



**‘Typhoid’ Mary  
Mallon:**

**Justly  
Quarantined or  
Unfairly  
Persecuted?**

**Public Health in  
Action**

**An Arts  
Integration Lesson  
By Jodi Delaney**



# Typhoid Mary

By Jodi Delaney

**Intent:** The goal of this lesson is to impress upon students the importance of washing their hands frequently, especially when handling food, to keep themselves and others healthy. They will also be weighing the debate between individual freedoms and public health and safety. Students will get a first-hand opportunity to see how difficult such decisions can be.

**Introductory Activity:** Before watching the performance, students will be asked to listen to this 'guest speaker' as though they were in the Department of Health. She is bringing her complaints to them and asking the Department to let her leave the hospital where she has been kept in quarantine for the past two years. Students must decide if they can trust this woman, if she should be freed, and if they let her go, what requirements should she follow once out among the general population. Go over specific vocabulary that the audience would know if they were doctors on the Board. Examples: 'blood cultures', 'feces samples', 'inveigle' (to persuade someone to do something through means of flattery and deception), 'utropin' (a common drug used as an antibiotic, but couldn't actually kill the *salmonella typhi*. An effective drug wasn't invented until after Mary's death.)

**Historical Background for Teacher:** "Typhoid Mary" Mallon (who sometimes went by Mary Brown) was an Irish cook who emigrated in the mid 1880s to the United States. She was an asymptomatic carrier of typhoid (one of around 50 known individuals at the time), infecting an unknown number of people with the deadly disease. At least three people are confirmed to have died and around 50 become seriously ill as the result of contracting illness from Mary. Although she had been medically proven to have been guilty of spreading the disease, Mary never believed the doctors and refused to follow their recommendations for limiting the spread of the *salmonella typhi* that she carried. Mary did not wash her hands (or did so very poorly) after using the bathroom, and then prepared food, which is how she spread the disease so easily.

This scene is an interview between Mary and unspecified members of the Department of Health imagined as the audience. She has been interviewed several times before by Dr. Soper, who identified her as the cause of the typhoid fever outbreaks. Mary does not like Dr. Soper or any of the other medical personnel and can be irritable to outright hostile. Dr. Soper organized manhunt to track down Mary, something she greatly resents. He also had fecal and urine samples taken by force after Mary repeatedly refused to cooperate.

Mary has moved often over the past decade, changing jobs every few weeks as her employers and fellow staff start showing signs of illness. Even though she is constantly on the run, she refuses to acknowledge her responsibility and denies any of the sickness as being connected to her or her actions.

From Uta Hagan's questions for actors<sup>1</sup>:

Who am I? *Mary Mallon, sometimes go by Mary Brown to obscure my identity from those who try to persecute me. I am a cook by trade and have worked in a number of households since coming to America.*

What are the circumstances? *I have been accused of spreading typhoid fever by several doctors, who have become increasingly hostile, and are trying to ruin my ability to get work.*

What are my relationships? *I am alone, with no friends and constantly moving from one household to another. I never leave a forwarding address, but simply disappear once anyone becomes ill. I don't want to get sick too.*

What do I want? *I just want to be left alone. I work hard and have no reason to stop.*

What is my obstacle? *Dr. Soper, Dr. Park, and their cronies are purposefully spreading horrible accusations about me and laying blame unfairly.*

What do I do to get what I want? *I will continue to work where I can. I feel no need to describe the misfortune of my former employers to the new ones. I will work until I can't anymore. They can't take that away and I need to make a decent living just like everyone else.*

The following dialogue is directly from Mary herself, one of few surviving primary source documents including Mary's point of view. Additions for clarity and to include further historical information or characterization have been set aside in brackets. Although this is not the standard format for a play, I want to maintain the distinction between the historical Mary's words and my interpretational Mary. This format is similar to other historical readers theater scripts in which as much dialogue as possible has been taken directly from primary sources.

As described on PBS's NOVA website<sup>2</sup>:

---

<sup>1</sup> Uta Hagen. *Respect for Acting*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons. 1973. A more complete list is on pg. 82 (as marked on the image itself of the PDF).

<sup>2</sup> "The Most Dangerous Woman in America." PBS. PBS, Aug. 2004. Web. 09 July 2014. <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/typhoid/letter.html>>.

*Few instances of the thoughts and handwriting of Mary Mallon, aka "Typhoid Mary," have come down to us. The longest surviving letter, and the one most telling of her plight and state of mind in the height of her quarantine, is a six-page, hand-scrawled diatribe she wrote in late June 1909. By this time, she had been quarantined against her will for over two years on an island in New York City's East River. Below, read the letter and get inside the mind of a woman tragically caught between a rock and a hard place: her discovery and labeling as a healthy carrier of typhoid who by this time had already infected numerous people through her cooking—and the city's obligation to protect the public's health. Reading between the lines, one gets a sense of just how frustrated, upset, and spiteful this 39-year-old Irish immigrant has become at her situation, a situation from which she ultimately never escaped.—Peter Tyson*

---

*At Rise: Mary is sitting on a hospital bed, fully dressed as though she is ready to leave. Her arms are crossed and she is physically closed off from the audience. She speaks with an Irish accent and is clearly angry, but is attempting to restrain her temper—for the moment.*

MARY: In reply to Dr. Park of the Board of Health I will state that I am not segregated with the typhoid patients. There is nobody on this island that has typhoid. [The people here are mostly sick with tuberculosis.] There was never any effort by the Board authority to do anything for me excepting to cast me on the island and keep me a prisoner without being sick nor needing medical treatment. [I have never even had the typhoid fever in my life.] *(Irritated, Mary straightens her skirt, flattening it with her hands a couple times, then crosses her arms again.)*

When I first came here they took two blood cultures, and feces went down three times per week, say Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, respectively, until the latter part of June. After that they only got the feces once a week, which was on Wednesday. Now they have given me a record for nearly a year for three times a week [and quite of few of these samples show no signs of this typhoid they're looking for]. [Sure, they claim the rest had typhoid in it, but I don't believe them. They're making up lies.]

When I first came here I was so nervous and almost prostrated with grief and trouble. My eyes began to twitch, and the left eyelid became paralyzed and would not move. *(Pointing to eye dramatically.)* It remained in that condition for six months. There was an eye specialist [who] visited the island three and four times a week. He was never asked to visit me. I did not even get a cover

---

Additional information is included in a great Snopes article: Mikkelsen, Barbara. "Typhoid Mary." *Snopes.com: Did Cause the Deaths of Thousands of People?* N.p., 21 May 2014. Web. 10 July 2014.  
<<http://www.snopes.com/medical/disease/typhoidmary.asp>>.

for my eye. I had to hold my hand on it whilst going about and at night tie a bandage on it. (*Covers eye with hand to demonstrate pitifully.*)

In December when Dr. Wilson took charge, he came to me and I told him about it. He said that was news to him and that he would send me his electric battery, *but he never sent [it]. (Harrumphs angrily.)* However, my eye got better thanks to the *Almighty God* and no thanks (*Correcting herself.*) --in spite of--the medical staff. Dr. Wilson ordered me urotropin. I got that on and off for a year. Sometimes they had it, and sometimes they did not. I took the urotropin for about three months all told during the whole *year*. If I should have continued [it], it would certainly have killed me for it was very severe. Everyone knows who is acquainted in any kind of medicine that it's used for *kidney trouble*. [They weren't even giving me anything for typhoid.]

When in January [1908] they were about to discharge me, when the resident physician came to me and asked me where was I going when I got out of here, naturally I said to [New York] so there was a stop put to my getting out of here. Then the supervising nurse told me I was a hopeless case, and if I'd write to [city health commissioner] Dr. Darlington and tell him I'd go to my sisters in Connecticut. [That nurse thought my only way to get out of here was to lie.] Now I have no sister in that state or any other in the U.S. [I immigrated alone to America when I was 14. I lived with an aunt and uncle at first, but after they died, I was left with no other family here.] Then in April a friend of mine went to Dr. Darlington and asked him when I was to get away. He replied, "That woman is all right now, and she is a very expensive woman [as we are forced to pay for her to stay in the hospital], but I cannot let her go myself. The Board has to [make the decision]. Come around Saturday." When he did, Dr. Darlington told this man "I've nothing more to do with this woman. Go to Dr. Studdiford."

He went to that doctor, and he said, "I cannot let that woman go, and all the people that she gave the typhoid to and so many deaths occurred in the families she was with." Dr. Studdiford said to this man, "Go and ask Mary Mallon and inveigle her [persuade her with lies and compliments] to have an operation performed to have her gallbladder removed. I'll have the best surgeon in town to do the cutting."

I said "No. No knife will be put on me. I've nothing the matter with my gallbladder." [Everyone knows that people having surgeries like this often get dangerous infections and die. I'm not sick and my gallbladder isn't hurting anyone.] Dr. Wilson asked me the very same question. I also told him no. Then he replied, "It might not do you any good." Also the supervising nurse asked me to have an operation performed. I also told her no, and she made the remark "Would it not be better for you to have it done than remain here?" I told her no. (*Very emphatically.*)

*(Mary gets up and begins pacing the floor.)*

There is a visiting doctor who came here in October. He did take quite an interest in me. *(Derisively.)* He really thought I liked it here, that I did not care for my freedom. He asked me if I'd take some medicine if he brought it to me. I said I would, so he brought me some Anti Autotox and some pills then. Dr. Wilson had already ordered me brewer's yeast. At first I would not take it, for I'm a little afraid of the people, and I have a good right for when I came to the Department they said they [the typhoid] were in my [intestinal] tract. Later another said they were in the muscles of my bowels. And latterly they thought of the gallbladder. [I don't think any of them know what they're talking about. How can there be some invisible little disease in my body that doesn't make me sick, but would make others ill? There's nothing wrong with me at all.]

I have been in fact a peep show for everybody. Even the interns had to come to see me and ask about the facts already known to the whole wide world. The tuberculosis men would say, "There she is, the kidnapped woman." Dr. Park has had me illustrated in Chicago. [He talked all about me, in front of all those other doctors and newspaper people. Dr. Park claims I'm the one who is making people sick with typhoid fever, even though I've never been sick with it a day in my life. He and that Dr. Soper have made my life terrible. Dr. Soper is the one who first decided I was to blame for all these people getting sick. He ordered a manhunt, getting everyone upset and convinced that I was spreading typhoid. Dr. Soper had people on the lookout for me, tracking me down like some kind of common criminal. Of course I went kicking and screaming when they came to arrest me. Anyone so mistreated would have done the same.] I wonder how the said Dr. William H. Park would like to be insulted and put in the Journal and call him or his wife Typhoid William Park.

[Sure, I don't want to work in a house where people are sick, so if people start getting fevers, then I'm not going to stick around. That's just common sense. It's not my fault if some of them have had to go to the hospital or died. I had already left before some of that happened. And why should I have to give a forwarding address to every single family I've ever worked for? Why should these doctors get to know where I am or who I work for? That's no one's business but mine.]

*(Stops pacing and sits back down again, still agitated.)*

[I am a good cook and these doctors are trying to make it impossible for me to get a job. People like the food I make, especially my peach ice cream. Those doctors kept making such a big fuss about my bathroom habits and how often I wash my hands. I don't have time for such nonsense. They clearly have never worked as a cook! If I took the time to wash my hands, and even with soap the way they want, every single time I had to use the bathroom, I'd

never get food on the table. Those doctors and nurses keep telling me that I have to keep the highest standard of cleanliness, which is just ridiculous. I can't see anything on my hands, so they are plenty clean enough.]

*(Stands up, pointing at audience, with one hand on her hip.)*

[Keeping me here is just plain wrong. I've committed no crime, there's been no trial, and I'm not remotely sick. You should let me go immediately.]

## END OF PLAY

---

Following Mary's monologue, the class should discuss the merits of her argumentation, what they felt were the strengths and weaknesses of her complaints. Students must decide how much they trust Mary and make a decision on whether or not to let her go. If they choose to release her from the hospital, then they have to decide what, if any, requirements they will place on her. For example, can she keep working as a cook? Should she be required to maintain an updated address with authorities so she can be found? How does her anger make you feel in reaction?

Historical Epilogue: Mary was indeed released, with the stipulation that she not work as a cook anymore. She did work as a laundress for a while, but that didn't pay as well as a cook and she eventually went back to her old ways. Mary changed her name and continued to work for each family until people began to fall ill, then she would leave suddenly for another job. She purposefully tried to avoid the authorities and mislead her employers so they wouldn't know her true identity. Mary was finally tracked down again, and was institutionalized permanently against her will until her death. Although there is still a debate about how many people she infected, we know of at least 47 verified, and three deaths that were unequivocally caused by Mary's improper handling of food. Mary never accepted any responsibility for her actions.