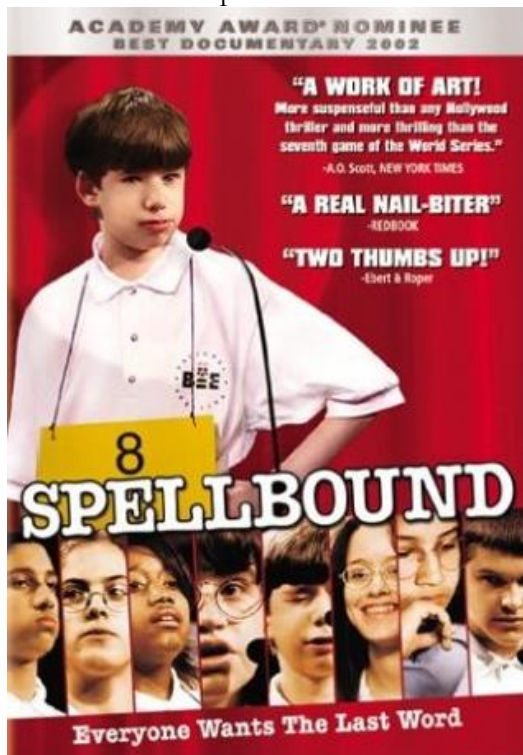


## Class Notes for the Film *Spellbound*

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**Guys:** this brief note on *Spellbound* should assist you in appreciating and comprehending the film better. The purpose of assigning you this documentary film is to highlight one of the major points I am making in this class, *but which most of you have probably missed*. While it's true that I have spent a great deal of time introducing you to the mechanisms behind the *structural* constraints people face in societies like this one (a capitalist democracy) in attempting to overcome class/gender/race, etc.-driven oppression, which in the end make a mockery of the words "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," I refuse to side completely with the **left** (or liberals) who suggest that all oppression is structural; I agree with the **right** (conservatives) that there is such a thing as *self*-oppression (expressed by an unwillingness, *even when opportunities exist*, to change one's circumstances for the better by exerting *agency*—meaning through one's own effort—involving discipline, hard work, ambition, and so on). The very fact that some kids had to hide their intellectual pursuits from their peers for fear of being ostracized is to me the clearest example of the existence of a culture self-oppression among the working classes.



Of course, I also very strongly disagree with the right when they say that there is no longer any *systemic* oppression in a capitalist democracy like this one, today. So, yes, in a capitalist democracy there is systemic racism, sexism, classism, and so on, but because this is not just a capitalist society but also a **democracy**, there is sufficient space for *some* individuals to break out of these forms of structural oppression by exerting their **agency** (instead of waiting for the revolution, which, trust me, is not coming any time soon). If *all* oppression was structural then there is no hope for a better tomorrow. Yes? Good. I am glad we are on the same page. In other words, the concept of the **American Dream**, in the post-civil rights era, is *not* a completely bogus concept. That is why you and I are in this school right now. Anyhow, this film shows us examples of individual agency at work in practice. Hence, regardless of your socio-economic circumstances (and as long as you have been raised to pass the **marshmallow test**, if asked to sit for it), you have a fair shot at winning the spelling bee—provided you have the time, the discipline, and a good dictionary! However, because we

are talking about children here, having a supportive environment (parents, teachers, siblings, peers, and even the community as a whole) really helps with the discipline as well as accessing learning resources.

By the way, some have been wondering why SEA-Americans (South-East Asian Americans) appear to be dominating the spelling bee these days. They have won in nine of the last twelve years! My explanation: their parents come from a very status conscious society and so once one of their children won the spelling bee at the Nationals, the rest of them soon got drawn into a fierce competition among themselves; hence winning the bee has become one of their key badges of honor for them. (Of course, winning the \$30,000 dollar cash prize does not hurt.) (NOTE: the word "bee" in spelling bee does *not* refer to that well-known insect that makes honey from pollen.)

## Dramatis Personae

- (1) **Angela Arenivar** (from Perryton, Texas; ethnicity: Latina/o-American)
- (2) **Nupur Lala** (from Tampa, Florida; ethnicity: South East Asian-American)
- (3) **Ted Brigham** (from Rolla, Missouri; ethnicity: Euro-American)
- (4) **Emily Stagg** (New Haven, Connecticut)
- (5) **Ashley White** (Washington, DC)
- (6) **Neil Kadakia** (San Clemente, California)
- (7) **April Digideo** (Ambler, Pennsylvania)
- (8) **Harry Altman** (Glenn Rock, New Jersey)

## Glossary

The following names/terms are essential for a full comprehension of the purpose behind assigning you this film; therefore, study them (questions on them may appear on the test).

- Agency:** see the *course glossary* (part of Online Course Materials)  
**American Dream:** see the *course glossary* (part of Online Course Materials)  
**Class:** see the *course glossary* (part of Online Course Materials)  
**Left/Right:** see the *course glossary* (part of Online Course Materials)  
**Marshmallow Test:** see the *course glossary* (part of Online Course Materials)  
**Structure:** see the *course glossary* (part of Online Course Materials)

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