let alone talk to a potential suitor. Although the "gentleman caller" draws her out of her shell for a short time, she soon withdraws again. Laura's inability to change reinforces the play's theme that contemporary society, with its emphasis on progress, has no place for people like her who live in private worlds "of glass animals and old, worn-out phonograph records."

Various staging elements, such as props and furnishings, may also convey the themes of a play. In *Death of a Salesman*, Biff's trophy, which is constantly in the audience's view, is a prop that ironically underscores the futility of Willy's efforts to achieve success. Similarly, the miniature animals in *The Glass Menagerie* suggest the fragility of Laura's character and the futility of her efforts to fit into the modern world. And, in *Trifles*, the depressing farm house, the broken birdcage, and the dead canary hint at Mrs. Wright's misery and the reason she murdered her husband.

Special lighting effects and music can also suggest a play's themes. Throughout *The Glass Menagerie*, for example, words and pictures are projected onto a section of the set between the front room and dining room walls. In scene 1, as Tom's mother, Amanda, tells him about her experiences with her "gentlemen callers," an image of her as a girl greeting callers appears on the screen. As Amanda continues, the words "Où sont les Nègres"—"Where are the snows [of yesteryear]?"—appear on the screen. Later in the play, when Laura and her mother discuss a boy Laura knew, his picture is projected on the screen, showing him as a high school hero carrying a silver cup. In addition to the slides, Williams uses music—a recurring tune, dance music, and "Ave Maria"—to increase the emotional impact of certain scenes. He also uses shafts of light focused on selected areas or characters to create a dreamlike atmosphere for the play. Collectively, the slides, music, and lighting reinforce the theme that those who retreat into the past inevitably become estranged from the present.

As you read, your own values and beliefs influence your interpretation of a play's themes. For instance, your interest in the changing status of women could lead you to focus on the submissive, almost passive, role of Willy's wife, Linda, in *Death of a Salesman*. As a result, you could conclude that the play shows how, in the post–World War II United States, women like Linda often sacrificed their own happiness for that of their husbands. Remember, however, that the play itself, not just your own feelings or assumptions about it, must support your interpretation.

**CHECKLIST**  Writing about Theme

- What is the central theme of the play?
- What other themes can you identify?
- Does the title of the play suggest a theme?
- What conflicts exist in the play? How do they shed light on the themes of the play?
- Do any characters' statements express or imply a theme of the play?
- Do any characters change during the play? How do these changes suggest the play's themes?
- Do certain characters resist change? How does their failure to change suggest a theme of the play?
- Do scenery and props help to communicate the play's themes?
- Does music reinforce certain ideas in the play?
- Does lighting underscore the themes of the play?

**DAVID HENRY HWANG** (1957— ) was born in Los Angeles. The son of Chinese-American immigrants, Hwang wrote his first play before he graduated from Stanford. *FOB* (Fresh Off the Boat), which was first performed in 1979, won the 1981 Obie as Best New Play of the Season. Hwang attended the Yale School of Drama from 1980 to 1981, and his next two plays, *The Dance and the Railroad* (1981) and *Family Devotions* (1981), were both based on the problems of immigrants trying at the same time to assimilate and to avoid assimilation into a new culture. In 1988, his Broadway hit, *M. Butterfly*, won the Tony Award for best play and established him as a major modern American playwright. The play was adapted into the 1993 feature film *M. Butterfly*. In his latest play, *Yellow Face* (2007), the protagonist's experiences are based closely on Hwang's own life.

**Cultural Context** With the advent of the Gold Rush and the burgeoning development of the railroad in the early nineteenth century, a large number of Chinese immigrants arrived to work in the United States. Many of these immigrants viewed their residency as temporary and did not wish to assimilate into American culture. Others wanted to stay but longed for a neighborhood of their own, and as a result, Chinatowns were born, with the largest in San Francisco and New York. Chinatowns, such as the one referred to in this play, are distinguished by bilingual signs, as well as by numerous restaurants, stores, and businesses that serve the Asian population.
Trying to Find Chinatown (1996)

CHARACTERS
Benjamin
Ronnie

SETTING
A street corner on the Lower East Side, New York City. The present.

NOTE ON MUSIC
Obviously, it would be foolish to require that the actor portraying Ronnie perform the specified violin music live. The score of this play can be played on tape over the house speakers, and the actor can feign playing the violin using a bow treated with soap. However, to effect a convincing illusion, it is desirable that the actor possess some familiarity with the violin, or at least another stringed instrument.

Darkness. Over the house speakers, fade in Hendrix-like virtuoso rock ’n’ roll riffs—heavy feedback, distortion, phase shifting, wah-wah—amplified over a tiny Fender pug-nose.

Lights fade up to reveal that the music’s being played over a solid-body electric violin by Ronnie, a Chinese American male in his mid-twenties, dressed in retro sixties clothing, with a few requisite nineties body mutilations. He’s playing on a sidewalk for money, his violin case open before him, change and a few stray bills having been left by previous passers-by.

Enter Benjamin, early twenties, blond, blue-eyed, looking like a midwestern tourist in the big city. He holds a scrap of paper in his hands, scanning street signs for an address. He pauses before Ronnie, listens for a while. With a truly bravura run, Ronnie concedes the number, falls on his knees, gasping. Benjamin applauds.

Benjamin: Good. That was really great. (Pause.) I didn’t ... I mean, a fiddle ...


Benjamin: It just slipped out. I didn’t mean to —

Ronnie: If this was a fiddle, I’d be sitting here with a cob pipe, stomping my cowboy boots and kicking up hay. Then I’d go home and fuck my cousin.

Ronnie: You’re lucky I’m such a goddamn softie. (He looks at the paper.) Oh, fuck you. Just suck my dick, you and the cousin you rode in on.

Benjamin: I don’t get it! What are you —?

Ronnie: Eat me. You know exactly what I —

Benjamin: I’m just asking for a little —

Ronnie: 13 Doyers St. Like you don’t know where that is?

Benjamin: Of course I don’t know! That’s why I’m asking —

Ronnie: C’mon, you trailer-park refugee. You don’t know that’s Chinatown?

Benjamin: Sure I know that’s Chinatown.

Ronnie: I know you know that’s Chinatown.

Benjamin: So? That doesn’t mean I know where Chinatown —

Ronnie: So why is it that you picked me, of all the street musicians in the city — to point you in the direction of Chinatown? Lemme guess — is it the earring? No, I don’t think so. The Hendrix riffs! Guess again, you fucking moron.

Benjamin: Now, wait a minute. I see what you’re —

Ronnie: What are you gonna ask me next? Where can you find the best dim sum in the city? Whether I can direct you to a genuine opium den? Or do I know how you can meet Miss Saigon for a night of rookie-rookie followed by a good old-fashioned ritual suicide? (He picks up his violin.) Now, get your white ass off my sidewalk. One dollar doesn’t even begin to make up for all this aggravation. Why don’t you go back home and face the bullfrogs, or whatever it is you do for —?

Benjamin: Brother, I can absolutely relate to your anger. Righteous rage, I suppose would be a more appropriate term. To be marginalized, as we are, by a white racist patriarchy, to the point where the accomplishments of our people are obliterated from the history books, this is cultural genocide of the first order, leading to the fact that you must do battle with all Euro-America’s emasculating and brutal stereotypes of Asians — the opium den, the sexual objectification of the Asian female, the exoticized image of a
tourist’s Chinatown which ignores the exploitation of workers, the failure to unionize, the high rate of mental illness and tuberculosis — against these, each day, you rage, no, not as a victim, but as a survivor, yes, brother, a glorious warrior survivor!

Silence.

RONNIE: Say what?

BENJAMIN: So, I hope you can see that my request is not —

RONNIE: Wait, wait.

BENJAMIN: — motivated by sorts of racist assumptions —

RONNIE: But, but where . . . how did you learn all that?

BENJAMIN: All what?

RONNIE: All that — you know — oppression stuff — tuberculosis . . .

BENJAMIN: It’s statistically irrefutable. TB occurs in the community at a rate —

RONNIE: Where did you learn it?


RONNIE: Where did you go to college?

BENJAMIN: University of Wisconsin. Madison.

RONNIE: Madison, Wisconsin?

BENJAMIN: That’s not where the bridges are, by the way.

RONNIE: Huh? Oh, right . . .

BENJAMIN: You wouldn’t believe the number of people who —

RONNIE: They have Asian-American studies in Madison, Wisconsin? Since when?

BENJAMIN: Since the last Third World Unity sit-in and hunger strike. (Pause.) Why do you look so surprised? We’re down.

RONNIE: I dunno. It just never occurred to me, the idea of Asian students in the Midwest going on a hunger strike.

BENJAMIN: Well, a lot of them had midterms that week, so they fasted in shifts. (Pause.) The administration never figured it out. The Asian students put that “they all look alike” stereotype to good use.

RONNIE: OK, so they got Asian-American studies. That still doesn’t explain —

BENJAMIN: What?

RONNIE: What you were doing doing taking it?...

BENJAMIN: Just like everyone else. I wanted to explore my roots. After a lifetime of assimilation, I wanted to find out who I really am. (Pause.)

RONNIE: And did you?

BENJAMIN: Sure. I learned to take pride in my ancestors who built the railroads, my Pops who would make me a hot bowl of jok with thousand-day-old eggs when the white kids chased me home yelling: “Gook! Chink! Slant-eyes!”

RONNIE: OK, OK, that’s enough!

BENJAMIN: Painful to listen to, isn’t it?

RONNIE: I don’t know what kind of bullshit ethnic studies program they’re running over in Wisconsin, but did they teach you that in order to find your Asian “roots,” it’s a good idea first to be Asian? (Pause.)

BENJAMIN: Are you speaking metaphorically?

RONNIE: No! Literally! Look at your skin!

Ronnie grabs Benjamin’s hands, holds them up before his face.

BENJAMIN: You know, it’s very stereotypical to think that all Asian skin tones conform to a single hue.

RONNIE: You’re white! Is this some kind of redneck joke or something? Am I the first person in the world to tell you this?

BENJAMIN: Oh! Oh! Oh!

RONNIE: I know real Asians are scarce in the Midwest, but . . . Jesus!

BENJAMIN: No, of course, I . . . I see where your misunderstanding arises.

RONNIE: Yeah. It’s called “You white.”

BENJAMIN: It’s just that — in my hometown of Tribune, Kansas, and then at school — see, everyone knows me — so this sort of thing never comes up. (He offers his hand.) Benjamin Wong. I forget that a society wedded to racial constructs constantly forces me to explain my very existence.

RONNIE: Ronnie Chang. Otherwise known as “The Bowman.”

BENJAMIN: You see, I was adopted by Chinese-American parents at birth. So clearly, I’m an Asian American —

RONNIE: Even though they could put a picture of you in the dictionary next to the definition of “WASP.”

BENJAMIN: Well, you can’t judge my race by my genetic heritage.

RONNIE: If genes don’t determine race, what does?

BENJAMIN: Maybe you’d prefer that I continue in denial, masquerading as a white man?

RONNIE: Listen, you can’t just wake up and say, “Ooie, I feel Black today.”

BENJAMIN: Brother, I’m just trying to find what you’ve already got.

RONNIE: What do I got?

BENJAMIN: A home. With your people. Picketing with the laundry workers. Taking refuge from the daily slights against your masculinity in the noble image of Gwan Gung.

RONNIE: Gwan who?

BENJAMIN: C’mon — the Chinese God of warriors and — what do you take me for? There’s altars to him up all over the community.

RONNIE: I dunno what community you’re talking about, but it’s sure as hell not mine. (Pause.)

BENJAMIN: What do you mean?

RONNIE: I mean, if you wanna call Chinatown your community, OK, knock yourself out, learn to use chopsticks. Go ahead, try and find your roots in some dim sum parlor with headless ducks hanging in the window. Those places don’t tell you a thing about who I am.

BENJAMIN: Oh, I get it.

RONNIE: You get what?

BENJAMIN: You’re one of those self-hating, assimilated Chinese Americans, aren’t you?

RONNIE: Oh, Jesus.
Ronnie puts his violin to his chin, begins to play a jazz composition of his own invention.

Does it have to sound like Chinese opera before people like you decide that I know who I am? (Benjamin stands for a long moment, listening to Ronnie play. Then, he drops his dollar into the case, turns, and exits. Ronnie continues to play a long moment. Then Benjamin enters, illuminated in his own special. He sits on the floor of the stage, his feet dangling off the lift. As he speaks, Ronnie continues playing his tune, which becomes underscoring for Benjamin's monologue. As the music continues, does it slowly begin to reflect the influence of Chinese music?)

Benjamin: When I finally found Doyers St., I scanned the buildings for Number 13. Walking down an alley where the scent of freshly steamed char ssu bao lingered in the air, I felt immediately that I had entered a world where all things were finally familiar. (Pause.) An old woman bumped me with her shopping bag—screaming to her friend in Cantonese, though they walked no more than a few inches apart. Another man—shouting to a vendor in Sze-Yup. A youth, in a white undershirt, perhaps a recent newcomer, bargaining with a grocer in Hokkien. I walked through this ocean of dialects, breathing in the richness with deep gulps, exhilarated by the energy this symphony brought to my step. And when I finally saw the number 13, I nearly wept at my good fortune. An old tenement, paint peeling, inside walls no doubt thick with a century of grease and broken dreams—and yet, to me, a temple—the house where my father was born. I suddenly saw it all: Gung Gung, coming home from his 16-hour days pressing shirts he could never afford to own, bringing with him candies for my father, each sweet wrapped in the hope of a better life. When my father left the ghetto, he swore he would never return. But he had, this day, in the thoughts and memories of his son, just six months after his death. And as I sat on the stoop, I pulled a hua-noi from my pocket, sucked on it, and felt his spirit returning. To the place where his ghost, and the dutiful hearts of all his descendants, would always call home. (He listens for a long moment.) And I felt an ache in my heart for all those lost souls, denied this most important of revelations: to know who they truly are. (Benjamin sits on the stage, sucking his salted plum and listening to the sounds around him. Ronnie continues to play. The two remain oblivious of one another. Lights fade slowly to black.)

Reading and Reacting

1. What does Benjamin hope to find in Chinatown? Do you think he is successful?
2. During the first half of the play, Benjamin dominates the action. At what point does this situation change? What do you think causes this change?
3. What is the main theme of this play? What other themes are developed?
4. What is the significance of the play's title? How does it express the play's main theme? For example, is Benjamin really trying to find Chinatown, or is he looking for something else?