*The Fire-Bringer* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1904);  
*A First View of English Literature*, by Moody and Lovett (New York: Scribners, 1905);  
*The Faith Healer* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1909; revised edition, New York: Macmillan, 1910);  
*The Great Divide* (New York: Macmillan, 1909);

*The Poems and Plays of William Vaughn Moody*, 2 vols., ed. John M. Marly (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1912);  
*Selected Poems of William Vaughn Moody*, ed. Lovett (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1931).

William Vaughn Moody's five plays skillfully blend the romanticism and the realism of two eras. Chiefly remembered as a transitional playwright and poet, Moody bridges the gap between traditional forms of the nineteenth century and experimental designs of the twentieth century. Although his ambitious trilogy of philosophical verse plays (*The Masque of Judgment*, *The Fire-Bringer*, and *The Death of Eve*) was never staged, his prose dramas (*The Great Divide* and *The Faith Healer*) establish his dramatic reputation as a pioneer of modern theatre. Moody's importance lies in the way he used his abilities as a poet to expand the limits of realistic melodrama.

Born in Spencer, Indiana, Moody grew up in New Albany, Indiana, on the Ohio River, directly across from Louisville, a center of commerce for the area. Before Moody was born, his father, Burdette Moody, had been a riverboat captain, traveling to and from New Orleans; however, when the Civil War erupted, Moody's boat was confiscated in Memphis and his piloting on the river was ended. Eventually he served as the employee of his brother-in-law's iron works business in New Albany, unhappy at the loss of his former freedom on the river. William Moody's aspirations were deeply influenced by his mother's love of art, music, and literature. As Moody grew up, she guided him, even

At the New Albany High School Moody edited a school newspaper, the *Minute-Man*, which was dedicated to attacking "evil institutions and abuses" in society. Graduating first in his class in 1885, Moody delivered for the valedictory speech his essay entitled "The Evolution of History." He was encouraged in his writing by the school's principal, R. A. Ogg, who suggested that Moody pursue a college education in the East.

Moody's mother died in 1884, his father in 1886. More on his own now, he taught high school at Corydon Pike, Indiana, near New Albany, for a year and began to read extensively and write poetry. In 1887 he went to Poughkeepsie, New York, to tutor a student for the Yale entrance exams, and he attended Riverview Academy to prepare for college himself. He graduated from Riverview in 1889 with

the highest average in the school's history and entered Harvard on a scholarship of \$400, supplementing his income with a loan of \$1,000 from an uncle and by tutoring, proctoring, typing, and editing.

In his first year at Harvard, Moody published poems and a short story in the college's literary magazines, the *Advocate* and the *Monthly*. As a result of these publications, Moody became closely associated with others interested in literature: Robert Morss Lovett, Hutchins and Norman Hapgood, and Robert Herrick—all on the *Monthly*'s editorial board which Moody himself was invited to join even though he was a first-year student. Many recent Harvard graduates kept in touch with the *Monthly*'s activities, and consequently Moody met several prominent writers and intellectuals, including George Pierce Baker and George Santayana, who were members of the Harvard faculty by then.

After completing his bachelor's degree in three years, he toured Europe the following year as tutor for a young man. Returning to Harvard, he received a master's degree in 1894, then worked as an instructor in the English department of Harvard and Harvard Annex (Radcliffe), assisting in Lewis E. Gates's writing courses. One of his associates was Josephine Preston Peabody, whom Moody met in 1895 at Harvard's English Club. She was a special student at the Annex and had enrolled in classes taught by Gates and George Pierce Baker. Peabody was already publishing poetry in the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Scribner's*, and she went on to establish herself as a playwright. In later years she and Moody remained friends, and he frequently offered constructive criticism of her work.

From 1895 through 1898 Moody taught English at the University of Chicago. Anxious to pursue his writing career, however, he arranged to teach half the year and remain on leave the other half. At the end of the fall term of 1899, he left Chicago for Boston and then New York, spending all of 1900 to complete his *Poems* (1901). His student

less, Moody did not like the duties of teaching, especially the monotonous task of correcting themes. His letters during this period refer with disgust to the "spiritual beggary" of "back teaching." Moody's academic aloofness is suggested by his students calling him "The Man in the Iron Mask"; perhaps because he was shy and taciturn, a colleague commented that, "It took Moody a pipeful to make a remark."

In 1901 Moody received an attractive offer from the University of California to teach for one semester at full salary—an offer which the University of Chicago matched, additionally permitting Moody to request another year's absence. The financial success of his textbooks on English literature, which he co-authored with his friend Robert Morss Lovett, enabled Moody to remain free from teaching. Except for a three-month stint in 1903, he did not teach again, although he stayed on the university register through 1908 as an assistant professor on leave.

With his teaching days over, Moody devoted himself completely to writing a prose drama, *A Sabine Woman* (later revised as *The Great Divide*), produced in Chicago in April 1906. In addition to *A History of English Literature* (1902) and *A First View of English Literature* (1905), he had already published book reviews, poems, two verse dramas, and editions of writers such as Bunyan, Coleridge, Milton, Scott, and Homer. Moody's talent was recognized by his election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1905. *The Great Divide* was received as a play of exceptional merit when it opened in New York in October 1906 for a successful run of 238 performances. While his second stage production, *The Faith Healer* (1910), did not enjoy this same popular success, Moody won critical acclaim for his plays' high merits. Moreover, in 1908 Moody received an honorary Doctor of Letters degree from Yale.

Critics have speculated that Moody's work as a playwright might have been second only to that of Eugene O'Neill had he lived longer than forty-one years. Having suffered a severe typhoid fever attack in March 1908, he was nursed by his longtime friend, Harriet Brainard, whom he married on 7 May 1909. Faced with the beginnings of blindness while honeymooning in England, he returned with her to southern California as his health deteriorated. He wrote one act of *The Death of Eve* but became too seriously ill to complete it. They moved to Colorado Springs in October 1910 in a last attempt for his recovery, but Moody died of a brain tumor on 17 October 1910.

A man of fine critical and creative intellect, Moody reflects his profound sensitivity and intelligence in his poetic and prose dramas. His chief merit as a dramatist lies in his highly lyrical poetic dramas rather than in the prose dramas that were

diction, syntax, and rhetoric. At their best, these plays reflect intensely emotional and serious themes; at their worst, they deteriorate into bathos and exalted moral idealism marked by rhetorical extravagance.

*The Masque of Judgment* (1900), written first but placed second in the trilogy, celebrates the dignity of man's rebellion against God. Set in Miltonian landscape, from the time of the Incarnation to the Judgment Day, it focuses on protagonist/archangel Raphael's conversations with Uriel and Michael. Other dramatic personae include an assortment of celestial "Spirits" and emblematic figures from the Book of Revelation: Spirits of the Seventh Lamp of the Throne, the Angel of the Pale Horse, the Lion and the Eagle of the Throne, Spirits of the Sacred and the Lost, and the Spirit of the Morning-star. These personifications of religious abstractions are used to define man's conflict with God. Ending with the destruction of heaven, the masque shows Moody's disapproval of the Puritans' God of wrath and of their concept of man's original depravity. The prelude and five acts (blank verse alternating with rhymed lyrics) dramatize the sanctity of the

He strongly believed that modern life could be presented best on stage in the poetic medium. However, he was concerned as well about the limitations inherent in theatre. In 1909 he wrote a friend, describing his concern with the physical nature of the stage: "I am torn between the ideal aspect of the theme and the stage necessities—the old, old problem. Perhaps in the end I will let the stage go to ballyhoo, and write the thing as I see it, for that justly lighted and managed stage of the mind, where there are no bad actors and where the peanut-eating of the public is reduced to a discreet minimum. But this—after all—is an unencouraged compromise." Nevertheless, his reputation as a playwright lies foremost with his prose plays, in which he managed to address the moral and metaphysical concerns of his day. His use of mythic symbolism, realistic detail, fine craftsmanship, and direct confrontation of contemporary problems makes his plays fine examples of American drama during the first decade in the twentieth century.

Moody's trilogy of verse dramas reflects his conservative attitude toward prosody. He adhered strictly to traditional forms and techniques in meter, human spirit, even when it defies God's authority.

*The Fire-Bringer* (1904), written second but the first play in the trilogy, stresses one's supreme duty to rebel in order to assert his dignity, his free will; one's physical and intellectual desires are more important than submission to his Creator. The play celebrates Prometheus, who, because he has struggled with the gods and been punished by Zeus for bringing back fire from Olympus to Deukalion and Peritha and for warning men of the deluge, is a



## A PRAIRIE RIDE

I

WHEN I look back and say, of all our hours  
This one or that was best,  
Straightway, from north and south, from east and  
west,  
With banners strange and tributary powers  
The others camp against me. Thus,  
Now for many nights and days,  
The hills of memory are mutinous,  
Hearing me raise  
Above all other praise  
That autumn morn  
When league on league between ripe fields of corn,  
Gallop neck and neck or loitering hand in hand,  
We rode across the prairie land  
Where I was born.

II

I never knew how good  
Were those fields and happy farms,  
Till, leaning from her horse, she stretched her  
arms  
To greet and to receive them; nor for all  
My knowing, did I know her womanhood  
Until I saw the gesture understood,  
And answer made, and amity begun.  
On the proud fields and on her proud bent head  
The sunlight like a covenant did fall;  
Then with a gesture rich and liberal  
She raised her hands with laughter to the sun, —  
And it was done,  
Never in life or death to be gainsaid!  
And I, till then,  
Home-come yet alien,  
Held by some thwart and skeptic mind aloof  
From nature's dear behoof,  
Knelt down in heart and kissed the kindly earth,  
And, having swept on wings of mirth  
The big horizon round, I swiftly clomb,  
And from the utter dome  
Of most high morning laughed, and sang my loved  
one home!  
Meanwhile, within the rings our laughter made,  
Bending like a water-arum  
Where impetuous waters meet,  
Rhythmic to the strong alarum,  
Of her horse's rushing feet,

Before me and beside me and on before me swayed  
Her body like a water-arum blade,  
Like a slanted gull for motion,  
And the blown corn like an ocean  
For its billows and their rumor, and the tassels  
snapping free  
As whittled foam and brine-scud of the sea.  
Thanks to God,  
No ocean, but the rife and homely sod,  
And golden corn to feed  
A universe at need!  
Land of mine, my mother's country!  
My heritage! — But through her loosening hair  
She has tossed me back the dare.  
Drunken-hearted! shall it be a race indeed?  
Then drink again, and drink again, to reeling  
drink the winy speed!

III

Ye on the jealous hills,  
Ye shall not have your wills  
For many a dreaming day  
And haunted night.  
To that high morning, walled and domed with  
light,  
I am given away;  
And often here, above the weary feet  
That pour along this fierce and jaded street,  
As from a taintless source  
Of power and grace,  
Anxious and shrill and sweet  
I hear her strong unblemished horse  
Neigh to the pastured mothers of the race.

William Vaughn Moody