

# Susannah

High School Study Guide  
Written by Robert Hollman



Music by Carlisle Floyd  
Text by Carlisle Floyd

Inspired by the apocryphal "Susannah and The Elders"

Premiered on February 24, 1955 at Florida State University

## CONTENTS

### 1. TEACHER'S INTRODUCTION

### 2. STUDENT HANDOUTS:

- COMPOSER BIOGRAPHY
- "SUSANNAH AND THE ELDERS"
- WRITING AND DISCUSSION: SOURCED FROM THE BIBLE
- SYNOPSES OF *SUSANNAH*
- WRITING AND DISCUSSION: INNOCENCE LOST
- WRITING AND DISCUSSION: DUPLICITOUS OR HUMAN?

## TEACHER'S INTRODUCTION

This study guide will introduce your students to Carlisle Floyd's opera *Susannah* through lessons that will incorporate the opera's plot and elements of its and the composer's historical background. Short writing activities followed by class discussions will be central to the success of the lesson.

The following pages should ideally be copied and handed out to students. The basic structure of the study guide relies on a simple formula: the students will read, then be asked to participate in an activity or answer a few questions. The lesson plan also calls for a screening of select films, the details of which are listed at the bottom of the page.

The teacher's role is implied in the handouts and should be easy to grasp without further instructions. The structure of the study guide allows a great deal of freedom on the part of the teacher to introduce alternative questions or subjects as they pop up, so feel free to take detours when inspiration takes hold.

The recommended lesson plan is as follows:

1. Distribute and read Carlisle Floyd's biography
2. Distribute and read the New American Bible version of "Susannah and The Elders"
3. Discuss, write and share the first writing prompt: "Sourced from the Bible"
4. Distribute and read the synopsis of *Susannah*
5. Making connections: Screen portion or entire "Virgin Spring" (see suggested DVD list)
6. Discuss, write and share the second writing prompt: "Innocence Lost"
7. Making connections: Screen portion or entire "Splendor in The Grass" (see suggested DVD list)
8. Discuss, write and share the third writing prompt: "Duplicitous or Human?"
9. Discuss any similarities to any other stories, fiction, TV, or film

"Splendor in The Grass" – 1961

[http://www.amazon.com/Splendor-in-Grass-Elia-Kazan/dp/B00002ND7B/sr=1-1/qid=1157729215/ref=pd\\_bbs\\_1/104-8154740-7582315?ie=UTF8&s=dvd](http://www.amazon.com/Splendor-in-Grass-Elia-Kazan/dp/B00002ND7B/sr=1-1/qid=1157729215/ref=pd_bbs_1/104-8154740-7582315?ie=UTF8&s=dvd)

"The Virgin Spring" - 1960

[http://www.amazon.com/Virgin-Spring-Criterion-Collection/dp/B000BR6QIW/sr=1-1/qid=1157729111/ref=pd\\_bbs\\_1/104-8154740-7582315?ie=UTF8&s=dvd](http://www.amazon.com/Virgin-Spring-Criterion-Collection/dp/B000BR6QIW/sr=1-1/qid=1157729111/ref=pd_bbs_1/104-8154740-7582315?ie=UTF8&s=dvd)

Susannah



### About Carlisle Floyd

Carlisle Floyd was born in 1926 in Latta, South Carolina, in the heart of what is known as the “Bible Belt,” so-called because of the great many preachers who have traveled around the area, the big tent “revival” meetings, and what seems like family oriented communities; though there’s been a dark side to all of this religious fundamentalism as well: bigotry and hypocrisy. Floyd’s father was a Methodist priest.

Floyd grew up playing the piano and really enjoyed drawing, so much so that he wanted to be a painter. His music teacher, Ernst Bacon, however, inspired him to continue with piano and Floyd eventually enrolled at Syracuse University where Bacon went to teach. Ultimately, Floyd earned both a Bachelor’s and a Master’s degree in Music with a concentration in piano and composition. While at Syracuse he started to write one act plays. He had ambitions to be known as an American writer.

In 1951, he started teaching at Florida State University where he wrote *Susannah*, drawing inspiration from the apocryphal story “Susannah and the Elders.” *Susannah* premiered in 1955 at the college and was staged by the New York City Opera in 1956. Floyd wanted this story to resonate with what he saw happening as the result of the anti-communist movement spearheaded by Senator Joseph McCarthy—who had secrets of his own to hide. The opera has been staged worldwide more than 800 times.

Carlisle Floyd has enjoyed turning popular novels into operas, something composers have been doing for centuries. Some of these adaptations include Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* and John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*. His most recent opera, *Cold Sassy Tree*, was based on the best-selling novel by Olive Ann Burns and premiered at Houston Grand Opera in April 2000.

Floyd has been considered a true American artist and in 2004 received the National Medal of Arts from President George Bush.

Susannah

## SUSANNAH AND THE ELDERS (SOURCE: NEW AMERICAN BIBLE)

In Babylon there lived a man named Joakim, who married a very beautiful and God-fearing woman, Susanna, the daughter of Hilkiah; her pious parents had trained their daughter according to the law of Moses. Joakim was very rich; he had a garden near his house, and the Jews had recourse to him often because he was the most respected of them all.

That year, two elders of the people were appointed judges, of whom the Lord said, "Wickedness has come out of Babylon: from the elders who were to govern the people as judges." These men, to whom all brought their cases, frequented the house of Joakim. When the people left at noon, Susanna used to enter her husband's garden for a walk. When the old men saw her enter every day for her walk, they began to lust for her. They suppressed their consciences; they would not allow their eyes to look to heaven, and did not keep in mind just judgments. Though both were enamored of her, they did not tell each other their trouble, for they were ashamed to reveal their lustful desire to have her.

Day by day they watched eagerly for her. One day they said to each other, "Let us be off for home, it is time for lunch." So they went out and parted; but both turned back, and when they met again, they asked each other the reason. They admitted their lust, and then they agreed to look for an occasion when they could meet her alone.

One day, while they were waiting for the right moment, she entered the garden as usual, with two maids only. She decided to bathe, for the weather was warm. Nobody else was there except the two elders, who had hidden themselves and were watching her. "Bring me oil and soap," she said to the maids, "and shut the garden doors while I bathe." They did as she said; they shut the garden doors and left by the side gate to fetch what she had ordered, unaware that the elders were hidden inside.

As soon as the maids had left, the two old men got up and hurried to her. "Look," they said, "the garden doors are shut, and no one can see us; give in to our desire, and lie with us. If you refuse, we will testify against you that you dismissed your maids because a young man was here with you."

"I am completely trapped," Susanna groaned. "If I yield, it will be my death; if I refuse, I cannot escape your power. Yet it is better for me to fall into your power without guilt than to sin before the Lord." Then Susanna shrieked, and the old men also shouted at her, as one of them ran to open the garden doors.

When the people in the house heard the cries from the garden, they rushed in by the side gate to see what had happened to her. At the accusations by the old men, the servants felt very much ashamed, for never had any such thing been said about Susanna.

Susannah

When the people came to her husband Joakim the next day, the two wicked elders also came, fully determined to put Susanna to death. Before all the people they ordered: "Send for Susanna, the daughter of Hilkiyah, the wife of Joakim." When she was sent for, she came with her parents, children and all her relatives. Susanna, very delicate and beautiful, was veiled; but those wicked men ordered her to uncover her face so as to sate themselves with her beauty. All her relatives and the onlookers were weeping. In the midst of the people the two elders rose up and laid their hands on her head. Through her tears she looked up to heaven, for she trusted in the Lord whole-heartedly. The elders made this accusation: "As we were walking in the garden alone, this woman entered with two girls and shut the doors of the garden, dismissing the girls. A young man, who was hidden there, came and lay with her. When we, in a corner of the garden, saw this crime, we ran toward them. We saw them lying together, but the man we could not hold, because he was stronger than we; he opened the doors and ran off. Then we seized this one and asked who the young man was, but she refused to tell us. We testify to this."

The assembly believed them, since they were elders and judges of the people, and they condemned her to death. But Susanna cried aloud: "O eternal God, you know what is hidden and are aware of all things before they come to be: you know that they have testified falsely against me. Here I am about to die, though I have done none of the things with which these wicked men have charged me."

The Lord heard her prayer. As she was being led to execution, God stirred up the holy spirit of a young boy named Daniel, and he cried aloud: "I will have no part in the death of this woman."

All the people turned and asked him, "What is this you are saying?"

He stood in their midst and continued, "Are you such fools, O Israelites! To condemn a woman of Israel without examination and without clear evidence? Return to court, for they have testified falsely against her."

Then all the people returned in haste. To Daniel the elders said, "Come, sit with us and inform us, since God has given you the prestige of old age."

But he replied, "Separate these two far from one another that I may examine them." After they were separated one from the other, he called one of them and said: "How you have grown evil with age! Now have your past sins come to term: passing unjust sentences, condemning the innocent, and freeing the guilty, although the Lord says, 'The innocent and the just you shall not put to death.' Now, then, if you were a witness, tell me under what tree you saw them together."

"Under a mastic tree," he answered.

"Your fine lie has cost you your head," said Daniel, "for the angel of God shall receive the sentence from him and split you in two." Putting him to one side, he ordered the other one to be brought.

"Offspring of Canaan, not of Judah," Daniel said to him, "beauty has seduced you, lust has subverted your conscience. This is how you acted with the daughters of Israel, and in their fear they yielded to you; but a daughter of Judah did not tolerate your wickedness. Now, then, tell me under what tree you surprised them together."

"Under an oak," he said.

"Your fine lie has cost you also your head," said Daniel; "for the angel of God waits with a sword to cut you in two so as to make an end of you both." The whole assembly cried aloud, blessing God who saves those that hope in him. They rose up against the two elders, for by their own words Daniel had convicted them of perjury. According to the law of Moses, they inflicted on them the penalty they had plotted to impose on their neighbor: they put them to death. Thus was innocent blood spared that day. Hilkiyah and his wife praised God for their daughter Susanna, as did Joakim her husband and all her relatives, because she was found innocent of any shameful deed. And from that day onward Daniel was greatly esteemed by the people.

## WRITING AND DISCUSSION: SOURCED FROM THE BIBLE

Here's a contest for you: how many stories, short stories, novels, plays, TV shows and movies have used ideas or stories from the Bible for inspiration? There have been many writers who have taken a story from the Bible and turned it into a contemporary tale. Who can think of the most? Make a list below of stories you can think of. Bonus points for those who can name the authors.

While jotting down the names of stories and their authors, ask yourself why biblical stories are so often recycled. Try to sketch out an explanation that you can share in the class discussion that will follow.

Susannah

## SUSANNAH SYNOPSIS

Setting: New Hope Valley, Tennessee

### Act I

The innocent Susannah is so beautiful that the gossip never stops about her—even at a church dance. The gossip gets worse when she dances with the new town priest, Reverend Olin Blich. Later on at home, Susannah’s friend Little Bat stops by and she tells him about the dance. But when McLean hears her angry, alcoholic brother Sam come home from hunting McLean runs out.

The next morning, Susannah is washing herself in a creek, but there’s a problem: it’s the creek the church plans to use for baptisms. The church elders arrive to assess the creek and, upon seeing Susannah in the nude, call her a “sinner” and tell everybody in town what she’s done. It gets so bad that when Susannah goes to a church dinner that night, everybody tells her to leave. The worst is when she gets home, confused and sad, and McLean, after explaining to her why people are mad at her, tells her that they forced him to confess that she seduced him!

### Act 2

Sam can’t help his sister. He tells her that to be absolved she must go to a prayer meeting and confess to everybody that she’s a sinner.

Susannah decides to go to church, even though she is innocent. She almost confesses—to nothing—when she feels the passion of Reverend Blich’s preaching, compounded by the crowd’s chanting, and can’t go through with it. She runs home and Blich later follows. He comes to pray with her, but he discovers she is alone and rapes her.

The next day, Blich realizes he’s raped a virgin and pleads with for her forgiveness. She refuses. She tells Sam what happened and, enraged, Sam hunts Blich down and murders him.

The entire church community thinks that Susannah is not only a sinner, but that she also drove her brother crazy—crazy enough to murder. They all show up at her house, as though on a witch-hunt, but she drives them away with a shotgun. In the end, she stands alone.

Susannah

## WRITING AND DISCUSSION: INNOCENCE LOST

Susannah is naïve at the start of *Susannah*, but something changes near the end. She is the town beauty. Boys and men alike flock to her during the dance and fight for her attention. Meanwhile, the townswomen gossip, spread rumors, prophesize a fall to come. Susannah is oblivious. She can see no harm in her actions, yet she is creating enemies. Her coy beauty and complete innocence frustrates all. She refrains from diplomacy and is left with no one to defend her. She makes herself an easy scapegoat.

Susannah refuses to fight for herself because she has done no wrong. Yet in the final scene, she takes an aggressive, violent stand. She wields a shotgun in front of an angry mob and threatens to shoot any who come closer. This is quite a reversal. What changed? What stripped Susannah of her naïveté? What made her see evil and understand its threat? Write down your answer, then consider whether the causal-link is realistic, i.e. whether x would be likely to cause y in a real-life situation.

If you feel it's realistic, try to provide examples from real life that support your conclusion. Go back to the synopsis if you need to refresh your memory or look for a cause. A class discussion will follow.

## WRITING AND DISCUSSION: DUPLICITOUS OR HUMAN?

Someone who is duplicitous will outwardly appear to be one way but inwardly be another. Duplicity can be useful if you're trying to scam someone: you pretend to love someone, but actually only want his or her money; you play the political adviser, actually wanting out-right control; or maybe you scandalize a community to reap the benefits of bringing it back to order.

*Susannah's* Reverend Blicht *may* be a bit of a huckster: he speaks loudly and often about giving as the collection bowl goes round, and suggests that if enough is not given, hell-fire can shortly be expected. He also puts into motion a chain of events that causes the town's moral disorder to increase, not subside. Blicht may be duplicitous, or he may be a hypocrite. He may also possibly be bad at his job and just as naïve about human nature—including his own—as *Susannah*. It's up for debate. Maybe he's just human.

Think through these possibilities and come up with your own character analysis of Blicht. What is he really up to? What does he want? Is he essentially a good person gone stray momentarily? Is he duplicitous? Is he a hypocrite? An appraisal of Blicht's character may ultimately hang on how you interpret his sexual actions against *Susannah*. You be the judge. Jot down your analysis and prepare to share you thoughts with your classmates in the class discussion that will follow.

Susannah