August: Osage County

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TRACY LETTS

Born in Tulsa and raised in Durant, Oklahoma, Tracy Letts struggled through an awkward childhood fraught with familial strife and generational trauma. His grandfather's suicide and his grandmother's subsequent pill addiction when Letts was just 10 years old haunted him throughout his early career as a struggling actor, and would eventually become the framework for his Pulitzer Prize-winning opus *August: Osage County*. Letts's parents, writers and academics, encouraged his creative side throughout his youth. Letts moved to Los Angeles in his early twenties to pursue an acting career, but found life in Hollywood both difficult and unfulfilling. He then moved to Chicago and began an apprenticeship at the prestigious Steppenwolf Theatre Company, where he honed his skills as an actor, writer, and director and composed plays such as *Killer Joe* and *Man From Nebraska*. Following the success of *August: Osage County*, Letts began taking on more and more acting roles. He appeared in a celebrated revival of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, and later appeared in prominent roles in the TV drama *Homeland* and the indie dramedy *Lady Bird*. Letts is married to the actress Carrie Coon, and was, in 2018, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for his play *The Minutes*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In August of 2007, America was on the verge of great change. The presidency of George W. Bush—during which the September 11th attacks and the retaliatory "War on Terror" unfolded—was about to enter its final year. Bush and his family—including his father, former President George H.W. Bush, and his brother Jeb, a former governor of Florida—had a large accumulation of personal wealth and socio-political power. The idea of familial inheritance, dynastic weight, and the clamor for wealth and control that their family symbolized (and still symbolizes) within American history is evident in the pages of *August: Osage County*. The play's central concern—the death of the patriarch of a troubled family—both mirrors and foreshadows the changes that would come to America in the subsequent years in the form of the staggering 2008 financial crisis and the election of Barack Obama, the first Black president of the United States.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

August: Osage County has its roots in the family dramas of Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Sam Shepard. O'Neill's magnum opus *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, which takes place over the course of one very long day in the lives of the Tyrone family (whose patriarch is dying of tuberculosis and whose matriarch is addicted to morphine), is, like *August*, based heavily on the playwright's own experiences of watching his family fight, fall ill, and disintegrate. *Long Day's Journey* notably features a character whose function is similar to Johnna's in *August*: a young maid named Cathleen, who serves as an outsider living in the family home and is in far over her head when it comes to caring for such damaged, self-destructive individuals. Tennessee William's *The Glass Menagerie*, a "memory play" also based very closely on the playwright's own life, takes place in a claustrophobic house dominated by an out-of-touch, delusional matriarch. Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*, also a recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, deals with themes and motifs of abuse, incest, and estrangement, and focuses on the symbolic relationship between the figure of the patriarch and the idea of the American dream.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *August: Osage County*
- **When Written:** Early 2000s
- **Where Written:** Chicago, Illinois
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** Pawhuska, Oklahoma; August 2007
- **Climax:** Barbara Fordham wrestles her mother, Violet Weston, in an attempt to get the pills to which Violet is addicted away from her. The triumphant Barbara then announces to Violet—and the entire family—that she is "running things" from now on.
- **Antagonist:** Violet Weston

EXTRA CREDIT

Hollywood Treatment. In 2013, *August: Osage County* was adapted into a film starring Meryl Streep and Julia Roberts. With an ensemble cast of lauded actors including Ewan McGregor, Benedict Cumberbatch, Chris Cooper, and Sam Shepard, the film received mixed reviews but earned Academy Award nominations for Roberts and Streep. Letts wrote the screenplay for the film, and though his nearly-three-hour play had to be cut considerably for the screen, he has stated in interviews that he is proud of the film and grateful that it gave wider audiences the chance to see his story of an American family in crisis.

PLOT SUMMARY

At the height of a **swelteringly hot** summer in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, Beverly Weston hires a young Native American woman named Johnna Monevata as a live-in housekeeper. Interviewing her in his disarrayed study, he explains that his and his wife Violet's addictions—to alcohol and pills, respectively—have become so demanding that they can no longer handle simple errands or household tasks on their own. Moreover, he says, Violet has recently been diagnosed with cancer of the mouth. Beverly tells Johnna he'd understand if she didn't want to take the job, but Johnna insists she needs the work. Beverly gives Johnna a volume of T.S. Eliot's poems and tells her she should read it for her own enjoyment.

About a week later, Beverly has gone missing. Violet's sister and brother-in-law, Mattie Fae and Charlie Aiken, have arrived in Pawhuska from their home an hour and a half away to keep Violet company. Also present is one of Violet's three daughters, Ivy, who lives nearby. Ivy has called her sisters, Barbara and Karen, to let them know the situation. Violet pops pills while she waits anxiously for her daughters to show up.

Barbara arrives with her husband Bill and her daughter Jean. Barbara is miserable to be home, though it is clear that things are not great for her back in Boulder, either—she and Bill are fighting, and their fourteen-year-old child is emotionally distant and "hooked" on cigarettes. As Violet fills Barbara and Bill in on the circumstances of Beverly's disappearance, she seems overly concerned about the state of his will and the valuables he left behind in a safe deposit box at the bank—a box, she tells Barbara and Bill, she has already emptied as per an "agreement" she and Beverly made some time ago. As Violet speaks, Barbara can see that her mother is high—Barbara warns Violet calmly that she will not go through "this" again.

Upstairs in the attic, where Johnna has been living, Jean asks Johnna's permission to smoke pot in her room. Jean feigns interest in learning about Johnna's past and traditions, but is really more concerned with her own problems. That night, as Bill and Barbara make up their bed in the living room, they have an argument about Bill's infidelity; he has been having an affair with a younger student. Bill tries to calm Barbara down, begging her to save the fight for after Beverly comes back. Barbara resignedly tells Bill that her father is dead, and then goes to sleep.

A few hours later, Johnna wakes Barbara and Bill—the sheriff has arrived. They greet the sheriff, whom Barbara recognizes as her former high school classmate Deon Gilbeau. Gilbeau reveals that Beverly's corpse has been found in a nearby lake, and tells Barbara she needs to come identify the body. As Barbara dresses upstairs, Violet enters the living room where the sheriff is waiting and puts on an Eric Clapton record. She babbles unintelligibly and dances erratically to **"Lay Down, Sally."**

Some days later, after Beverly's memorial service, the entire family is preparing for a funeral dinner. Barbara and Ivy's sister Karen has arrived—with a new beau in tow—and will not stop rambling to Barbara about how wonderful her life has become. Upstairs, Ivy, Violet, and Mattie Fae look through boxes of old pictures. Violet needles Ivy about her frumpy appearance and urges her to start dressing more femininely if she wants to attract a man. Ivy reveals that she already has a man but will not tell her mother or her aunt who it is she's seeing.

Downstairs, Bill, Jean, and Karen's shady fiancé Steve return from a grocery run. Steve teases Jean, telling her that she smells like marijuana. When she denies using the drug, Steve tells her it's a shame she doesn't partake—if she did, he'd "hook [her] up" with some "tasty shit." Jean immediately caves, begging Steve to help her get "fucked up," and Steve tells her that later, he will.

Charlie arrives at the house with his and Mattie Fae's adult son, Little Charles, who slept through the funeral. Little Charles is distressed at having missed the service and worries that his family, who already makes fun of him incessantly, will be furious. Charlie tenderly reassures Little Charles that he is loved and urges him to give the rest of the family a chance to see the real him. Charlie goes into the house, and Ivy meets Little Charles out on the porch. The two share a kiss, and it becomes clear that they are having an affair.

Dinner is served, and almost immediately the bickering begins as Violet cooks up discord with nearly every member of the family. When Barbara accuses Violet of attacking her entire family one by one, Violet becomes enraged, and insists it is time that their family told some truths. Barbara tells Violet that she's a drug addict, and Violet joyfully admits to the accusation. She holds her bottle of pills aloft and announces to her family that if any one of them tries to take the pills from her, she will eat them alive. Barbara lunges for Violet and, after a struggle, successfully wrestles the pills away from her. Barbara orders her sisters to search the house for Violet's stashes of pills. Violet cries and tells Barbara that she's out of line—this is Violet's house. Barbara towers over her mother and screams in her face: "I'm running things now!"

Later that night, Barbara, Karen, and Ivy sit upstairs, discussing what to do with their mother. After the explosive dinner, they took her to see her doctor, who has been overprescribing her medication for a long time now—Barbara and Ivy know, though, that Violet sees multiple doctors and manipulates them all into writing her potentially dangerous prescriptions. Barbara asks Ivy if there is something going on between her and Little Charles and warns her not to try and have children with him. Ivy reveals that she can't bear children, anyway—she had a hysterectomy last year after she was diagnosed with cervical cancer. Barbara and Karen are shocked by this news, and Barbara asks Ivy why she wouldn't have told her sisters she was

struggling with cancer. Ivy says that she feels no connection to either of her sisters, or to anyone in her family except Little Charles. Ivy then reveals that she and Little Charles are planning on running away to New York together; Ivy is tired of the burden of caring for her abusive, addict parents.

Violet enters the room, sober but shaky, and apologizes to the girls for being so mean. Barbara asks for a moment alone with Violet, and the two call a truce. Downstairs, Ivy finds Little Charles watching TV in the living room. He brings Ivy over to the piano, where he plays a love song he's written for her. Mattie Fae and Charlie come into the room, interrupting them, and Mattie Fae tells Little Charles that it's time to leave. Seeing that the TV is on, Mattie Fae begins berating Little Charles for his obsession with television. Charlie orders Little Charles and Ivy to leave the room. As Charlie, alone with Mattie Fae, warns her that if she cannot find room in her heart to be kind to her son, he will leave her, Barbara—who has come downstairs—listens in the doorway. When Charlie goes outside, Mattie Fae becomes aware of Barbara's presence.

Barbara apologizes for eavesdropping, and Mattie Fae asks if something is going on between Little Charles and Ivy. When Barbara admits that there is, Mattie Fae says that such an affair can't happen—Little Charlies is not Ivy's cousin, not her half-brother. Mattie Fae reveals that she had an affair with Beverly many years ago, and that Little Charles is Beverly's son, not Charlie's. Now that Beverly is dead, Mattie Fae says, she—and Barbara—are the only ones who know the truth. Mattie Fae begs Barbara to put a stop to whatever is happening between Ivy and Little Charles; after all, Barbara said she was the one "running things."

Later that night, Jean and Steve are sneaking around the house, smoking pot and giggling. Steve begins groping Jean. Johnna appears with a cast-iron skillet in her hand and starts beating Steve. The whole house awakes to the commotion, and Karen takes the injured Steve into the next room, where they begin packing their things to leave. Barbara and Bill ask Jean what happened and attempt to get her to tell them the truth, but she will not—she accuses her parents of being unable to tell right from wrong themselves anymore, and of using her to do that work for them. Barbara attempts to talk to Karen, but Karen will not let Barbara get a word in. Karen asks Barbara to get the truth from Jean—Karen does not want to believe that Jean is "blameless" in what happened. Karen then announces that she is returning to Florida with Steve.

After Karen leaves, Bill comes downstairs with his and Jean's suitcases. He is taking Jean back to Boulder. Barbara asks Bill if they will be able to repair their marriage, and Bill says they won't. Later, in the early hours of the morning, Barbara and Johnna sit up in the study. Barbara drinks a glass of whiskey and offers Johnna the chance to quit. Johnna insists she can do the job, and that she wants to stay.

The following morning, Sheriff Gilbeau comes by to talk to Barbara—he has received a call from the proprietor of a local motel who says that Beverly stayed there in the days between his disappearance and the recovery of his body. Sheriff Gilbeau is going to follow the lead and see if he can find any incoming or outgoing calls to Beverly's motel room.

That night, Barbara and Ivy sit at the dinner table. Barbara tells Ivy she needs to break things off with Little Charles, but Ivy wants to do the opposite—to tell Violet about her affair. Violet comes down to dinner. As she, Ivy, and Barbara begin eating, Ivy tries to tell Violet the truth. Barbara keeps cutting her off, attempting to stop the secret from coming to light. Ivy keeps starting sentences with "Little Charles and I," but can't get any further than that—eventually, Violet finishes the sentence for her: "Little Charles and you," she says, "are brother and sister." Violet reveals that she has known the truth of Little Charles's parentage all his life—Beverly knew that she knew, she says, but the two of them never discussed it.

Ivy, shocked and horrified, leaves, calling both Barbara and Violet "monsters." Violet continues talking to Barbara about Beverly and Little Charles, and suspects that in the end Beverly ultimately killed himself because of his guilt over the situation. If she had been able to reach Beverly at the motel, Violet says, she would have told him to forget his guilt and come back home. Barbara is stunned to realize that her mother knew where her father was after he disappeared all along. Violet reveals that Beverly left a note when he left Saturday morning, saying he could be reached at the Country Squire Motel. Despite this fact, Violet waited until Monday—after the bank opened and she had emptied out the safe deposit box—to try calling Beverly, by which point he'd already checked out of the motel.

Realizing that her mother could have prevented her father's death, but chose his money over his salvation, Barbara leaves. Violet, disoriented and seemingly high once again, puts "Lay Down, Sally" on and dances about the living room before attacking the record player and destroying it. She calls for her daughters, and when they don't answer, she begins calling for Johnna. She crawls up the stairs to Johnna's room, and places her head in Johnna's lap. Johnna comforts Violet and repeats out loud a line of T.S. Eliot's: "This is the way the world ends."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Beverly Weston – The patriarch of the Weston family. Beverly appears in only one scene—the play's prologue. Even after his disappearance and death, however, Beverly's presence is palpable throughout the play and reflected in his family's unraveling in the wake of his departure from it. A writer and teacher whose first book of poems won him critical acclaim and a degree of fame in the 1960s, Beverly is grizzled and jaded at

the start of the play. He is also a self-professed alcoholic who has decided to stop trying to quit drinking and instead devote himself to it fully. He hires Johnna Monevata to care for him and his wife Violet, who have descended deeper and deeper into their respective addictions to alcohol and pills. Beverly's escape from his familial role through suicide seems bleak at first, but as the dysfunction and decay within the Weston family becomes more evident, his decision to take his leave of the clan forever—through the only guarantee that he will not be dragged back in—takes on the sheen of heroism.

Violet Weston – Beverly's wife, and the matriarch of the Weston clan. A cruel and emotionally abusive narcotics addict, Violet has already begun to spiral out of control before Beverly's disappearance. Recently diagnosed with mouth cancer, Violet manipulates the doctors treating her into prescribing her pills, and grows more and more unstable throughout the play as a result of her addiction. Violet controls and manipulates more people than just her doctors: she verbally intimidates her sister Mattie Fae, her housekeeper Johnna, and her middle daughter Ivy into submission. She attempts to bring her eldest daughter Barbara under her control as well through their back-and-forth power struggle, which comprises much of the play's second act. By Act Three, Violet has announced her intention to get clean, but wants to do so on her own, without anyone's help or influence. Whether or not she winds up kicking her dependency on drugs is left unresolved; by the end of the play, though, it is clear that Violet has either reverted to old habits or been left so confused and brain-damaged by her years of drug abuse that she is unable to make heads or tails of her surroundings. In the end, Violet winds up alone and despondent, having driven Ivy and Barbara away and alienated everyone else she cared about, even if she only cared about them because they fed her sense of power and control.

Barbara Fordham – Beverly and Violet's eldest daughter. A whip-smart and sharp-tongued woman who has painstakingly tried to distance herself from the Plains and from her family, Barbara is both practical and easily flustered, decisive and yet flailing in her own role as a wife and a mother. Barbara's arc throughout the play focuses on her power struggles with Violet, an abusive addict. Barbara's desire to unseat her mother as the matriarch of the family reflects her symbolic desire to reclaim the self-worth and dignity that Violet has stolen from her all her life. The claustrophobic, oppressive vortex of Pawhuska threatens to reclaim Barbara and erase all the progress she has made in her life, but by the end of the play she has managed to once again—and, it's implied, for the final time—escape the clutches of her unstable mother, her family's broken legacy, and her stifling hometown.

Bill Fordham – Barbara's husband. A university professor currently embroiled in an affair with a younger student, Bill is intellectual and aloof. He loves Barbara but finds her difficult, and for this reason has chosen to distance himself from her by exploring a trial separation. Bill is clearly overwhelmed by Barbara's toxic and overbearing family, but often uses his bewilderment as an excuse for his lack of emotional support for both Barbara and their daughter Jean.

Jean Fordham – Barbara and Bill's fourteen-year-old daughter. Jean is sullen, quirky, and desperate for an escape from her difficult family; she retreats into movies and marijuana, longing to drown out her separated parents' incessant fighting and avoid the role of judge and moral compass they have placed upon Jean's unwilling shoulders. It's implied that Jean has recently gone through puberty and filled out, and that she looks older than her age; Karen's fiancé Steve is sexually attracted to Jean, and attempts to assault her one night after the two share a joint. Jean is uneasily stumbling through her adolescence, desperate not to make a "federal case" or a "big deal" out of the many slights, traumas, and difficulties her family puts onto her plate. Jean's desire for solitude and escape is a direct reflection of the claustrophobic atmosphere of her family's ancestral home, and her attempts to establish herself as someone distinct from the rest of her family reflect many of the more repressed adult characters' hidden wishes for themselves.

Ivy Weston – The middle child of the Weston family, the quiet, sensitive, and emotionally aloof Ivy plays everything close to the chest. Ivy has lived in Pawhuska her entire life—she is the only one of her sisters who never moved away from their hometown. As such, the burden of caring for Beverly and Violet has fallen largely on Ivy, and she feels trapped by her claustrophobic and manipulative family; the only member of her family she can relate to is her cousin Little Charles, with whom she is having a romantic affair. Ivy harbors dreams of running away to New York with Little Charles and spends much of the play vacillating between resolving to bring the truth of their affair to light and keeping it hidden. At the end of the play, when Violet reveals that Ivy and Little Charles are not cousins, but brother and sister, Ivy is devastated, and flees the house, vowing never to return. Quiet and complicated, Ivy's life has been structured around her role as her mother's punching bag and caretaker, and the trauma of such a confining, suffocating existence is evident in Ivy's isolation, self-destructiveness, and vivid fantasy life.

Karen Weston – The youngest of the Weston sisters. Karen is flighty and false; she seems to have a checkered past marked by many failed relationships and unspeakable mistakes. Karen is guarded about her personal history but eager to use the family reunion that takes place around Beverly's funeral to prove to everyone how happy, fulfilled, and loved she is now that she has found her fiancé, Steve.

Mattie Fae Aiken – Violet's younger sister. Mattie Fae is boisterous and funny, but, like her sister, has a strong cruel streak. Mattie Fae's meanness is mainly focused on her only son, Little Charles, who at thirty-seven seems to be in a

perpetual state of arrested development. Mattie Fae is relentless in her criticisms of Little Charles, and the source of her unending disappointment in him is eventually revealed to stem from her own guilt and self-loathing over the fact that Little Charles is actually Beverly's illegitimate son.

Little Charles Aiken – Mattie Fae and Charlie Aiken's adult son. Little Charles is thirty-seven years old but stunted in almost every way—he is unmarried, unemployed, and seemingly has trouble even taking basic care of himself. He is tender and creative, though, and has found a secret love with his cousin Ivy. It is eventually revealed—to nearly everyone but Little Charles himself—that Little Charles is actually Beverly's illegitimate son, making him Ivy's half-brother; Mattie Fae had an affair with Beverly some time ago and has been passing Little Charles off as Charlie's boy since his birth.

Johnna Monevata – A Native American woman from the Cheyenne tribe who is hired to be Beverly and Violet Weston's live-in housekeeper. Despite the difficult emotional demands of the job she has accepted, Johnna quickly becomes a mostly silent but steadfast participant in the lives—and the dramas—of the Weston clan, intervening when she is most needed to protect, defend, and support the very damaged people she has signed on to care for. Though Johnna is often a victim of Violet's verbal abuse and harsh language, she is the only one left, in the end, to comfort Violet in her moment of deepest sorrow and defeat.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Charlie Aiken – Mattie Fae's husband. A sensitive and jocular man who seems uneasy about replacing his brother-in-law Beverly as the patriarch of the Weston clan. Charlie resents Mattie Fae's cruel treatment of their son, Little Charles, and attempts to defend his stunted but tender son any chance he gets.

Steve Heidebrecht – Karen's fiancé. A shady businessman, Steve lives in Florida and is purposefully oblique about his profession. He is later revealed to be a pedophile when he attempts to sleep with the fourteen-year-old Jean.

Sheriff Deon Gilbeau – The Osage County Sheriff. He and Barbara attended high school together, and her return to Pawhuska seems to stir up longing for the past—and for one another—in both of them.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

PARENTS, CHILDREN, AND INHERITANCE

August: Osage County is fundamentally a story about the inheritance of trauma. As the extended Weston clan comes together under one roof for the first time in years after the death of their patriarch, Beverly, the relationships most keenly tested are those between parents and children. Through his examination of several fraught parent-child relationships under pressure, playwright Tracy Letts suggests that behavior both benign and abusive, and legacies both mundane and traumatic, are inevitably passed on from one generation to the next.

Letts examines the burden of inherited trauma through the relationship between Violet, the Weston family matriarch, and her eldest daughter Barbara. Violet is a cruel woman—an addict who stumbles through her house in a haze, spewing vitriol at anyone who will listen. Violet's cruelty is eventually revealed to stem, at least in part, from her own mother's meanness. At one point, for example, Violet tells her daughters about her mother pulling a prank one Christmas, gifting Violet a pair of dirty, feces-caked work boots after she'd asked for a pair of shiny cowboy boots. Ruminating on this story, Violet calls her mother a "nasty, mean old lady" and supposes she's the source of her own cruelty.

Violet has clearly passed her pain on to her own three daughters—most of all, to Barbara. After being home for only a few hours, Barbara begins picking a fight with her husband Bill about his infidelity. As Barbara insults Bill every chance she gets, Bill remarks that "Violet really has a way of putting [Barbara] in attack mode." This quotation illustrates the effect Violet has on Barbara, and the ways in which being home exacerbates the baggage Barbara has inherited from her mother. Barbara also spars with her sisters Ivy and Karen and her own daughter, Jean, further proving herself to possess Violet's appreciation of a down and dirty battle of words.

Through the relationship between Violet's sister Mattie Fae and her son Little Charles, Letts also demonstrates how parents' self-loathing is inherited by their children. Mattie Fae displays outsized disdain towards Little Charles throughout the play. The source of this cruelty is not revealed until Act Three, when Mattie Fae suspects that Little Charles and his (supposed) cousin Ivy are involved romantically and comes to Barbara with her suspicions. Barbara confirms Mattie Fae's fears, prompting Mattie Fae to reveal the truth: Ivy and Little Charles aren't cousins, but half-siblings; Little Charles is Beverly's son from an affair with Mattie Fae.

As she confesses this, Mattie Fae self-reflectively admits that she doesn't know why Little Charles is "such a disappointment" to her—she wonders if she is really just "disappointed *for* him," and has been hard on him as a result of her guilt over hiding such a secret. In this way, Mattie Fae's pain has been passed

down to her son. Though he doesn't know the truth of his parentage, he has had to bear the burden of his mother's ire for nearly four decades, and has become insecure, introverted, and emotionally stunted as a result. Little Charles has internalized the worst of his mother and built his entire identity around this sense of inadequacy.

While Barbara and Beverly never appear together onstage, the echoes of their unique relationship reverberate throughout the play. Beverly passes down two things to his oldest daughter: his talent for writing, and his inability to use that talent. Beverly came to prominence after the publication of his first book of poems, *Meadowlark*, in the 1960s. Though the play never delves into specifics, Letts hints that Barbara herself is a writer—and a failed one at that. Violet tells Barbara that Beverly always said his daughter had talent; this information shocks Barbara, who refuses to believe that her father would ever have said such a thing—or, even if he had, that such a thing could be true. The fact that Beverly never told Barbara himself that he admired her writing reveals a disconnect between the two, but also suggests the inheritance of talent—whether it was passed down through genetics or through Barbara's active effort to be like (or to impress) her father is never revealed. Talent, then, is a different kind of "trauma" here—Beverly's early success became a burden when he failed to produce a second book that held up to his first, and the pain of flailing as an artist is a legacy to which Barbara has, perhaps unwittingly, become the heir.

This connection between Beverly and Barbara's artistic lives is symbolic of a deeper emotional connection between the two, hinted at when Barbara and Johnna (Beverly and Violet's housekeeper) convene in Beverly's study in scene that mirrors the play's prologue. In the prologue, Beverly offers Johnna the job of housekeeper and caretaker, before launching into a half-drunken monologue about his disillusionment with his life, his writing, and his country. Later in the play, Barbara sits Johnna down in the study for a meeting. Barbara nurses a glass of whiskey—as her father did in the prologue—while waxing poetic about her father's disappointment in America, his family, and himself. After dismissing Johnna, Barbara pours herself some more whiskey—demonstrating that she may stand to inherit her father's alcoholism, as well—and talks to herself circuitously, mirroring his behavior twice over. Barbara, unaware of the manner in which Johnna was hired, unknowingly mimics Beverly's actions, suggesting the patterns and behaviors she has inherited from him are not just copied—as her writing career may be—but transmitted genetically or spiritually.

Trauma, talent, self-loathing, and predispositions toward addiction make their way from generation to generation in a combination of genetics, behavioral influence, and an element—at least in the world of this play—of fate. As the Westons struggle to understand the traits their parents have thrust upon them—and indeed the things they have forced, willingly or not, upon their own children—Letts highlights the inevitability of inheritance, and all the burdens contained within it.

PATRIARCHY AND AMERICAN MEMORY

The disappearance of the Weston clan's patriarch, Beverly, structures the play's first act, and the void left in the wake of his loss forms both the logistical and emotional framework of the rest of the action. Beverly becomes an almost mythical figure as the drama unfolds—an archetype symbolic of the death of a vision of America that no longer exists. Set in mid-2007—a crucial moment in American patriotism and paranoia—*August: Osage County* uses Beverly's death to simulate the end of a certain era in American life, to suggest the irrelevance of the "Greatest Generation"—those who grew up in the Depression and went on to fight in World War II—and to reject the idea that America's most important years are in its past.

Beverly only appears in the play's prologue, as he interviews Johnna Monevata for a job as a live-in housekeeper. During this peculiar introduction to the Weston home, Beverly declares he will soon depart from the world due to his inability to live the quintessential American life he always believed he'd have. This is established through a number of things Beverly says, and by his metaphorical passing of the baton to Johnna, a Native American woman. Beverly begins the interview by quoting memorably bleak lines from T.S. Eliot ("Life is very long") and John Berryman ("The world is gradually becoming a place where I do not care to be anymore"). His "affinity with the damaged" is evidence of his own exhaustion and brokenness.

Beverly admits he is not "entirely comfortable" with bringing in help, but explains he is "join[ing] the ranks of the Hiring Class"—a "class" he seems, from this language, to view derisively—because his and Violet's addictions have become so overwhelming that they can no longer participate in "the maintenance of traditional American routine." The scene ends as Johnna accepts the job and Beverly gives her a volume of T.S. Eliot to read, telling her it is not a "job requirement," but merely for her own enjoyment.

This moment, in which Beverly metaphorically renounces his role as patriarch and puts the care of himself and his wife in the hands of a Native woman from a younger generation, is not only symbolic of Beverly's preparation for his own literal demise, but of his preparation for the figurative demise of the control his generation has exerted over America. In lending her the volume of Eliot, he is making one final half-hearted attempt to pass on the wisdom of his own generation. The irony in this gesture is that Eliot, though born in America, defected to England at an early age and renounced his American passport. A member of the generation before Beverly's, Eliot had already seen the fruitlessness and death in "American routine."

As the play progresses, Johnna's presence is seen by many members of the Weston clan as disorienting. More than anything, they simply aren't sure how to talk to or treat Johnna. Their reactions reveal an anxiety about the presence of otherness in their lives, and symbolize, on a larger scale, American anxieties about a more inclusive future which attempts to atone for the mistakes of generations past—even those of the so-called "Greatest Generation" to which Violet, Beverly, Mattie Fae, and Charlie all belong.

Violet is particularly baffled by Johnna's presence. She repeatedly points out Johnna's otherness by referring to her as an "Indian." Despite Barbara's attempts to clue her mother in as to the politically correct nomenclature, Violet keeps referring to the "Indian in her house" and making pointed reference to Johnna's status as an outsider. When Karen later refers to the old fort in the backyard where she and her sisters used to play "Cowboys and Indians," Violet angrily makes a point of correcting Karen, urging her to revise her sentence—"You played Cowboys and Native Americans." The correction is really a pointed attack on Barbara; Violet is angry with her eldest daughter for her progressiveness—progressiveness that, to Violet, signals the end of her generation's era of power, and the end of a way of life that blatantly privileged white American while paying little attention to the needs of marginalized populations. Johnna's status as a live-in housekeeper has already made Violet feel useless, and watching her family privilege Johnna's comfort and sense of belonging over Violet's own is too much for her to bear.

At the end of the play, Violet has been forsaken by her husband and daughters, and has no company but her pills and Johnna, "the Indian who lives in [her] attic." Violet crawls up the stairs to Johnna's room, where she lays her head in Johnna's lap and begs for comfort. In one way, the play has been about Violet's struggle against the forces of addiction and abuse; in another, more symbolic sense, it has been about Beverly and Violet's journey towards the acceptance of the fact that their generation's power is coming to a close, and that a new era of American life is about to begin. The image of Violet taking emotional refuge in the arms of her hired help—a woman whose people have systematically been taken advantage of and decimated by white Americans—is symbolic of the wounds between oppressed and oppressor that may never heal. As Johnna cradles a quietly weeping Violet—who is herself repeating, over and over again, "And then you're gone, and then you're gone"—Johnna invokes T.S. Eliot, saying, "This is the way the world ends" over and over. Johnna is quoting an American poet who renounced his ties to America, and who foretold of the world ending with a "whimper"—indeed, Violet's world is ending to the soundtrack of her own pitiful whimpers.

As his characters wrestle with political correctness, the death of their dreams and aspirations, and the demands of modern American life, Letts uses the canvas of *August: Osage County* to examine the anxieties unique to a world in flux. The symbolic death of the Weston patriarch sets the stage for the play's larger symbolic tilt: the death of the received social order of contemporary America.

ADDICTION

The inciting incident of *August: Osage County*—and almost all the action that follows —is calibrated around the emotional and logistical vacuum created by addiction. In the play's prologue, Beverly Weston hires Johnna Monevata to look after him and Violet, whose addictions, according to Beverly himself, "have over time made burdensome the maintenance of traditional American routine." As the play unfolds, Letts—whose real-life family was plagued by addiction—demonstrates the ways in which addiction cripples not just individuals, but families as well. Through his searing portrait of the Weston clan's matriarch, Violet—an emotionally violent and verbally abusive pill addict—Letts ultimately suggests that addiction often masks other impulses, tendencies, or shameful secrets, and that without attending to those demons, the specter of addiction can never be defeated.

Violet is the most obvious and outlandish addict in the play. While Beverly was a self-admitted alcoholic at the time of his death, and had chosen to nurse his addiction rather than try to escape it, Violet spends much of the first half of the play denying her narcotics addiction to everyone around her—even as she pops pills in plain sight. As the open secret of Violet's addiction is dissected piece by piece, her behavior is revealed to be a cover for much darker impulses, and a way for her to numb herself to the painful secrets of her own past.

When Violet first appears, she descends the stairs in a state of disarray, mumbling incoherently, lurching around the house erratically, and lashing out against Beverly in abusive verbal attacks. This behavior provides context for Beverly's twinned senses of hopelessness and desperation. Violet is a woman beyond saving—her recent diagnosis with "a touch of cancer" of the mouth has allowed her to legitimize her use of pills as a practical antidote to the hellish side effects of chemotherapy—and Beverly knows that he cannot do anything to stop his wife from pursuing her addiction, which seems to be her one joy in life.

When the audience next sees Violet, she is disturbed but not incoherent. Nevertheless, as she anxiously awaits Barbara's arrival, she pops pills one by one, eventually losing count and asking her daughter Ivy how many she's taken. Ivy, though, has not been able to keep track either. This scene demonstrates how Violet's serious addiction has become just another banality in the Westons' lives—it is part of their family's world, as ubiquitous as furniture. When Barbara arrives soon after this moment, she can tell almost immediately that her mother is high. Barbara warns Violet that she will not go through "this" again—implying that Violet has wrestled with addiction for

many years, and demonstrating that her family's previous attempts to intervene and get her clean have failed spectacularly.

As the play progresses, the depths of Violet's addiction become more fully realized. She refers to her pills as her "best fucking friends," and warns her family that if any of them tries to take them from her she will "eat [them] alive." Violet's vicious protectiveness of her addiction suggests that it is masking something even more terrible—and as the drama continues, the reasons for her attachment to that mask become clear. It is eventually revealed that Violet has known her family's most terrible secret all along: that Little Charles is in fact the child of Beverly and Violet's sister Mattie Fae, not Mattie Fae and her husband Charlie. Violet claims to have always known this truth, but to have never discussed it with Beverly. Clearly, the shame, guilt, and pain of this secret has eaten both of them alive; Beverly is dead by his own hand, and Violet is recklessly toying with her life each day she remains addicted to narcotics.

By the end of the play, Violet has seemingly returned to her addiction, despite her promises to her daughters that this time she would get clean for real. Her erratic, violet, bizarre behavior in the play's final moments might also reveal an even darker truth: that her addiction has left her brain so addled and damaged that the real Violet, whoever she was, is gone forever. In this reading of the play, the mask that Violet wore in the form of her addiction has become her real "face"—the only visage that remains.

Through Violet, Letts is making a larger comment on what addiction can do not just to individuals, but to families. By the end of the play, Violet has lost everyone she claimed to love—her daughters, her sister, and her husband. Each and every one of them is as much a victim of Violet's addiction as she is herself; each pays the price for her cowardly disappearance into the use of substances to disguise the truths that, had they been aired in a loving, respectful, honest way, might have been the family's salvation, rather than its destruction.

VIOLENCE, ABUSE, AND POWER

Violence and abuse, both psychological and physical, have seeped into every corner of the Weston household—and into nearly every line of *August: Osage County*. The play is about a family that does not know how to be good to one another as a result of generational trauma, addictive behavior, broken promises, and dangerous secrets, and it seems, for much of the action, that violence and abuse are inevitable byproducts of such sadness, tension, and brokenness. As the play unfolds, though, and as the violence ramps up, it becomes clear that Letts is arguing that violence and abuse are, more often than not, consciously-employed methods of securing and maintaining power over other individuals.

From the moment Violet is first shown with her daughters, Letts establishes the emotionally violent atmosphere that Violet perpetuates in order to maintain power over her three children. In her early interactions with Ivy, Violet disparages her middle daughter in cruel, offhand ways. She tells Ivy she is "hopeless" after badgering her to disclose how an earlier phone call with Barbara went, and all Ivy can relay is that Barbara said she was on her way. When Ivy tells Violet—perhaps in an attempt to appease her mother—that she called her middle sister, Karen, as well, and that Karen said she would try to make it home, Violet replies that Karen will "be a big fat help, just like you," before popping a pill and stating that the only person she wants around is Barbara. When Ivy replies that she doesn't know what Barb is going to be able to do that Ivy herself couldn't, Violet begins attacking Ivy's appearance, telling Ivy that straightening her hair was a mistake, encouraging her to wear makeup, and telling her that she looks "like a lesbian" and needs to "spruce up" in order to attract a man. From this scene alone, it is clear that Violet attempts to beat her daughters down and level their sense of self-confidence in order to retain power over them. She has clearly been successful with Ivy, who has stayed in her hometown all her life and who is single despite being in her mid-forties.

Violet's abuse of Barbara is different, and more insidious. Violet claims to need Barbara and sees Barbara as the only one who can help her—yet Violet rejects Barbara's attempts to draw attention to Violet's addiction, denying it outright when Barbara asks her mother if she is high on pills. Because Barbara is the one who can see Violet most clearly—and is the only one unafraid of speaking up to her or out against her—Barbara receives the most abuse in the form of pointed verbal jabs and screaming tirades alike.

This tension between the two women comes to a head at Beverly's funeral dinner. Sick of her mother's treatment not just of herself but of Ivy, Karen, Little Charles, and practically everyone else at the dinner table, Barbara accuses her mother of being an addict in front of everyone. Violet responds by gleefully admitting to the label, brandishing her pills and challenging anyone to try and take them away from her. Barbara lunges for her mother, and a fight ensues—one of the rare examples of visible physical abuse in the play. Barbara is as skilled at verbal sparring as her mother—she learned, after all, from the best—yet there is no longer any chance of either woman securing power through words. The only avenue left, then, is establishing physical dominance—Barbara's win over her mother is a sure thing, as Violet is weakened both by intoxication and cancer. At the end of the fight, Barbara's triumphant scream—"I'm running things now!"—is a way of wrestling some sense of agency out of a relationship which for so many years was balanced in Violet's favor.

Violet is not the only one in the play who uses emotional violence and abuse as a way to establish power—Mattie Fae,

who is nearly as sharp-tongued and cruel as her older sister, uses similar patterns to maintain control over her only son, Little Charles. Mattie Fae's disdain for Little Charles permeates every sentence she speaks about him. Even her insistence on calling him "Little Charles," in spite of the fact that he is thirty-seven years old, betrays her desire to infantilize him in order to keep him firmly under her thumb.

Little Charlies, like Ivy, lives close to home and has remained unmarried. Like Ivy, Little Charles must daily bear the brunt of his mother's ire—though the reasons behind Mattie Fae's abuse of Little Charles are very different than those for Violet's cruelty towards Ivy. It is eventually revealed that Little Charles is the product of an affair between Beverly and Mattie Fae, and that Mattie Fae's guilt and shame over this secret has caused her to see her only son as a disappointment. Mattie Fae's abuse towards Little Charles, then, is motivated by her own self-loathing. By belittling Little Charles, Mattie Fae convinces herself she has power over the secret which has come to calibrate her life—even if the maintenance of that illusion saps every ounce of goodness and kindness from her heart.

The myriad ways in which abuse and violence are used to hold power—or at least create the illusion that one is in possession of power—throughout the play reveal Letts's curiosity about the efficacy of such struggles. Rather than creating characters who are cruel, abusive, and violent for no reason at all, he creates an atmosphere through his carefully-orchestrated character dynamics in which abuse and violence often yield power. Violet and Mattie Fae's cruelty is, for each woman, a direct means to the maintenance of the illusion that they have power over their families, their destinies, and themselves.

FAMILIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND ENTRAPMENT

The atmosphere of the Weston clan's ancestral home is stifling and tightly-controlled, and the effects of such an environment on the individuals made to endure it become increasingly sinister as the play unfolds. As tensions mount and horrible secrets come to life, Letts paints a picture of the mechanisms of responsibility and entrapment that keep people tied to abusive and miserable families. Letts ultimately suggests, through his careful examination of the three Weston sisters—Barbara, Karen, and Ivy, each of whom feel a different level of responsibility for their parents and larger extended family—that the only way to escape a broken family is to sever oneself from their origins entirely, leaving behind any and all chances of being pulled back in.

When Barbara arrives in Pawhuska with her husband Bill and their daughter, Jean, she comments right away on the oppressive **heat**—itself a symbol throughout the novel for control, suffocation, and entrapment. Barbara, as her parents' eldest child, is given task after painful task once she arrives home. It is Barbara who has to go identify Beverly's body, once it is dredged up out of a local lake; it is Barbara who leads the pill raid once she realizes that her mother is, for at least the second time in her life, hooked on narcotics; it is Barbara who must remain with her mother, alone in the house she hates, after nearly everyone else in the family has up and left.

With each task, Barbara is pulled deeper into her family's web, and towards the end of the play, it seems that Barbara has failed, once and for all, to get herself back out. As the play draws to a close, Violet reveals that she knew all along that Beverly was actually at a nearby motel during the days he went missing, and could've saved him from committing suicide by simply picking up the phone and calling him. This revelation is too much for Barbara to bear. Though she has been walking around her mother's house for days or weeks like a ghost—losing touch with her life outside of Pawhuska—Barbara, in the wake of Violet's admission, retrieves her rental car keys and leaves without another word, making clear her intent to never look back.

Karen, meanwhile, is characterized as a narcissistic dimwit clinging desperately to a sense of elaborately-constructed optimism. She prattles on about the happiness she has in Florida with her new fiancé Steve. After a lifetime of being treated badly, Karen says, she is finally being treated right. As Karen monologues at her sister Barbara—whom she hasn't seen in years—while they set the table for their father's funeral dinner, it is clear that Karen is actively trying to paint a picture of herself as someone who has established both physical and emotional distance from the claustrophobia of her toxic family, and thus, found enlightenment and true happiness.

As the play continues to unfold, though, it will become clear that in trying to establish a life away from home, Karen has aligned herself with someone perhaps even worse than the Westons. Steve comes on to Barbara's fourteen-year-old daughter, Jean, eventually attempting to seduce her one night in the kitchen. Johnna puts a stop to the assault, attacking Steve with a frying pan, but Karen is quick to defend her beau after the incident. She admits that she herself has done things she's "not proud of […] 'cause sometimes life puts you in a corner that way." By alluding to having taken desperate measures and done bad things in order to escape the "corner" her family had wedged her into, Karen demonstrates how she has stopped at nothing to try and get away from her family.

Ivy's experience of entrapment at the hands of her parents is so profound that she cannot conceive of a life or a relationship outside of her family; this is reflected in her choice to pursue a romance with her cousin, Little Charles. Ivy is the only Weston girl to have stayed behind in Oklahoma. While Barbara moved to Colorado and Karen went to Florida, Ivy has wasted her life in service to Beverly and Violet. Despite her proximity to home, Ivy feels disconnected from her entire family—except for Little Charles. The play implies that Ivy and Little Charles have

always been the odd ones out—Barbara remarks that the two of them have "always marched to their own [beat.]" Ivy tells Barbara that for years she stayed in Pawhuska, "hoping against hope someone would come into [her] life," but never making any romantic connections. Having become so wrapped up in her parents' insular world, Ivy chose, when pursuing romance, to burrow even deeper into the mechanisms which have kept her tied, all her life, to her family.

When Little Charles is revealed to be Ivy's half-brother, it symbolizes that Ivy is even more entrapped within her family that she would like to believe. As the realization of what Ivy has done hits her, she leaves the house, promising Barbara that she is going to run away to New York with Little Charles. Whether Ivy will go through with this remains unknown—but what is certain is that even if she runs away from her family, her relationship with Little Charles will forever serve as a reminder of the insularity of her own world as well as her inability to escape her responsibilities to her family.

In creating a sense of entrapment, claustrophobia, and inescapability, Letts turns the Westons' home into a house of horrors, which releases the members of the Weston clan only when they have declared their intent to cut all ties to the rest of the family. Though the three Weston sisters are at the center of the play, the other characters are bound to this spell-like code, too. Karen and Steve leave after Steve transgresses against Jean, and Karen speaks of fleeing to Belize on their honeymoon; Bill leaves with the declaration that he and Barbara will never repair their marriage; Charlie leaves threatening to divorce Mattie Fae; Ivy leaves promising to run away to New York; Barbara leaves after telling her mother she is "strong" enough to live—and die—on her own. As the characters realize that to escape their home they must sever themselves from one another, Letts paints a dark but compelling portrait of family as a kind of rat-trap—something one can only escape by destroying a small part of oneself.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

HEAT

The characters of *August: Osage County* make reference to the stifling heat within and around the Weston family's ancestral home in Pawhuska, Oklahoma multiple times throughout the play's three acts. The heat is ubiquitous and crushing, and as the play unfolds, it comes to serve as a symbol of the oppressive, claustrophobic, and confining emotional atmosphere of the house in which the action takes place. Every time a character mentions heat—especially when Barbara makes reference to having a hot flash—a devastating or ludicrous emotionally-charged moment is about to unravel in the lives of the Westons.

Barbara and Bill complain of the heat when they arrive on the porch of the Weston home, preparing to confront the chaotic, dysfunctional family Barbara left behind for the first time in several years; when Violet needles her daughter Ivy about her mediocre appearance and her frumpy fashion sense, Ivy attempts to get away from her mother by complaining about the heat in the room; when Steve, Karen Weston's sleazy fiancé, attempts to seduce Karen's fourteen-year-old niece Jean, he engages in wordplay with her about the room being hot and Jean's own "hot"-ness, both temperature-wise and appearance-wise—an obvious, and in this case telling, double-entendre which reveals the intense feelings of discomfort and entrapment Jean is experiencing in that moment. The recurring invocation of anger at, discomfort caused by, and disorientation rooted in the ever-present Oklahoma heat, as well as the exhaustion, crankiness, and feelings of suffocation and constriction it creates, symbolize the Weston family's desire to escape one another, and the seemingly cursed place that has brought them all together.

"LAY DOWN, SALLY"

Eric Clapton's "Lay Down, Sally"—a rollicking 1977 country-blues tune that plays at two crucial moments in the play—is a happy-sounding song whose lyrics suddenly become remarkably dark when looked at in the context against the events of *August: Osage County*. "There is nothing that is wrong in wanting you to stay here with me," Clapton croons in the song's opening lines; "I know you've got somewhere to go, but won't you make yourself at home and stay with me? And don't you ever leave." In a play focused on familial entrapment, and the ways in which parents attempt to undermine, control, and assert power over their children—children who, in this case, are desperate for escape from an oppressive, abusive family situation—these lyrics take on a haunting new sheen.

"Lay Down, Sally" is played twice in the play. Both times, Violet is the one to put the record on, and both times, she is in a state of psychological distress or disconnection from reality. The first time Violet plays the song, Sheriff Gilbeau has just arrived at the Weston house in the middle of the night to tell the family that Beverly's body has been found; Violet is high, and Gilbeau does not have a chance to tell her the news before she sidles over to the record player and starts up the song. She begins to dance, mumbling incoherently and occasionally attempting to sing along, as a horrified Gilbeau looks on. In the play's final moments, Violet—having been abandoned by Barbara and Ivy after a series of horrific revelations about Little Charles's true parentage and the fact that Violet could have saved Beverly from committing suicide—finds herself alone and disoriented,

either from a relapse or from brain damage, in her own empty house. Violet stumbles to the record player and puts the song on again, but after just a few bars, attacks the record player and destroys the album.

In these two moments, the song becomes a kind of inner monologue for Violet. She is desperate for her family to stay with her, to rally around her, to keep her company despite her constant verbal abuse and emotional violence. The song's flirty, fun lyrics become, through Violet, a desperate plea for attention, love, and concern—a plea that will ultimately go unanswered.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Theatre Communications Group edition of *August: Osage County* published in 2008.

Prologue Quotes

BEVERLY: The facts are: My wife takes pills and I drink. And these facts have over time made burdensome the maintenance of traditional American routine: paying of bills, purchase of goods, cleaning of clothes or carpets or crappers. Rather than once more assume the mantle of guilt … vow abstinence with my fingers crossed in the queasy hope of righting our ship, I've chosen to turn my life over to a Higher Power … and join the ranks of the Hiring Class.

Related Characters: Beverly Weston (speaker), Johnna Monevata, Violet Weston

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

In the brief but thematically rich prologue, which opens the play, Beverly Weston—the aged patriarch of the Weston family—meets with Johnna Monevata, a young Native American woman he hopes to hires as a live-in housekeeper. Beverly explains that despite his initial reluctance to hire someone to care for him and his wife as they lean further into their respective addictions, he is at last ready to admit defeat and "join the ranks of the Hiring Class." Beverly, a writer and professor, has decided that his addiction to alcohol is the most important thing in his life—more important than work, art, caring for his wife, or attending to the maintenance of their routines. This dark admission demonstrates Beverly's disappointment in his own life, and his desire to escape from it in any way he can. One of the novel's major themes, patriarchy and American memory, is reflected in this passage, as Beverly symbolically passes the torch of his care not to one of his own children, but to a young, Native woman, implying that the future of the country rests not on generational inheritance, but the willing concession of wealth, power, and agency to previously marginalized or disadvantaged populations.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

CHARLIE: Ivy. Let me ask you something. When did this start? This business with the shades, taping the shades?

IVY: That's been a couple of years now.

MATTIE FAE: My gosh, has it been that long since we've been here?

CHARLIE: Do you know its purpose?

MATTIE FAE: You can't tell if it's night or day.

IVY: I think that's the purpose.

Related Characters: Charlie Aiken (speaker), Mattie Fae Aiken, Ivy Weston

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

After Beverly Weston disappears, Violet Weston's sister, Mattie Fae, and her husband Charlie—as well as Bev and Violet's middle daughter, Ivy—come to the house to keep Violet company while she waits for news from the sheriff. Mattie Fae and Charlie live just about an hour and a half away yet haven't been to the Westons' house in many years, and are puzzled—and perturbed—by a new practice of taping the shades so that no one can tell the difference between night and day. The mysterious ritual seems to relate directly to Violet and Beverly's twin addictions, and perhaps denotes their desires to remain—quite literally—in the dark about the extent of the damage they are doing to themselves, and the rest of their family, by choosing to continue their addictive behaviors.

BARBARA: Goddamn, it's hot.

BILL: Wimp.

BARBARA: I know it. Colorado spoiled me.

BILL: That's one of the reasons we got out of here.

BARARA: No, it's not.

BILL: You suppose your mom's turned on the air conditioner?

BARBARA: Are you kidding? Remember the parakeets?

BILL: The parakeets.

BARBARA: I didn't tell you about the parakeets? She got a parakeet, for some insane reason, and the little fucker croaked after about two days. So she went to the pet store and raised hell and they gave her another parakeet. That one died after just one day. So she went back and they gave her a third parakeet and that one died, too. So the chick from the per store came out here to see just what in hell this serial parakeet killer was doing to bump off these birds.

BILL: And?

BARBARA: The heat. It was too hot. They were dying from the heat.

Related Characters: Barbara Fordham, Bill Fordham (speaker), Violet Weston

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

As Barbara Fordham and her husband Bill arrive at Barbara's childhood home in Pawhuska, Barbara feels unprepared to confront the chaos and discord she knows is waiting for her inside. She dreads being home—as the play unfolds, her loathness to return to such a claustrophobic place and be drawn back into her parents' complicated web will begin to make even more sense. In this passage, Barbara tells Bill a darkly funny story about a time her mother killed three pet parakeets in a row by keeping them inside in the stifling heat. As heat is a symbol throughout the play for the constricting nature of the Weston home, Barbara conveys her fear of becoming like one of her mother's poor birds—trapped, miserable, and in actual danger as a result of the oppressive atmosphere within the house.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

VIOLET: [Beverly] just told me he's disappointed in you because you settled.

BARBARA: Is that supposed to be a comment on Bill? Daddy never said anything like that to you—

VIOLET: Your father thought you had talent, as a writer.

BARBARA: If he thought that, and I doubt he did, he was wrong. Anyway, what difference does it make? It's my life. I can do what I want. So he was disappointed in me because I settled for a beautiful family and a teaching career, is that what you're saying? What a load of absolute horseshit.

Related Characters: Barbara Fordham, Violet Weston (speaker), Beverly Weston, Bill Fordham

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Barbara and her mother begin fighting almost immediately upon Barbara's arrival. One of the things they spar about is Barbara's choice to move to Colorado and leave her parents' home in Pawhuska. Violet attempts to make Barbara feel badly about her choice to leave Oklahoma, and takes a low blow at her daughter as she invokes the missing Beverly and his disappointment in Barbara's life choices. Barbara, however, rejects the idea that she inherited any of her famous father's talent for writing. She perhaps sees writing talent as not only a shared trait but a shared trauma between herself and her father; Barbara seems to want to be as distant as she can from her parents, physically and emotionally, and the idea that they share such an intimate and personal part of their lives both frightens and disgusts Barbara.

VIOLET: I'm not hooked on anything.

BARBARA: I don't know if you are or not, I'm just saying I won't go—

VIOLET: I'm not. I'm in pain.

BARBARA: Because of your mouth.

VIOLET: Yes, because my mouth burns from the chemotheeeahh.

BARBARA: Are you in a lot of pain?

VIOLET: *(Starting to cry.)* Yes, I'm in pain. I have got... gotten cancer. In my mouth. And it burns like a ... bullshit. And Beverly's disappeared and you're yelling at me.

BARBARA: I'm not yelling at you.

VIOLET: You couldn't come home when I got cancer but as soon as Beverly disappeared you rushed back—

BARBARA: I'm sorry. I ... you're right. I'm sorry. *(Violet cries. Barbara kneels in front of her, takes her hand.)* You know where I think he is? I think he got some whiskey...a carton of cigarettes, couple of good spy novels... aannnd I think he got out on the boat, steered it to a nice spot, somewhere in the shade, close to shore...and he's fishing, and reading, and drinking, and if the mood strikes him, maybe even writing a little. I think he's safe. And I think he'll walk through that door...any time.

Related Characters: Barbara Fordham, Violet Weston (speaker), Beverly Weston

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33-34

Explanation and Analysis

As Barbara notices Violet's speech beginning to slur and her attitude becoming more violent, Barbara asks her mother if she is high on pills. Violet insists she's only taking muscle relaxers for the pain from her chemotherapy, but Barbara reminds Violet of the pain and lunacy of the last time Violet went through withdrawal from a prior pill addiction. Violet, upset at being cornered by her eldest daughter, breaks down into tears, choosing to play the victim by invoking her cancer and her emotional weakness in the wake of Beverly's disappearance. As if to fully get Barbara on her side—and off her case—Violet attempts to guilt Barbara by pointing out how Barbara has made herself available during a time of crisis for Beverly, but could not be bothered to attend to Violet herself when she got sick. The tactic works; Barbara softens, and goes out of her way to comfort Violet.

Act 1, Scene 3 Quotes

BILL: Barbara, please, we have enough on our hands with your parents right now. Let's not revisit all this.

BARBARA: *Re*visit, when did we visit this to begin with? You pulled the rug out from under me. I still don't know what happened. Do I bore you, intimidate you, disgust you? Is this just about the pleasures of young flesh, teenage pussy? I really need to know.

BILL: You need to know *now?* You want to have this discussion with Beverly missing, and your mother crazy as a loon, and our daughter twenty feet away? Do you really want to do this now? [...] This discussion deserves our care. And patience. We'll both be in a better frame of mind to talk about this once your father's come home.

BARBARA: My father's dead, Bill.

Related Characters: Barbara Fordham, Bill Fordham (speaker), Beverly Weston, Jean Fordham

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39-40

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Bill and Barbara are fighting, in their makeshift "bedroom" in the living-room, about Bill's recent infidelity—he has been having a relationship with one of his students. Barbara, in the depths of misery as she confronts her dysfunctional family and her ailing mother, seems to want to salt her already-raw wounds by bringing up Bill's own transgressions. Bill calls her on this behavior, and suggests they wait until Beverly comes home. Barbara's confession—that she believes her father to be dead—stops the conversation in its tracks as the full emotional weight of the insane situation Barbara and Bill have found themselves in descends.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

KAREN: I guess what I'm telling you is that I'm finally happy. I've been really unhappy for most of my life, my adult life. I doubt you've been aware of that. I know our lives have led us apart, you, me and Ivy, and maybe we're not as close as we … as close as some families—

BARBARA: Yeah, we really need to talk about Mom, what to do about Mom—

KAREN:—but I think at least one reason for that is that I haven't wanted to live my unhappiness in full view of my family. But now I'm … well, I'm just really happy. And I'd really like us to maybe get to know each other a little better.

Related Characters: Barbara Fordham, Karen Weston (speaker), Steve Heidebrecht, Violet Weston, Ivy Weston

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Karen and Barbara are setting the table for dinner following Beverly's funeral. Karen narcissistically rambles on about what a difficult time she has had finding love and happiness throughout her life, and lauding her fiancé, Steve, for being the first emotionally attentive man she's ever encountered. Barbara keeps trying to get a word in edgewise, but Karen is very clearly aiming to paint a convincing picture of her own bliss, and doesn't let Barbara speak. Karen does eventually turn the conversation to her desire to reconnect with her family, but when Barbara brings up a serious problem actually affecting their family, Karen brings things right back around to her own experiences and desires, demonstrating her selfishness and falseness.

BARBARA: Three days ago … I had to identify my father's corpse. And now I sit here and listen to you viciously attack each and every member of this family—

VIOLET: "Attack my family"?! You ever been attacked in your sweet spoiled life?! Tell her 'bout attacks, Mattie Fae, tell her what an attack looks like!

MATTIE FAE: Vi, please—

IVY: Settle down, Mom—

VIOLET: Stop telling me to settle down, goddamn it! I'm not a goddamn invalid! I don't need to be abided, do I?! Am I already passed over?!

MATTIE FAE: Honey—

VIOLET: (*Points to Mattie Fae.*) This woman came to my rescue when one of my dear mother's many gentlemen friends was attacking me, with a claw hammer! This woman has dents in her skull from hammer blows! You think you been attacked?! What do you know about life on these Plains? What do you now about hard times?

BARBARA: I know you had a rotten childhood, Mom. Who didn't?

VIOLET: You DON'T know! You do NOT know! None of you know, 'cept this woman right here and that man we buried today! Sweet girl, sweet Barbara, my heart breaks for every time you ever felt pain. I wish I coulda shielded you from it. But if you think for a solitary second you can fathom the paint that man endured in his natural life, you got another think coming.

Related Characters: Mattie Fae Aiken, Violet Weston, Barbara Fordham (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

As the funeral dinner progresses, Violet becomes more and more intoxicated, and more and more belligerent. She has picked on nearly everyone at the table when Barbara, at the top of this passage, calls her out for "viciously attack[ing]" everyone. Violet flies into a rage, excoriating Barbara for thinking that verbal sparring and physical abuse are even comparable. This passage reveals Violet's deep inner traumas from childhood, which she appears to be passing on to her own children. It also suggests her fears of being "abided" or "passed over." Part of her outburst stems from the fact that she does not want to lose the upper hand in her family—she does not want to relinquish the power she gets from verbally abusing everyone and bullying them into silence.

VIOLET: Do you know where your father lived from age four 'til about ten? Do you? *(No one responds)* Do you?!

BARBARA: No.

IVY: No.

VIOLET: In a Pontiac sedan. With his mother, his father, in a fucking car! Now what else do you want to say about your rotten childhood? That's the crux of the biscuit: We lived too hard, then rose too high. We sacrificed everything and we did it all for you. Your father and I were the first in our families to finish high school and he wound up an award-winning poet. You girls, given a college education, taken for granted no doubt, and where'd you wind up? *(Jabs a finger at Karen.)* Whadda you do? *(Jabs a finger at Ivy.)* Whadda you do? *(Jabs a finger at Barbara.)* Who're you? Jesus, you worked as hard as us, you'd all be president. You never had real problems so you got to make all your problems yourselves.

Related Characters: Ivy Weston, Barbara Fordham, Violet Weston (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

In a continuation of her earlier tirade, Violet continues to shame Barbara for having thought that Violet's verbal "attacks" constituted real violence. Violet points out the very real financial and physical hardships she and Beverly—and so many others of their generation—faced in their youth. She and Beverly are part of the "Greatest Generation"—the generation that came of age in the Great Depression and fought in World War II. The theme of patriarchy and American memory is reflected in this passage, as Letts allows Violet to vent her rage over the fact that her daughters, absent any "real problems," have rested on the laurels of their parents' hard work and invented "fake" problems for themselves. Violet sees her own verbal vitriol as one of her daughters' invented "problems," and fails to understand how the very real verbal abuse she doles out constitutes emotional violence.

BARBARA: You're a drug addict.

VIOLET: That is the truth! That's what I'm getting at! I, everybody listen … I am a drug addict. I am addicted to drugs, pills, 'specially downers. *(Pulls a bottle of pills from her pocket, holds them up.)* Y'see these little blue babies? These are my best fucking friends and they never let me down. Try to get 'em away from me and I'll eat you alive.

BARBARA: Gimme those goddamn pills—

VIOLET: I'll eat you alive, girl!

Related Characters: Violet Weston, Barbara Fordham (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage—towards the end of the Weston clan's train-wreck of a funeral dinner—Barbara calls Violet out on her addiction in front of the rest of the afmily, and Violet gleefully admits to the truth. It becomes clear in her brief monologue to her gathered family that the pills to which she is addicted are the only things in her life that bring her any joy. They are more important to her than her children, and her promise to eat anyone who tries to take them from her "alive" is so frightening and visceral that it seems for a minute that, when Barbara rushes her mother and attempts to take the pills from her, Violet will make good on her word.

BARBARA: Okay. Pill raid. Johnna, help me in the kitchen. Bill, take Ivy and Jean upstairs. *(To Ivy.)* You remember how to do this, right?

IVY: Yeah…

BARBARA: *(To Jean)* Everything. Go through everything, every counter, every drawer, every shoe box. Nothing's too personal. Anything even looks suspicious, throw it in a box and we can sort it out later. You understand?

CHARLIE: What should we do?

BARBARA: Get Mom some black coffee and a wet towel and listen to her bullshit. Karen, call Dr. Burke.

KAREN: What do you want me to say?

BARBARA: Tell him we got a sick woman here.

VIOLET: You can't do this! This is *my* house! This is *my* house!

BARBARA: You don't get it, do you? *(With a burst of adrenaline, she strides to Violet, towers over her.)* I'M RUNNING THINGS NOW!

Related Characters: Karen Weston, Charlie Aiken, Ivy Weston, Violet Weston, Barbara Fordham (speaker), Jean Fordham

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

After successfully wrestling her mother's pills away, Barbara orders her family around as she begins a "pill raid." It is clear that this is familiar territory not just to Barbara, but to many other members of the family. Even as she militaristically doles out assignments, it's clear that she is conflicted—she refers to her mother as a "sick woman," a phrase that could, depending on the line reading any given actress delivers, be imbued with tenderness and fear or irony and disdain for Violet's choices in making herself sick. As Violet weakly protests that Barbara cannot take over "her" house, Barbara becomes enraged, and gets in her mother's face to scream a declaration which is both powerful and frightening, but also slightly ridiculous and ironic. Barbara cannot hope to "run things" in this chaotic, toxic house—she can no more "run" her family's affairs than she can her own wayward life.

Act 3, Scene 1 Quotes

BARBARA: You might have told us [about the cancer].

IVY: You weren't going to tell us about you and Bill.

BARBARA: That's different.

IVY: Why? Because it's you, and not me?

BARBARA: No, because divorce is an embarrassing public admission of defeat. Cancer's fucking cancer, you can't help that. We're your sisters. We might have given you some comfort.

IVY: I just don't feel that connection very keenly.

KAREN: I feel very connected, to both of you.

IVY: *(Amused)* We never see you, you're never around, you haven't been around for—

KAREN: But I still feel that connection!

IVY: You think if you tether yourself to this place in mind only, you don't need to actually appear.

KAREN: You know me that well.

IVY: No, and that's my point. I can't perpetuate these myths of family or sisterhood anymore. We're all just people, some of us accidentally connected by genetics, a random selection of cells. Nothing more.

Related Characters: Karen Weston, Ivy Weston, Barbara Fordham (speaker), Bill Fordham

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76-77

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ivy has just revealed to her sisters that she struggled with cancer the previous year and had a hysterectomy as a result. Barbara and Karen are shocked and hurt that Ivy hadn't told them at the time, and sad that they were denied the chance to comfort her. When Ivy points out that the three of them are not even remotely close, and have not been in a very long time—if ever—Karen is quick to state that she feels connected to her sisters despite the vast physical and emotional distances between them. Ivy calls Karen's bluff, pointing out that "feeling" a connection that doesn't exist is disingenuous, self-serving, and even cruel. Ivy does not want to "perpetuate" the delusion that the three of them are connected by anything other than "a random selection of cells." Ivy's cynicism about the role of family stems from her intense isolation in Pawhuska, and her own anger at having had to shoulder the burden of caring for Beverly and Violet on her own for so many years.

BARBARA: Aren't you angry with him?

IVY: No. He's accountable to no one but himself. If he's better off now, and I don't doubt he is, who are we to begrudge him that?

BARBARA: *His daughters.*

KAREN: *Yeah—*

BARBARA: And I'm fucking furious. The selfish son-of-a-bitch, his silence, his melancholy … he could have, for me, for us, for all of us, he could have helped us, included us, talked to us.

IVY: You might not have liked what you heard. What if the truth of the matter is that Beverly Weston never liked you? That he never liked any of us, never had any special feeling of any kind for his children?

Related Characters: Karen Weston, Ivy Weston, Barbara Fordham (speaker), Beverly Weston

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Barbara, Karen, and Ivy discuss their anger—or lack of it—with their father for taking his own life. Ivy, whose ideas about family and familial responsibility are warped through years of abuse and isolation, believes that Beverly's choice was valid—and perhaps even noble. Ivy is willing to admit that perhaps her father never liked her—never liked anything about his life—and had every right to take control of it and leave. Barbara doesn't buy into this philosophy, but Ivy—whose whole life has been lived in service to her toxic parents—sees Beverly's death as an escape or a release, and a well-deserved one at that.

CHARLIE: I don't understand this meanness. I look at you and your sister and the way you talk to people and I don't understand it. I just can't understand why folks can't be respectful of one another. I don't think there's any excuse for it. My family didn't treat each other that way.

MATTIE FAE: Well maybe that's because your family is a—

CHARLIE: You had better not say anything about my family right now. I mean it. We buried a man today I loved very much. And whatever faults he may have had, he was a good, kind, *decent* person. And to hear you tear into your own son on a day like today dishonors Beverly's memory. We've been married for thirty-eight years. I wouldn't trade them for anything. But if you can't find a generous place in your heart for your own son, we're not going to make it to thirty-nine.

Related Characters: Mattie Fae Aiken, Charlie Aiken (speaker), Little Charles Aiken, Beverly Weston

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

For the entirety of the play, Mattie Fae Aiken has been picking on her son Little Charles every chance she gets. She calls him dumb behind his back, berates him for making even the smallest mistakes, and tries to frame him as bumbling, incompetent, and lazy in her conversations with every other member of the family. In this passage, her husband Charlie breaks down and at last confronts Mattie Fae over her cruel treatment of their son, standing up for Little Charles and threatening to leave Mattie Fae if she not get herself under control. Charlie's kindheartedness and generosity toward his only son, and the love and solidarity he shows in this scene, are practically unheard of in the Weston family.

MATTIE FAE: Y'know, I'm not proud of this.

BARBARA: *Really.* You people amaze me. What, were you drunk? Was this just some—?

MATTIE FAE: I wasn't drunk, no. Maybe it's hard for you to believe, looking at me, knowing me the way you do, all these years. I know to you, I'm just your old fat Aunt Mattie Fae. But I'm more than that, sweetheart … there's more to me than that. Charlie's right, of course. As usual. I don't know why Little Charles is such a disappointment to me. Maybe he … well, I don't know why. I guess I'm disappointed *for* him, more than anything. I made a mistake, a long time ago. Well, okay. Fair enough. I've paid for it. But the mistake ends here.

BARBARA: If Ivy found out about this, it would destroy her.

MATTIE FAE: *I'm* sure as hell not gonna tell her. You have to find a way to stop it. You have to put a stop to it.
BARBARA: Why me?

MATTIE FAE: You said you were running things.

Related Characters: Barbara Fordham, Mattie Fae Aiken (speaker), Ivy Weston, Charlie Aiken, Little Charles Aiken

Related Themes:

Page Number: 84-85

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mattie Fae has just revealed an awful truth to Barbara—Little Charles is Barbara, Ivy, and Karen's half-brother, not their cousin. Mattie Fae had an affair with Beverly decades ago, and Little Charles is as much Beverly's child as the three Weston girls are. Barbara and Mattie Fae, knowing that Ivy and Little Charles have been having an already highly unorthodox love affair, fear what will happen if they discover the truth. At the same time, both women know that the affair cannot be allowed to continue. Mattie Fae instructs Barbara to handle things, but Barbara is reluctant. When Mattie Fae points out the fact that Barbara said she was "running things," the irony of Barbara's own inability to exert any influence over her family, or to right the chaos they have descended into, hits her in full.

Act 3, Scene 3 Quotes

BARBARA: One of the last times I spoke with my father, we were talking about … I don't know, the state of the world, something … and he said, "You know, this country was always pretty much a whorehouse, but at least it used to have some promise. Now it's just a shithole." And I think now maybe he was talking about something else, something more specific, something more personal to him … this house? This family? His marriage? Himself? I don't know. But there was something sad in his voice—or no, not sad, he always sounded sad—something more hopeless than that. As if it had already happened. As if whatever was disappearing had already disappeared. As if it was too late. As if it was already over. And no one saw it go. This country, this experiment, America, this hubris: what a lament, if no one saw it go. Here today, gone tomorrow. *(Beat.)* Dissipation is actually much worse than cataclysm.

Related Characters: Barbara Fordham (speaker), Beverly Weston, Johnna Monevata

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Barbara takes Johnna into her father's study and engages her in a slightly rambling conversation that almost entirely ignores Johnna's presence—a scene that mirrors the prologue, in which Johnna sat in the study with Beverly and listened to him complain about his own life and his dissatisfaction with the world around him. As Barbara reflects sadly on her father's inscrutable, unfathomable disappointment in his life, she seems to understand at last the symbolism in his suicide. No one "saw [America] go"—and no one saw Beverly go, either. Beverly chose to slip out of the world unseen, to "dissipate" rather than have a "cataclysm[ic]" demise. Barbara regrets that her father met such a fate, and "lament[s]" that America will—if it hasn't already—meet the same end.

Act 3, Scene 5 Quotes

IVY: Why did you tell me? Why in God's name did you tell me this?

VIOLET: Hey, what do *you* care?

IVY: You're monsters.

VIOLET: Come on now—

IVY: Picking the bones of the rest of us—

VIOLET: You crazy nut.

IVY: Monsters.

VIOLET: Who's the injured party here? *(Ivy staggers out of the dining room, into the living room. Barbara pursues her.)*

BARBARA: Ivy, listen—

Ivy: Leave me alone!

BARBARA: Honey—

IVY: I won't let you do this to me!

BARBARA: When Mattie Fae told me, I didn't know what to do—

IVY: I won't let you change my story! *(Ivy exits. Barbara chases after her and catches her on the front porch.)*

BARBARA: Goddamn it, listen to me: I tried to protect you—

IVY: We'll go anyway. We'll still go away, and you will never see me again.

BARBARA: Don't leave me like this.

IVY: *You will never see me again.*

BARBARA: This is not my fault. I didn't tell you. *Mom* told you. It wasn't me, it was *Mom*.

IVY: There's no difference.

Related Characters: Barbara Fordham, Violet Weston, Ivy Weston (speaker), Little Charles Aiken, Mattie Fae Aiken

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

Just as Ivy—oblivious to the fact that she and her cousin-slash-lover Little Charles Aiken are, in fact, half-brother and sister—is preparing to proudly confess to her affair with Little Charles, Violet beats Ivy to the punch line, revealing that she has known all along a secret which only Mattie Fae and Barbara were believed to have known. Ivy is, of course, devastated, and lashes out not just at Violet but at Barbara as well, whom she sees as complicit in her own suffering. Ivy tells Barbara that Barbara and Violet are one and the same,

confirming Barbara's worst fears: in allowing herself to be pulled back into her mother's web, she has become indistinguishable from the cruel woman who raised her—and who drove her out of Oklahoma in the first place.

VIOLET. You had better understand this, you smug little ingrate, there is at least one reason Beverly killed himself and that's *you*. Think there's any way he would've done what he did if you were still here? No, just him and me, here in this house, in the dark, left to just ourselves, abandoned, wasted lifetimes devoted to your care and comfort. So stick that knife of judgment in me, go ahead, but make no mistake, his blood is just as much on your hands as it is on mine. *(No response. Violet enters the study. Barbara follows.)* He did this, though; this was his doing, nor ours. Can you imagine anything more cruel, to make *me* responsible? And why, just to weaken me, just to make me prove my character? So no, I waited, I waited so I could get my hands on that safety deposit box, but I would have waited anyway. You want to show who's stronger Bev? Nobody is stronger than me, goddamn it. When nothing is left, when everything is gone and disappeared, I'll be here. Who's stronger now, you son-of-a-bitch?!

BARBARA. No, you're right, Mom. You're the strong one. *(Barbara kisses her mother… exits the study, returns to the living room.)*

Related Characters: Barbara Fordham, Violet Weston (speaker), Beverly Weston

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100-101

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Violet blames Barbara for Beverly's death—though she has just admitted that she herself was instrumental and complicit in Beverly's loss. Violet excoriates Barbara for having left her parents after they "devoted" their lives to their daughters' "care and comfort." Violet then begins railing against Beverly for leaving her alone with the mess of their lives and the "responsibility" of having driven him to suicide. Violet proclaims, toward the end of her rant, that she perhaps wanted Beverly to die—that she would not have saved him even if she could have. She believes this makes her "stronger" than him. Barbara mutely agrees—she tells her mother that she is "the strong one," implying that if Violet was strong enough to have a hand in Beverly's death, she is strong enough to take care of herself from now on, all alone.

VIOLET. Barbara? *(Barbara grabs her purse, digs out rental car keys.)* Barbara? *(Barbara stands, listens to her mother.)* Barbara, please. *(Barbara exits the house.)* Please, Barbara. Please. *(Violet shuffles into the living room.)* Barbara? You in here? *(She crosses to the dining room.)* Ivy? Ivy, you here? Barb? *(She crosses to the kitchen.)* Barb? Ivy? *(She turns in a circle, disoriented, panicked. She crosses to the study.)* Bev? *(She reenters the living room, stumbles to the stereo, puts on Clapton … stares at the turntable as the album spins … attacks the record player, rakes the needle across the album. She looks around, terrified, disoriented.)*

Related Characters: Violet Weston (speaker), Beverly Weston, Ivy Weston, Barbara Fordham

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Barbara leaves the house while Violet calls for her to stay, begging her oldest daughter—and the person to stick around the longest, this time at least—not to leave her. Unable to stop Barbara from leaving, Violet begins wandering the house, calling for the other departed members of her family—Ivy, who herself has sworn to never return, and Beverly, who killed himself to escape Violet and their life together. As Violet realizes that she is alone, she puts on "Lay Down, Sally" by Eric Clapton—a song whose lyrics, begging a lover not to leave, mirror Violet's desperate, depressed frame of mind upon realizing that she has alienated everyone she ever cared about.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

In a large, old country house in Pawhuska, Oklahoma—sixty miles northwest of Tulsa—Beverly Weston sits in his office. He is drunk, and he nurses a glass of whiskey as he interviews Johnna Monevata, a young Native American woman he hopes to hire as a housekeeper. He rambles on and on to Johnna about his favorite writers and poets. Beverly himself is a writer, and his office is full of piles of books. Beverly quotes T.S. Eliot specifically, musing on Eliot's assertion that "life is very long."

In the play's prologue, the Weston family's patriarch, Beverly, is clearly struggling. His home is in disarray, and he is drunk in the middle of the day. His preoccupation with the Eliot quote about the long nature of life allows the audience to see that Beverly views his own life as interminable and inescapable.

Elsewhere in the house, Beverly's wife Violet can be heard muttering, cursing, and stumbling around. Off of Johnna's confused look, Beverly explains that his wife takes pills, while he himself drinks—this is the "bargain" the two of them have struck. Beverly clarifies that he does not drink because his wife takes pills, nor does she take pills because he drinks—the reasons they partake "are inconsequential." Beverly explains to Johnna that his own drinking and his wife's pill addiction have made the staples of the "traditional American routine"—paying bills, purchasing groceries, housekeeping, and laundry—not just burdensome but impossible for the two of them. It is for this reason that Beverly is reluctantly searching for a housekeeper.

Beverly's frank confession to Johnna sets the stage for the play's atmosphere of stark bleakness. Beverly does not want to get better—he does not want Johnna to help him and his wife to cope with their addictions, but rather hopes that she will take care of the banalities of their lives so that they can focus on diving even deeper into them. Beverly is looking for Johnna to help facilitated his and Violet's declines—an odd job, indeed.

Beverly notices Johnna sweating, and offers her a handkerchief to wipe her brow. He apologizes for the temperature in the house. It is **sweltering hot**—his wife, he says, does not believe in air conditioning, and has taped the edges of the shades throughout the house with black duct tape.

The miserable heat within the house will come to function as a recurrent symbol of the constricting, suffocating atmosphere in the Weston home—not just physically, but emotionally, as well.

Violet comes into the room, smoking a cigarette, mumbling, and asking if the police are at the house. When she sees Johnna, she expresses surprise that there is a woman in the house. Violet's speech is slurred and disordered, and she asks odd and inappropriate questions of Johnna, calling attention to Johnna's Native heritage. She is clearly very high. When Beverly calmly suggests Violet go back to bed, she explodes violently, telling him to "fuck a fucking sow's ass." Recognizing her own outburst, Violet apologizes to Beverly, and to Johnna. She promises Johnna that in the future, she'll be "sickly sweet," and leaves the room.

The audience's first introduction to Violet allows them to glimpse her in her worst, most vulnerable state. Completely addled by her abuse of narcotics, Violet vacillates rapidly between inappropriate nitpicking, violent outbursts, and moments of "sweetness." Violet is portrayed off the bat as an unstable woman uncomfortable with change.

After Violet exits, Beverly reminds Johnna that he has only called her because Violet's doctor, Dr. Burke, specifically recommended Johnna as someone qualified to handle Violet's needs. Johnna tells Beverly that she has a year toward a nursing certificate but had to drop out when her father died. Beverly goes over the requirements of the job with Johnna once more—she will be expected to be a live-in maid and will need to observe the "unusual hours" kept in the Weston household. Beverly warns Johnna that he and his wife try not to differentiate between night and day—they have taped up the shades in order to keep up this illusion—and that Johnna may have difficulty maintaining "any sort of a healthy routine." Johnna accepts these conditions, saying she needs the work.

As Beverly lays out the requirements of the position more specifically, Letts shows how Johnna's financial desperation contributes to her accepting a job that seems not only frightening but actually dangerous. Beverly warns Johnna that there is the chance that she will become sucked into his and Violet's vortex, and that her life will become "unhealthy"—but generational trauma, poverty, and abuse have forced Johnna's hand, and she will take this job whether or not she wants it.

Beverly tells Johnna that he himself needs very little help or attention—the bulk of the job will be attending to Violet, who has been diagnosed with cancer and needs to be driven back and forth from Tulsa for chemotherapy appointments. Johnna asks what kind of cancer Violet has—Beverly, amused, reveals that the "punch line" is that Violet has mouth cancer. When Johnna asks what pills Violet takes, Beverly rattles off an extensive list which includes Valium, Vicodin, Percocet, Xanax, and OxyContin.

Violet's mouth cancer is a cruel joke. For a woman who spews so much vitriol, it is fitting—and even darkly funny—that her mouth has become cancerous and diseased.

Beverly takes a long gulp of his drink and tells Johnna that Violet is in denial about her addiction to pharmaceuticals. She tried to quit once before, but once she got sober, she chose to return to "this reality" almost immediately—the reality of her addiction. Beverly wearily stands up and goes over to a bookshelf. He tells Johnna that his books are his "last refuge," then pulls a volume of T.S. Eliot from the shelf and gives it to her. He tells her that it's not required reading, but for her own enjoyment. He then trails off into a dark recitation of an Eliot poem: "Here we go round the prickly pear," he says again and again, as the scene fades to black.

Whereas Beverly owns his identity as an addict and even expresses his desire to stoke and protect his addiction, he warns Johnna that Violet is in denial. This foreshadows the pain that will surface when her family inevitably tries to get her help. As Beverly quotes "here we go round the quickly pear," his speech simulates a whirling vortex—the whirlpool of his and Violet's addiction and dysfunction which threatens to drag Johnna—and the audience—deep into its heart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

Ivy, Mattie Fae, and Charlie sit in the living room. Ivy is Beverly and Violet's daughter; Mattie Fae is Violet's sister, and Charlie is Mattie Fae's husband. Mattie Fae drinks a glass of scotch while Charlie drinks a beer and watches baseball on TV. Mattie Fae says that Beverly has taken off before but has always come back. Mattie Fae recalls one time in particular, when Beverly left without a word—she recommended Violet pack Beverly's bags, leave them on the porch, and burn his books in a bonfire on the lawn. As Mattie Fae tells the story, she and Charlie bicker back and forth about the details. Charlie urges Mattie Fae to settle down—he doesn't want to upset Ivy, who is surely concerned about her father's whereabouts. Mattie Fae says she's sure Beverly will come back soon, but Ivy herself says she thinks "this time is different."

This scene demonstrates the closeness of this family, and the knowledge they all have of everyone else's business. It also shows that Beverly has long wanted to escape his home and his family—he has toyed with the idea of disappearing before. Nevertheless, there is something about this time that strikes Ivy as being "different"—this line contributes to the atmosphere of heavy dread in the Weston household.

Charlie asks why this time is different, and Ivy replies that she believes her parents have stopped trying to repair their marriage. Mattie Fae adds that Beverly is a complicated man. Charlie compares Beverly's seriousness to that of Little Charlies—his and Mattie Fae's own son—but Mattie Fae protests that Beverly is "nothing" like Little Charles; someone has to be smart to be complicated, and she feels her son is not smart at all.

In light of the information that will be revealed later in the play, this exchange takes on a new significance. Mattie Fae is quick to differentiate her own son, Little Charles, from Beverly. The moment her child is brought up, she begins insulting him—her cruelty is a defense mechanism, and as the play unfolds, the audience will learn why.

Mattie Fae changes the subject, complaining that it's so **hot** inside the house she's sweating. Charlie laments the heat, too, and asks Ivy when her parents started taping up the shades. Ivy replies that they've been doing it for a couple of years now. Charlie asks Ivy if she knows the purpose—one can't tell if it's "night or day" in the house. Ivy answers that she believes creating that inability to differentiate between the two is the purpose. Ivy isn't sure which of her parents began the practice, but she admits that she can't really see Beverly as having been the one to take the initiative. Mattie Fae begins to peel some tape from the shades but Charlie reprimands her—it's nighttime anyway, he says, and she shouldn't come into someone's home and start changing things around.

Again, the sweltering, claustrophobic physical environment within the house mirrors the constricting emotional environment. The taped shades, meant to block out night and day and help Violet and Beverly live in squalor, unseen by the outside world and alone with their addictions, further the terrifying, suffocating psychological atmosphere within the home.

Violet enters—she has just gotten off the phone with the sheriff, who says that they have checked all the hospitals but have found no sign of Beverly. Additionally, Beverly's boat is missing. Though some boats have been stolen recently and the sheriff isn't sure if its absence means anything, Violet says, she seems despondent, and heads up the stairs. Ivy follows her.

Things are not looking good—Beverly is nowhere to be found, and the idea that his boat is missing does not bode well for what could have befallen him.

Upstairs, Violet asks Ivy if she has called Barbara—her daughter, and Ivy's sister—yet. Ivy says she did, and tells Violet that Barb and her husband Bill are on their way from Boulder, Colorado. Violet asks Ivy to provide her with more details about the phone call—what Barb said, how she sounded, et cetera—but Ivy is close-mouthed. Violet takes a pill, and curses Beverly for putting her through such an ordeal. She is angry that he has left her with an office full of paperwork and a "stranger in [her] house" in the form of Johnna, who started just one week ago.

This scene sets up the dynamic between Violet and Ivy. The quiet, introverted Ivy is at her mother's mercy, and stands by in feigned ignorance as her mother feeds her crippling pill addiction.

Ivy tells Violet she has called Karen—another sister—as well, and that Karen is going to try to come to Oklahoma. Violet takes another pill, and says that neither Karen nor Ivy will be any help—the one she needs is Barb. Violet begins disparaging Ivy for her appearance, making negative comments about her recently-straightened hair, her makeup-free face, and her wardrobe, which makes her "look like a lesbian." Violet tells Ivy that if she just spruced up a little bit, she could meet a man—after all, she's forty-four, and the clock is ticking. Violet takes yet another pill and asks Ivy if Ivy has been counting how many she's taking—Ivy says she hasn't been.

As Violet continues taking pills, the emotional and verbal abuse she inflicts on Ivy ramps up. Her addiction and her desire to abuse and entrap everyone around her are shown to be intimately related—first through her earlier scene with Beverly, and now through this interaction with Ivy, in which she attempts to belittle and invalidate the only daughter who has stayed close to home.

Ivy asks Violet if her mouth is hurting, and Violet says she is in a lot of pain. Ivy suggests Violet stop smoking, as she's not supposed to be. Violet counters that nobody is "supposed" to smoke. Ivy asks Violet if she is scared, and Violet admits that she is. She tells Ivy that she is a comfort—Violet is grateful that at least one of her three daughters stayed close to home.

Violet complains of being in pain yet continues smoking. This shows that she is either lying about how much pain she is in as an excuse for taking more and more medication, or is simply so high that she forgets about her pain after a time.

Barbara and Bill arrive on the porch, carrying suitcases. Their daughter Jean is by the car, smoking, and Barbara accuses Bill of encouraging their daughter's habit—she is "hooked" at just fourteen years old. Bill asks Barbara if she is ready to confront her family; she tells him she isn't. He urges her to take a second and prepare. Barbara complains about the **heat**. Bill asks Barbara if Violet has gotten an air conditioner yet. Barbara says there's no way she has, and then reminds Bill of a story about her mother and a series of parakeets Violet acquired some years ago. The birds kept dying after just a couple of days, and when a salesgirl from the pet store came by, she told Violet that the birds were dying from the heat. Barbara remarks that even birds meant to survive in the tropics cannot stay alive in this house.

As Barbara and Bill arrive on the porch, it is clear that Barbara does not want to be there, no matter the circumstances. She complains of the heat—again, a symbol of the crushing physical and emotional oppression she knows she is in for—and tells an anecdote with illustrates how the heat (and Violet's violent, irresponsible behavior) have claimed actual lives in the past. Even parakeets—tropical animals—were felled by the outstanding heat once they became trapped in the Weston household.

Barbara cannot believe she is home on the Plains once again—a place she and Bill see as empty and "creepy." As they joke about the "spiritual affliction" of the place, Bill tries to touch Barbara's neck, but she shakes him off, telling him she's having a **hot flash**. Jean joins them on the porch, and together, all three of them enter the house.

Barbara's hot flashes will, throughout the play, correspond when moments become too emotionally heated for her. It is clear from her refusal of Bill's touch that something less than pleasant is going on between the two of them.

Mattie Fae greets Bill, Barbara, and Jean enthusiastically. Mattie Fae remarks on how big Jean has gotten, and comments on the size of her breasts—the last time Mattie Fae saw Jean, she recalls, Jean looked like a "little boy." Violet comes down the stairs and bursts into tears when she sees Barbara. She runs into her daughter's arms. Barbara holds Violet while she weeps. Violet recovers after a moment, and then Barbara greets Ivy. She remarks on how beautiful Ivy looks, and Bill agrees that Ivy looks great.

From this scene, it becomes evident that many members of the Weston family have not seen each other in years. Much is made of Jean's entry into puberty—she is a woman now, in the eyes of her family, and as such is about to take her rightful place in the ranks of a chaotic world she knows little about.

Violet pulls Barbara and Bill into the living room, and asks them to help her with paperwork which, it's implied, pertains to Beverly's will. Barbara tells Violet that they can get to it later, but Violet seems intent on attending to it now. Bill assures Violet he'll sort everything out soon. Mattie Fae and Charlie announce that they are going to leave and drive the hour and a half back to their own house—they left in a rush and didn't get anyone to look after the dogs. Plus, there isn't room for them to stay. When Barbara asks why they can't stay in the attic, Violet replies that there's an "Indian who lives in [the] attic." Barbara, confused, asks Violet to explain. Johnna enters the room, introducing herself and welcoming Barbara home.

Barbara's first few minutes back in her childhood home are overwhelming and disorienting. Violet is prioritizing important paperwork which may or may not be about Beverly's will—it seems that Violet is behaving as if Beverly is already dead. In addition to her mother's increasingly erratic behavioral changes, there is a relative stranger in the house—Johnna's presence is symbolic of a changing of the guard, so to speak, in the alchemy of the Weston household.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

Barbara, Bill, and Violet sit in the dining room drinking coffee and eating pie. Violet is filling the two of them in on the circumstances of Beverly's disappearance. According to her, he left the previous Saturday morning and did not return—he has been missing now for more than five days. Violet says that for the first couple days, she didn't think anything of Beverly's absence—she assumed he'd gone on a bender. As Violet speaks, her words become slurred and her sentences begin to fall apart. By Sunday, she says, when there was still no sign of Beverly, she began getting worried and "worked up" about a safety deposit box at the bank in which the two of them kept a great deal of cash and some jewelry.

This passage makes clear that there is more going on in the Weston household than meets the eye. As Barbara listens to her mother's strange and erratic take on recent events, it becomes clear to her that both her parents have descended into harrowing substance abuse—and that her mother is more concerned with ensuring her own survival than Beverly's.

Barbara asks Violet why Violet was concerned about the box—Violet reveals that she and Beverly had an arrangement that if something ever happened to one of them, the other would go and empty the box to prevent its contents from getting rolled into their larger estate. Violet says that after the bank opened Monday, she went and emptied the box, and then called the police to report Beverly missing. Barbara is shocked that all of this happened on Monday, and that Barbara herself didn't get a call until Thursday. All Violet says is that she didn't want to worry Barbara.

Something shady is going on, but it's not yet clear what. Violet's preoccupation with securing her and Beverly's material wealth could be a coping mechanism, or she could be following instructions Beverly himself gave her at some point in time. Nevertheless, the fact that Violet was so blasé about her husband's disappearance raises a red flag for Barbra.

Bill asks if there was any trigger or catalyst for Beverly's departure, but Violet says that there wasn't. Barbara sarcastically applauds her "good old unfathomable dad." When Bill presses Violet to think of anything unusual in the days leading up to Beverly's departure, Violet does admit that Beverly only hired Johnna a few days before he left. She complains about having a stranger—an "Indian" stranger—in her house. Barbara attempts to correct her mother, reminding her that the correct term for indigenous people is "Native American." Violet will not hear of such political correctness.

Violet's intense anxiety about Johnna's presence is symbolic of the metaphorical thread running through the whole of the play: Beverly and Violet's generation is becoming irrelevant, and younger and marginalized communities are coming to the forefront of America's collective consciousness. Violet is shocked that Beverly would have willingly ushered such change into their own home and does not know how react.

Violet changes the subject, asking Barbara when she was last in Oklahoma—she says she herself can't even remember. Barbara begs her mother not to start an argument and defends her "dutiful" attitude towards her parents—she sends presents and letters, she says, and calls often. Violet, her speech becoming more and more labored, tells Barbara that she broke Beverly's heart when she moved away to Colorado. Violet tells Barbara that she was always Beverly's favorite child. Barbara defends her decision to leave—she and Bill got offered jobs in academia at a university in Colorado making twice what they would've made in Oklahoma. Barbara adds that Beverly gave her his "blessing" when she left.

Barbara does not see that she has any tangible duty or responsibility to her parents. She sees sending letters and presents a few times a year as duty enough—she is afraid to do anything more, or get any closer, as she has tried so hard to remove herself form their orbit by moving away to Colorado. Still, Barbara apparently has some guilt or shame over this choice, as she is hyper-defensive of her own agency and her father's "blessing" alike.

Violet tells Barbara that Beverly's "blessing" was false—behind her back, Beverly told Violet that he was disappointed in Barbara for settling, and not pursuing her talent as a writer. Barbara accuses Violet of making stories up to hurt her. She says that regardless, though, of what her father did or did not say, and of any talent she may or may not have had, she has the right to make her own choices.

Barbara has tried to get as far away from her family as possible—hearing now that her father always thought she had talent as a writer, the implication that her father passed something as vast and inextricable as talent onto her puts her on edge.

Barbara asks Violet if Violet is high; Violet says she isn't, though she very clearly is. Barbara tells Violet that she will not go through another pill addiction with her, and reminds Violet of her visit to the psych ward the last time she was "hooked." Violet insists she isn't hooked on anything—she's simply in pain. She begins to cry, complaining of the awful pain in her mouth, and lamenting that Barbara came home when Beverly was in danger but did not even think about coming when Violet was first diagnosed with cancer. Barbara softens, comforting her mother and trying to assure her that Beverly is probably out on the lake with some books and some cigarettes and will come home any moment.

In this passage, Letts demonstrates how Violet is a master manipulator. High out of her mind but lying through her teeth about it, Violet successfully ensnares Barbara in the illusion that she is someone to be pitied. Whether her despair over having been abandoned by her daughter is as intense as she describes it, and whether the pain she feels is even real at all, is up to the audience—Barbara, however, is successfully drawn in, and is soon playing right into her mother's hand.

Upstairs, Jean goes into the attic, where Johnna is reading. She greets Johnna and offers her some marijuana. Johnna declines. Jean asks if she can smoke in the attic, so that her parents won't get suspicious. Johnna agrees to let Jean do so. As Jean packs a small pipe, she explains that her father doesn't care about her smoking pot, but her mother does. She also reveals to Johnna that her parents are separated—Bill has been having an affair with a student.

Jean seems less surprised by Johnna's presence—but she is nonetheless inconvenienced by it. Jean had probably been looking forward to having her old attic room, but now that Johnna is up here, Jean feels her space has been encroached upon. In this sense, her reaction to Johnna mirrors both Violet's and Barbara's.

Jean asks Johnna about her own parents, and Johnna tells Jean they are dead. Jean apologizes for bringing up something painful, but Johnna grabs a picture off of her dresser and shows it to Jean—it is her parents on the day of their wedding. Jean asks Johnna what she's reading—Johnna reveals she is working her way through a T.S. Eliot book Beverly gave her. Jean admires Johnna's necklace, which is shaped like a turtle. Johnna reveals that the necklace contains her umbilical cord—it is a Cheyenne tradition. Cheyenne men and women wear the necklaces their whole lives, because if they lose them, their souls "belong nowhere" and will walk the Earth forever. Jean, who has apparently not been listening, asks Johnna not to say anything to anyone else about her own parents' split. They are trying, she says, to keep things "low-key."

Jean at first seems to be genuinely interested in Johnna—her life, her family, her history, and her culture. Jean is revealed to be shallow and uninterested, though, when push comes to shove—she really just wants someone to talk to about her own problems. Jean is, in a way, blameless; her warring parents have dragged her to a place where she doesn't really know anyone, and where the atmosphere is even more unstable than it is in her own home. Jean and Johnna are both outsiders in the family in a sense, and even if they don't bond emotionally in this scene, Letts is drawing a commonality between the two of them.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

Barbara pulls down a hide-a-bed in the living room and begins setting up her and Bill's "room." Bill comes in from the study, carrying a thin book—a hardback edition of Beverly's most famous book. Bill remarks on how cool it is to find a hardback version, but Barbara insists the book is not such a big deal. Bill contradicts her, insisting that it is a huge deal, and wondering about the pressure Beverly must have felt in the wake of its publication. Barbara attempts to change the subject, asking if Jean went to bed, but Bill brings the book up again. Barbara, losing her temper, yells at Bill to shut up about the book. She condemns him for being obsessed with awards and critical opinion—he is in his "male menopause," she says, and as such is preoccupied with "creative question[s]" and interested in "screwing" younger women.

In this scene, Barbara and Bill are alone on stage for the first time—and their resentments towards one another begin spilling over. It becomes clear that Bill has been pursuing an affair with a younger woman, and a student to boot—for this reason, Barbara sees her husband's interest and excitement about her father's work as a transgression and a symptom of how Bill has been corrupted by the academic world just as her own father was.

Bill comments that Violet has "a way of putting [Barbara] in attack mode." Barbara insists that her mother doesn't have anything to do with her own rage. She accuses Bill of being a narcissist and ignoring her pain. Bill begs Barbara to back off—they have enough to deal with, he says, with her parents, and don't need to revisit their recent personal misery. Barbara insists they never "visited" things in the first place—she feels as if the rug has been pulled out from under her. Bill berates Barbara for attacking him with so much else going, telling her that the discussion deserves their care. They would be better served having it, he says, after Beverly returns home. Barbara tells Bill that her father is dead, and then gets into bed and turns onto her side, facing away from Bill.

Bill points out that Barbara is on edge because of the tense situation at home—and has been further riled up by her mother's vicious tendencies. Barbara, though, wants to lean into her own pain and salt her own wounds. Bill tries hard to get Barbara to see that doing so is ill-advised, and attempts to calm her down by reminding her of the situation at hand. Barbara sees things very differently than Bill, though; she believes her family situation is hopeless, and seems to know in her bones that her father is already far beyond their help.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

Later that night, red and blue police lights flash through the living room. Johnna appears downstairs, and gently wakes Barbara. She tells Barbara that the sheriff is at the house. Bill and Barbara scramble out of bed, and Barbara goes upstairs with Johnna to wake Violet. They knock on Violet's door, telling her the sheriff has come—Violet's slurred and incoherent responses from within the room show that she is heavily-drugged and half asleep. Bill urges Barbara to come back downstairs and talk to the sheriff herself, and to let her mother sleep.

Violet is so high that she is unable to process what is happening. Though she has been waiting days for news from the sheriff, when it finally arrives, she is incoherent and incapacitated, and the burden of attending to the sheriff falls to Barbara.

Bill lets the sheriff in, and Barbara and Johnna return downstairs. As the sheriff steps into the room, Barbara recognizes him as Deon Gilbeau—someone from her past. Sheriff Gilbeau tells Barbara, Bill, Johnna, and Jean that he has some bad news for them. The department has found Beverly's body—he is dead. Barbara cries and collapses to the floor. Johnna comforts her.

Despite her cynicism about her family—and the fact that she was anticipating such news—Barbara is hit hard by the news that her father has died, revealing the fact that there was, against all odds, an emotional connection between them.

Gilbeau reveals that a few hours ago, lake patrol called to say that Beverly's boat had been found washed up on a sandbar. They'd planned to dredge the lake, but before they could do so, two fishermen hooked Beverly's body and pulled it up. Gilbeau says that he needs a relative to come with him and identify the body. Barbara says she doesn't think she can do it. Bill offers to go, but Gilbeau insists it needs to be a blood relative. Barbara stoically agrees to go, and hurries to put some clothes on.

Barbara is being strong for her family in spite of the fact that she is reluctant to be back in Oklahoma in the first place, as well as the fact that these burdens should not have to fall on her—if her mother weren't so incapacitated and if her husband hadn't strayed, she wouldn't be feeling so alone.

Bill asks Gilbeau what he thinks happened—whether Beverly's death was an accident or a suicide. Gilbeau admits that he guesses it was suicide, though the official cause of death is "drowning." Gilbeau warns Bill that the body is bloated and decomposed, as it has been in the water for about three days—he urges Bill to "prepare" Barbara for what she will see down at the lake.

The fact that Beverly's death was a suicide casts it in a new—but not entirely unexpected—light. Beverly's life had become unbearable, and as his behavior in the prologue suggested, he had begun preparing to end his life before the play even began.

Up on the second floor, Jean sits with Barbara while Barbara brushes her hair. Barbara reveals to Jean that she and the Sheriff went to high school together. They were prom dates, but on the day of the prom, Deon's father got drunk and stole his car. Deon and Barbara attempted to walk the three miles to the prom, but got so dirty and sweaty that they just got a six-pack, broke into a local chapel, and spent the night talking and kissing. Marveling at the irony of the fact that it is Deon who has come to take her to her dead father's body, Barbara says it's good that people can't see the future—otherwise they'd never get out of bed. Barbara looks Jean in the eye and asks Jean to promise her she'll outlive her. Jean says she'll do her best.

Barbara is attempting to connect with her daughter in this scene, despite the emotional maelstrom swirling all around them. Barbara's revelations of her own past are painful and embarrassing, and perhaps she is hoping to offer Jean a portrait of herself as a young woman to help Jean better understand the kind of place Barbara comes from.

Down in the study, Sheriff Gilbeau is waiting for Barbara to get ready. Violet enters shakily, still in her pajamas. She speaks in nonsensical half-sentences, slurring her words. Eventually it becomes clear that she is asking whether Beverly has come home. She asks Gilbeau for a cigarette, and he gives her one and lights it for her. Violet speaks a garbled sentence, which may or not be "I'm in Hell." She goes over to the stereo in the living room and puts a record on. **"Lay Down, Sally"** by Eric Clapton begins playing. Sheriff Gilbeau, horrified but transfixed, follows Violet into the living room and watches as she dances madly, speaking and singing incoherently.

Violet comes downstairs, high out of her mind, and attempts to converse with the sheriff despite the fact that she is unable to form a single coherent sentence. The music she selects—"Lay Down, Sally"—is a deceivingly upbeat song whose lyrics betray a deep anxiety about being abandoned. Violet does not seem to need to hear from the sheriff that her husband is dead—the violent devastation of being abandoned is already present in her actions here.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

The house has been cleaned and straightened. The hodgepodge of books and papers in the office have been rearranged, and the dining room table has been set for a nice dinner, complete with china, candles, and a floral centerpiece. There is a "kid's table," set for two, set up in the corner of the dining room. It is three o' clock in the afternoon, and Beverly Weston has just been buried. Violet is standing in the study in a black dress. She is sober, for the moment, but holds a bottle of pills in her hand. She speaks in a monologue, directly to Beverly, remarking on how August was always his month. She takes pills, flips through his books of poetry—the most famous of which is dedicated to her—and proclaims that she will not weep for him. This mess is his to answer for, she says, not hers.

Violet, having just buried her husband, seeks refuge in her pills to escape the profoundly sad and harsh reality that her husband killed himself to escape her. She does not allow despair or sadness to catch up with her, though—as she addresses Beverly, or at least his spirit, she vows that she will remain strong in the face of his abandonment, and will somehow force him to reckon with the "mess" he has left behind for her.

In the dining room, Barbara and her sister Karen fold napkins and place them on the table. Karen babbles on and on about her newfound commitment to living in the present moment. After years of pining for a man, and dating loser after loser, Karen has finally met Mister Right—an older man named Steve who is "kinda country club" but is good to her. Every time Barbara interjects, Karen keeps talking over her sister, extolling the joys of living in the "now" and never planning for the future. Karen has had a fantasy of going to Belize all her life, and now Steve is going to take her there on her honeymoon after she is married—Karen cannot believe her good luck.

In this scene, Karen—who clearly has not seen or communicated with Barbara in a long time—attempts to paint a picture of her own delirious happiness. All of this is totally tone-deaf, as the two of them have just spent the day burying their father. Karen is clearly so self-absorbed and narcissistic that she has become disconnected from emotions and, to some degree, reality.

Johnna brings a pitcher of iced tea from the kitchen. Barbara is grateful for it—she is having a **hot flash**. Karen brings the conversation back to her own impending trip to Belize. She asks Barbara what she thought of Steve when she met him at the funeral—Barbara insists she only spoke two words to Steve, and couldn't really get a read on him. Karen asks Barbara if she'll come to the wedding, which will be in Miami, Florida on New Year's Day. Karen tells Barbara that though the years have led them apart, she wants to get closer with Barbara. When Barbara tells Karen they need to have a talk about their mother, though, Karen deflects, saying that now that she has found happiness she wants to "get to know" her own family.

Barbara's hot flash indicates that she is feeling trapped, cornered, and stifled by Karen's inane, incessant prattling. Karen keeps trying to engage Barbara in conversation and get Barbara to agree to attend her own wedding under the guise of wanting to reconnect. When something that the two women actually need to connect about, however—their mother's health—comes up, Karen proves uninterested in talking or thinking about anyone other than herself.

Upstairs, Violet, Mattie Fae, and Ivy—who is dressed in a black suit—look through a box of old photographs. Violet shows Ivy photos of pretty dresses she used to own and berates Ivy for wearing a suit to the funeral. When the women find a picture of Violet and Beverly in New York City on Beverly's first book tour, Mattie Fae remarks that her son, Little Charles, has been talking about moving to New York, but she thinks he wouldn't last a day in the city. After all, she says, he overslept for his own uncle's funeral. Ivy attempts to defend Little Charles, but Mattie Fae tells her not to make excuses for him. He's thirty-seven years old, unable to drive, and obviously a large source of shame and anxiety for Mattie Fae.

In this scene, a parallel is established between the put-upon Ivy and the down-and-out Little Charles. Both of their mothers berate them almost constantly, and both seem to exist on the fringes of their family.

Violet goes to her closet and gets a dress for Ivy to try on. Ivy refuses to try the dress on and asks Violet why she's trying to give away her clothes. Violet says she's "downsizing," and is going to get rid of everything she doesn't need anymore—anything that reminds her of how old she's become. Violet tells Ivy that if she doesn't learn how to dress she'll never attract a man. Ivy replies that she already has a man, shocking both Violet and Mattie Fae, who immediately start asking her who her "man" is. Ivy says she's not telling either of them anything. When Violet asks Ivy if she's in love, Ivy lets out a strange, shrill laugh, and goes downstairs.

Ivy is clearly uncomfortable sharing whatever is going on in her romantic life—she wants to carve out privacy and solitude where she can, and with her overbearing mother intruding on every aspect of her life—even her fashion sense—it's no wonder. Ivy's refusal of the clothes is symbolic of her desire to refuse the emotional burdens her mother attempts to pass onto her each chance she gets—Ivy is clearly a woman who has nearly had enough of her role in her family.

In the kitchen, Bill, Jean, and Karen's boyfriend Steve are returning from a grocery run. Jean runs into the house and goes straight to the television, turning it on and sitting close to the screen. Steve is telling Bill about his business—which is shady and nebulous, and seems to have something to do with security, the Middle East, and offshore accounts. Barbara asks Jean what she's watching on TV—Jean is watching a restored version of the 1925 adaptation of *The Phantom of the Opera*. Barbara berates Jean for having been concerned about getting home to watch it all day long—even in the middle of the funeral.

Jean is attempting to retreat into familiar touchstones or comforts only to berated by her mother for shirking her duties to her family. Barbara has done a lot of emotional labor in the past few days, and though she can't possibly want for Jean to feel the things she's feeling, she wants—perhaps even on a subconscious level—to drag her daughter down into the muck with her, as her own mother has always tried to do to her.

Barbara leaves the room, and Steve comes in. He starts talking to Jean about the movie, which he's clearly knowledgeable about—Jean seems impressed. Steve asks how old she is, and she answers that she is fifteen. Steve gets close to Jean, telling her he smells pot on her. She denies smoking. Steve remarks that it is **hot** in the room, and tells Jean she must be hot, too. He asks Jean once again if she smokes pot—when she denies it, he says it's a shame, since he has some "really tasty shit" on him. Jean immediately relents, revealing that she is out of weed and needs some more; she wants to get "fucked up." Steve teases her, asking her to repeat what she wants to do again and again. When she tells him he's "bad," he insists he's just teasing her.

Steve's sleazy behavior towards Jean demonstrates that he is less of a good guy than Karen has made him out to be. He is preying upon the young Jean, using coercion, double entendre, and manipulation in order to bring her into his orbit. Jean's desire to get "fucked up" and in this way remove herself from the chaos of her family is a lower-stakes iteration of Violet and Beverly's addictive tendencies. Jean's only smoking pot—for now—but she's still turning to substances to escape from her present circumstances.

Karen enters the room and asks Steve if he remembered to get cigarettes—he laments the fact that he forgot. Jean says they can bum some off her. Karen tell Jean that she's too young to smoke, but then asks Jean for some cigarettes anyway. Jean gives Karen a couple, and then Karen, overwhelmed by the heat, asks Steve to join her in the backyard so that they can smoke, and she can show him her and her sisters' old fort. Steve follows Karen out, promising Jean he'll "hook [her] up later" before rubbing his hand on her face.

Jean clearly wants to be one of the adults, and she has given herself a set of behaviors which make her seem more adult than she really is. She is getting herself in over her head, though—Steve is clearly a bad guy who wants to use, manipulate, and possibly even harm Jean.

Out on the porch, Charlie arrives with Little Charles. Little Charles worries that his mother will be furious with him for missing the funeral. He assures his father that he set his alarm but says that the power must have gone out. Charles worries that Uncle Bev's spirit will be disappointed in him for missing the event. Charlie reassures Little Charles that Uncle Bev wasn't spiteful like that. Little Charles cries, and Charlie comforts him. Little Charles says he knows that the whole family says things about him and doesn't want to bring any more ire upon himself. Charlie tells Little Charles that everyone else in the family just hasn't gotten the chance to see what Little Charlies is really like. He urges Little Charles to stop being so hard on himself. They tell one another that they love each other, and together they enter the house.

In this scene, we see one of the first genuine, loving interactions between two members of the extended Weston clan. Little Charles is a sensitive man whose own self-loathing and insecurity is so overpowering that he has kept himself at arm's length from everyone in his family except his father. Charlie's patience with Little Charles is practically unheard of in the Weston family—he is tolerant, loving, and encouraging, but even this is not enough to make Little Charles see his own self-worth over the emotional abuse enacted upon him.

Barbara and Bill are in the dining room, arguing. Barbara accuses Bill of being an absent parent to Jean and encouraging her to act older than her age. Barbara begs Bill to "be a father" and help her raise their daughter. As the two argue further, their digs at one another become pettier and pettier, and eventually they devolve into arguing about the correct tense of a verb. Bill accuses Barbara of fighting unfairly and erratically. Barbara says she's sick of being fair—her world is "falling apart." Bill accuses Barbara of dragging Jean into this "madhouse" in the first place and using her as a "buffer." As Barbara attempts to bring up Bill's affair, Bill deflects, telling Barbara that she is "good, decent, funny, wonderful [and a] pain in the ass" before exiting to the porch.

In this scene, Bill and Barbara call each other out on some seriously toxic behaviors which directly affect their daughter. Barbara worries that in prizing maturity, Bill has put Jean on a dangerous path, and she is not wrong. Bill's indictment of Barbara, though, is valid too—she has brought Jean along unnecessarily to a place rife with pain and discord, and this is also placing too much on Jean's young shoulders.

Johnna announces that dinner is ready, and the entire family makes their way to the dining room. Their conversations overlap with one another—Karen tells Barbara about how she just showed Steve their old fort, Little Charles attempts to apologize to Mattie Fae for missing the funeral, and Ivy fights off Violet's persistent inquiries into the state of her romantic life.

The family's overlapping but not really intertwining conversations as they head in to dinner symbolize the chaos in the house, and their disconnection from one another.

Bill comes back in from the porch and goes to get Jean from the living room. She asks if she can eat in front of the TV; she doesn't want to get stuck at the kid's table with Little Charles. Bill tells her she needs to be on her best behavior, and she reluctantly follows him into the dining room. Little Charles, having grown indignant about being made to sit at the kids' table, has gone to retrieve a casserole his mother made from the car. Johnna volunteers to sit at the kids' table, insisting she doesn't mind.

Jean is at a tough age—she wants to isolate herself because she is afraid of being infantilized, and she would rather not participate in her family at all than be made to feel like she is too young to be taken seriously as a member of it. Johnna, though, knows she is an outsider, and willingly shoulders the slight humiliation of being relegated to the kids' table.

As Little Charles comes back up to the house from the car, Ivy meets him on the porch. He apologizes for missing the funeral, and for not being there for Ivy on "one of the worst days of [her] life." She cuts him off mid-sentence, insisting they don't have to ever apologize to one another. She hugs him and kisses him on the mouth. Little Charles pulls away, warning Ivy that she is breaking their rule. Ivy reveals that her family is "on to her"—she wants Little Charles to know she told her mother that she's seeing someone, but didn't specify who, in case it comes up. She reminds Charles that they need to let their family know about them "piece by piece."

The revelation that Ivy and Little Charles are having an affair is shocking, but in a way, understandable. Neither is taken seriously by their family, and both are mightily abused by their mothers. Ivy and Little Charles are seeking refuge in each other—and in a family of addicts and abusers, their incestuous but emotionally supportive and pure union seems like small potatoes compared to some of the other Westons' transgressions against one another, and against human dignity.

Back in the dining room, everyone but Violet, Little Charles, and Ivy is seated at the table. The men have removed their suit coats. As the family passes food around and makes their plates, Little Charles enters. Almost immediately, he drops Mattie Fae's casserole. She screams at him, but Charlie urges her to "let it go." Charlie tries to pass the chicken to Jean, but she says she doesn't eat meat. Violet enters with a picture of Beverly, which she places on the sideboard before taking her seat. Remarking upon the fact that all the men are in their shirts, she says she thought they were all have "a funeral dinner, not a cockfight." Without a word, the men put their jackets back on, despite the **heat**.

The men's removal of their suit-jackets is symbolic of their desire to escape the miserable heat—itself a symbol of the stifling emotional atmosphere within the house. Violet, though, doubles down on that sense of constriction as she demands the men sacrifice their own comfort for the sake of appearances, even in their family's own home.

Violet tells Barbara to say grace in Beverly's absence, but Barbara insists that Charlie, now the family's patriarch, should be the one to do so. Charlie delivers a wordy, stumbling prayer, and then everyone begins eating.

Charlie is unsure about becoming the new patriarch of the family, and this is reflected in his uncertain delivery of grace.

Violet, pointing out the sideboard, asks Barbara if she wants it—she tells Barbara, as she told Ivy earlier, that she is clearing out the house, getting rid of old things. Barbara says she is "not prepared" to talk about taking her parents' furniture. Everyone compliments Johnna on the delicious meal—Violet, slurring her words, says that it's what Johnna's being paid for.

Violet tried to pawn off her dresses on Ivy and is now trying to get Barbara to take the sideboard—she clearly wants to divest of the reminders of her "old" life and free herself from the past.

After an awkward silence, Charlie begins ribbing Jean about her vegetarianism. Jean insists that when you eat an animal, you "ingest [its] fear," but everyone just makes fun of her. Violet, misquoting a famous T.V. commercial, begins screeching "Where's the meat?" Everyone freezes watching her, "stunned" by her odd behavior.

Violet, who is becoming steadily more and more intoxicated, is behaving oddly and erratically—but her addiction and its consequences are the unmentionable elephant in the room.

The conversation turns to the service. Everyone agrees that it was a nice funeral, but Violet insists there was too much talk about Beverly's poetry and teaching. She tells a vile story about Beverly soiling himself at a university function, illustrating how Beverly's defining traits at the time of his death were not his academic or artistic successes, but his deep devotion to drinking above all else. Steve attempts to tell Violet that he thought the poems of Beverly's which Bill read at the funeral were beautiful, but Violet is confused as to who, exactly, Steve is, and she asks him his name.

Violet wants to smear Beverly's memory, perhaps as vengeance for his having left her with an aforementioned "mess" on her hands. Even polite attempts around the dinner table to discuss Beverly's life, work, and contributions to American letters are met with cruel remembrances of his failures, and the ways in which his addiction crippled him in his later years.

When Karen reminds Violet that Steve is her fiancé, Violet remarks that it is "peculiar" of Karen to bring a "date" to her father's funeral. Karen insists that she and Steve are getting married and invites Violet to the wedding in Miami. Violet says she "[doesn't] really see that happening" before asking Steve about his romantic history. When Steve reveals that he has been married three times already, Violet turns to Mattie Fae and begins laughing, saying she had Steve "pegged."

Violet does not care about even creating the illusion that she's happy for Karen or interested in what Karen is doing with her life. This meal is all about Violet showing off how well she knows people, and how in-control she is of her family and their secrets.

Karen attempts to change the subject, telling Violet about how she took Steve out to see the fort where she, Barbara, and Ivy used to play cowboys and Indians. Violet corrects Karen, telling her she used to play "cowboys and Native Americans." Barbara, seeing her mother's deepening intoxication, asks Violet what pills she took. Right at that moment, Charlie drops his head, appearing to be choking or in distress. As everyone's panic mounts, he rises out of his chair, before announcing that he "got a big bite of fear." Everyone laughs. Barbara jokes that every once in a while she catches Jean eating a hamburger. Jean, indignant, calls Barbara a liar. Violet intensely tells Jean that if she herself had ever called her own mother a liar, her mother wouldn't "knocked [her] goddamn head off [her] shoulders."

As this moment unfolds, it becomes clear that Violet will not even let the fallout of a lighthearted joke slip past her uncommented upon. Jean's offhand remark about Barbara being a liar inspires a dark intensity in Violet, who warns Jean that ill-intended speech could get her "knocked" around. The irony of this moment is intense, as Violet sees herself as being able to say whatever she wants to whomever she wants with total impunity.

After an awkward silence, Violet asks Bill if he has found any "hidden treasure" in Beverly's office. Bill reveals that he found out the Beverly appeared to be working on some new poems. Though Karen is interested in hearing more, Violet steers the conversation to Beverly's will. She tells her daughters that though in the written will, everything of Beverly's goes to the girls, she and Beverly had discussed changing things and leaving it all to Violet herself. Though they never got around to "legally" altering the will, Violet announces her intention to take the money. Violet offers the girls the furniture instead, saying she'll sell it to them for less than she would at an auction. Barbara suggests that Violet will never get around to the auction, and they'll all just take the furniture once she dies. "You might at that," Violet replies, and the two stare one another down.

Violet is unconcerned with the artistic contributions Beverly might have left behind, despite the fact that writing was his life's work and the root of their success. Instead, she is focused on the material. She is so obsessed with hanging onto financial control of Beverly's estate that she cruelly informs their daughters that they'll receive nothing—in front of the rest of the family, with no regard for how this might make her appear.

Little Charles attempts to ask Bill about the poems he found, but Violet interrupts and asks Bill where he's living, and whether he wants the sideboard—she has intuited that Bill and Barbara are separated. She chides Barbara for thinking she could "slip that one by [her]," stating that no one slips anything by her. She reveals that she herself and Beverly split a couple times, and cruelly tells Barbara that there's just no competing with a younger woman. Violet asks Bill if a younger woman is involved; Barbara attempts to change the subject, but Bill frankly admits that there is.

A day that is supposed to be about remembrances of Beverly has quickly become all about Violet's desire to hang all her family's dirty laundry out to dry for her own amusement. Perhaps exposing everyone else's pain helps Violet to feel better about her own, or perhaps she simply wants to solidify her power as her family's matriarch now that Beverly is gone.

Charlie asks Violet why she's being so "adversarial," but she insists she's just telling the truth. Barbara admonishes Violet for "viciously attack[ing]" the entire family. Violet stands up and begins screaming—she says that Barbara has never been truly attacked once in her "sweet spoiled life." She urges Mattie Fae to tell Barbara what a real attack looks like. Mattie Fae attempts to quiet her sister down, but Violet refuses. She begins telling a story about how Mattie Fae rescued her, once, when one of their mother's "many gentleman friends" was attacking her with a claw hammer. She claims that Mattie Fae still has dents on her head from the encounter. She asks Barbara what Barbara knows about life "on these Plains." Barbara admits that she knows her mother had a hard childhood, but somewhat provocatively asks "who didn't."

Barbara and Violet have very different ideas of what an "attack" is. Violet's anecdote about being physically and brutally attacked by one of her mother's "gentlemen friends" makes her own verbal abuse look simple, to be sure, but her denial of the fact that her words have consequences, and that a hard childhood isn't only one defined by physical abuse and endangerment, shows her obliviousness—or her contempt—of the effects that her own actions have on those around her.

Violet tells Barbara that her heart breaks for "every time [Barbara] ever felt pain," but that Barbara cannot imagine the pain of Violet's own childhood, or of Beverly's. She reveals that Beverly, from the ages of four to ten, lived with his family in a Pontiac sedan. Violet says she and Beverly worked hard and sacrificed everything for her girls, who have done nothing with their lives in return. They never had any real problems, Violet says, so the three of them have gone around making up problems all their lives. Barbara asks Violet why she is continuing to scream at everyone. Violet answers that it's time their family told some truths.

Violet—a member of a generation whose childhoods were defined by the Great Depression and whose adulthoods were shaped by World War II—has no patience for the emotional "problems" her daughters have. She accuses them of squandering their lives and failing to make use of the gifts she and Beverly sacrificed so hard to give them, demonstrating that she is either oblivious or contemptuous of the miserable emotional world they ultimately created for their children.

Little Charles abruptly stands up. He announces that he, too, has a truth to tell. Ivy quietly begs Little Charles to sit back down—"not like this," she says to him. He tells his family that his "truth" is that he forgot to set his alarm clock for this morning, and then goes out to the porch. Mattie Fae says she gave up on Little Charles a long time ago. Ivy quietly says that his name is just Charles. Violet pats Ivy's hand, calling her a "poor thing," and lamenting how Ivy always roots for the underdog. Ivy begs her mother not to be mean to her, but Violet continues.

The complicated relationships between Mattie Fae and Little Charles, and Ivy and Violet, are shown here in a moment of profound tension. The relationship between Ivy and Little Charles will become a major focal point of the next act, and the tension created in this moment will cause all four characters to question what they know about one another as the play progresses.

Barbara tells Violet that she's a drug addict. Joyfully, Violet shouts, "That is the truth!" She pulls a bottle of pills out her pockets and tells her whole family that her pills are her "best fucking friends." If anyone tries to take them away from her, she says, she will eat them alive. Barbara lunges for the pills, and Violet screams that she will eat Barbara alive. They wrestle on the floor, while the others try to pull them apart.

Violet's pills bring her greater happiness than anything else in her life. Her dedication to her role as an addict has been evident since the play's prologue, but now it is no longer an open secret—it is merely out in the open, on display for all to see.

Eventually, Barbara wrestles the pills away from a sobbing Violet. She announces that she is starting a pill raid and instructs Ivy and Bill to go upstairs and start going through "everything" Violet owns. She orders Karen to call Dr. Burke and tell him that they have a "sick woman" on their hands. Violet cries that Barbara can't do this—this is Violet's house. "You don't get it, do you?" Barbara asks, getting in Violet's face, towering over her. With a triumphant scream, Barbara tells Violet that it is she is running things now.

This cataclysmic transfer of power is as triumphant as it is completely in vain. Barbara is laboring under the illusion that she could possibly "run" such a chaotic, violent household overrun by emotional abuse, distrust, and cruelty. Barbara is in over her head—and whether or not she knows it, her desperate statement demonstrates just how unprepared she is to usurp her mother as matriarch of the family.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

It is nighttime—the window shades have all been un-taped and removed. Karen, Barbara, and Ivy sit in the study, drinking a bottle of whiskey. Charlie, Mattie Fae, Jean, and Steve play cards in the dining room while Bill sorts through paperwork on the porch. Violet is upstairs, looking out the window, her hair wrapped in a towel. Barbara and her sisters are talking about the report from their mother's doctor, who told them earlier, when they brought her to his office after the debacle at dinner, that she may be "slightly brain damaged." He claimed not to know that Violet was taking so much medication, and then suggested she be institutionalized.

The un-taping of the window shades symbolizes the new era of transparency that has been brought into the Weston household—in large part by Violet's gleeful admission of her addiction to narcotics. The information Violet's doctor reveals to the girls—that Violet may have sustained brain damage as a result of her addiction—will color the rest of the play, as it will never become clear whether Violet's subsequent episodes of incoherence are due to a relapse or to the damage she has inflicted upon herself.

Karen asks why one doctor would write so many prescriptions, but Ivy cuts her off, telling her that Violet is, and has been for a long time, seeing multiple doctors and securing various prescriptions from each of them. When they threaten to cut her off, she threatens to take legal action and put their licenses in jeopardy, thus assuring that they are in her pocket for life. Barbara asks if Ivy knew that their mother's old patterns had started up again recently, but Ivy only shrugs.

Despite Ivy's proximity to her parents, and her unofficial status as their caretaker, she seems to have been oblivious to the signs that Violet was getting worse—either that or Ivy, in a show of independence, was intentionally ignoring her mother's decline either to focus on her own affair with Little Charles, or even make a point that she can no longer be controlled by her parents.

Barbara marvels at how earlier, at the doctor's office, Violet was silent and wounded, like a "wilting **hothouse** flower." Barbara felt that Violet was trying to make her daughter look like the crazy one at the appointment, and Barbara jokes that she wanted to try and goad her mother into exhibiting some of the crazy behavior she displayed during dinner, going on about the claw hammer and the "Greatest Generation." Barbara asks what makes her mother's generation so great before reminiscing with her sisters about the last time their mother got checked into a psych ward and smuggled pills in by stashing a bottle in her vagina. Though the memory is dark, the sisters now laugh about it.

As the Weston sisters reminisce about their mother's previous attempts to shirk the help being offered her and feed her addiction even in the face of medical intervention, their darkly amused reactions reveal that these three women are not bound by any truly happy memories, but rather only by the traumas their parents have put them through.

Karen tells Barbara that she's sorry to hear about her marital strife—she asks Barbara if she thinks she and Bill will get back together. Barbara admits she doesn't know. Karen admires their own parents for having stayed married for so long. Ivy points out that Beverly killed himself to escape his marriage.

Karen's dimwittedness is on full display here, as she attempts to praise her parents for sticking together through the years—only to have the point that Beverly literally killed himself to escape their union pointed out to her.

Barbara asks Ivy outright if there is something going on between her and Little Charles, joking darkly that if there is, the two of them "shouldn't consider children." Ivy reveals that she couldn't anyway—she had a hysterectomy last year after she was diagnosed with cervical cancer. Barbara and Karen are both shocked by the revelation—Ivy says she told no one at the time but Charles, and that's when things started between them. Barbara asks why Ivy didn't tell her or Karen—Ivy points out that Barbara hadn't told either of them about her and Bill. Barbara insists the two things are different—divorce is an "embarrassing public admission of defeat" while cancer is simply cancer.

In this act—and in this scene in particular—Ivy will emerge as one of the most psychologically interesting characters within the play. She longs to escape the entrapment of her family, but in seeking romance with Little Charles, she only ends up burrowing further into it. At the same time, Ivy's mind and sense of self-worth has been so warped by her abusive mother that it makes sense she would seek to pair with someone who intimately understands what it means to come from her family.

Barbara says that if Ivy had told them, she and Karen might have been able to offer her some comfort, but Ivy says she doesn't feel connected to either of her sisters. Karen protests that she feels connected to both of them despite the fact that she's not ever present. Ivy points out the hypocrisy in Karen's New-Age-y reply, and states that she doesn't want to "perpetuate these myths of family or sisterhood" any longer. She feels their whole family is connected only by "a random selection of cells."

Again, Ivy's attitudes towards family are contradictory yet utterly intuitive. She feels trapped and suffocated by the omnipresence her family in her life, her thoughts, and her daily routine, yet at the same time feels completely disconnected from them because Violet has made her feel so isolated and othered over the years.

Barbara asks Ivy when she got so cynical; Ivy replies that perhaps it was when she realized that the burden of caring for their parents had fallen entirely to her, as she is the only one who stayed in Oklahoma. Ivy has been stuck here on the Plains while her sisters have gone off and done whatever it is they wanted to do. Ivy reveals that now, at last, it is her turn—she is going to leave for New York soon, and won't feel any guilt at all. When Barbara asks what Ivy and Little Charles could possibly be planning to do in New York, Ivy replies that the two of them have something rare and extraordinary between them—"understanding."

Ivy is indignant about the role that has been thrust upon her: that of reluctant caregiver. Ivy has felt trapped for years, and resentment and wanderlust have been brewing within her for a long time. She is now prepared to assert her independence by fleeing altogether—yet this move is not in her own best interest, as it involves making a commitment to an unorthodox (to say the least) relationship and a life in a foreign and demanding new place.

Barbara asks Ivy if she feels "comfortable" leaving Violet alone here. Ivy admits that she doesn't, but also doesn't want to stick around to see how much worse Violet is going to get without their father. Ivy tells Barbara that she can't begin to imagine the effect of witnessing such madness and decay for so many years—and even if she could, she could only imagine it from the perspective of the "favorite."

Ivy does not actually feel confident in her mother's survival if Ivy leaves her to her own devices—and yet Ivy is past the point of caring, as she feels she has too long waited in the wings for her life to begin.

Barbara tells Ivy that the other day, Violet told her she was Beverly's favorite. Ivy says that's not true—Ivy herself was Beverly's favorite, and Barbara is Violet's favorite. Barbara is shocked, and Karen is disgruntled to not be anyone's favorite. Barbara counters that Violet told her that Beverly was heartbroken when she moved to Boulder, but Ivy insists it was Violet who was actually "heartbroken," not Beverly.

The revelation that Barbara is Violet's "favorite" makes a strange kind of sense. Though Violet is abusive and abrasive towards Barb, it is Barbara she depends upon and Barbara whose presence elicits the most volatile, passionate response in Violet.

Karen, taking a stab at Ivy, tells Ivy that she must be taking Beverly's suicide "kind of personally," as his favorite. Ivy coolly says that Beverly killed himself for his own reasons—reasons she won't pretend to know or presume to guess. Ivy says she is sure that Beverly is "better off" now, and doesn't want to begrudge him that. Barbara, though, says she's "furious" that Beverly selfishly left them. Ivy implies that Beverly never owed them anything, and perhaps didn't even like any of them at all. Barbara says she believes Beverly had a responsibility "to something greater than himself," as everyone does.

Though Barbara and Karen feel that Beverly's suicide was a selfish move, Ivy does not begrudge her father the chance to claim agency over his own existence. Perhaps it is because Ivy has been denied this chance for so many years tha,t even though her father's decision pains her, she believes his ability to make that decision at all was more important than her feelings about it could ever be.

Barbara asks Ivy when she and Little Charles are planning on leaving—Ivy says they could be leaving, perhaps, in just a few days. Barbara asks if Ivy is going to tell their mother about the affair, and Ivy answers that she's trying to figure that out. Ivy tells Barbara that if Barbara is so concerned about Violet, she can stay in Oklahoma herself—Ivy is leaving, and nobody gets to point any fingers at her.

Ivy is desperate for a sense of agency after so many years of being pawns in other peoples' stories. Even as she announces her confidence in her decision out loud, though, there is the underlying sense that she does have a great deal of anxiety about what people will think of her for abandoning her parents, just as her sisters did.

Violet enters the room, shaky but lucid. The girls invite her in and ask her how she's feeling. Violet is behaving surprisingly normally; she sits with her daughters and tells them how it gives her a "warm feeling" to have all her girls under one roof. She tells them that she has always identified with her girls—no matter how old she gets, she remembers being a girl herself.

Violet—lucid for the first time in the entirety of the play thus far—reveals a new side of herself as she attempts to actually connect with her children and treat them with respect and empathy. The moment is intended to be as disorienting for the audience as it must be for the girls themselves.

Violet begins telling her daughters a story. When she was thirteen or so, she had a crush on a boy from the neighborhood who, though scrawny and goofy-looking, had a pair of incredible leather cowboy boots. The boots gave him self-confidence, and Violet was sure that if she could get a pair herself, he'd ask her to go steady. Violet found the boots in a store window, but of course couldn't afford them. She began praying for them every night and begging her mother to buy them for her for Christmas. On Christmas morning, a box the size of a boot box, wrapped in nice paper, was under the tree. Violet tore open the box to find that it contained a pair of old, worn men's work boots caked in mud. Her mother laughed at her, and kept laughing for days.

This short but poignant story reveals that Violet has her own history of being abused, belittled, and made to feel insignificant for the sake of someone else's amusement, or to satisfy their sense of power. Violet's dark past with her mother suggests a matrilineal inheritance of cruelty, abusiveness, and disregard in this family, and the question that must be on all the Weston women's minds in this moment is whether it can ever be stopped.

Barbara tells Violet that the story is so sad it's making her "wish for a heartwarming claw hammer story." Violet says that her own mother was a mean woman, and she supposes that's where she gets her own meanness from. Karen tells Violet she isn't mean and kisses her on the cheek.

This is the closest Violet has yet come to apologizing to her children for her behavior. Karen, ever oblivious, attempts to make Violet feel as if there is no need to apologize—when in reality, Violet's apology is significantly overdue.

Barbara asks Ivy and Karen to leave the room so that she can talk to Violet alone for a moment, and they oblige her. Barbara apologizes to Violet for losing her temper at dinner and taking things too far. Violet apologizes, too, admitting that she was "spoiling for a fight." The two call a truce.

This rare moment of connection between Barbara and Violet hints at what their relationship could have been—one of mutual respect, rather than one defined by endlessly escalating grabs at power and attempts to degrade or disenfranchise the other.

Barbara asks Violet if she wants to check into a rehab center, but Violet insists she can get clean alone. She asks Barbara if she got rid of all her pills, and Barbara says everything they could find is gone. Violet insists that will be enough, and after a few days, she'll be okay. Barbara admits that she can't imagine what her mother's going through and offers her any help she needs. Violet, though, begins getting angry, insisting she doesn't need anyone's help.

Despite her softness in the previous passages, Violet is as determined as ever in this moment to prove her strength, independence, and fortitude. She is committed to establishing dominance not just over others, for once, but over her own will.

Downstairs, Ivy walks into the living room, where Little Charles is watching TV. She joins him on the couch. Little Charles asks Ivy if she's mad at him for nearly blowing things—she says she isn't and takes his hand. Little Charles tells Ivy that he was just trying to be brave—he just wanted to let everyone know that he found the love he always wanted, and isn't as big a loser as they all think he is. Ivy tells Little Charles that he is her hero.

Little Charles and Ivy are each another's support system in such a volatile, miserable environment. Despite her fear at the dinner table, Ivy is not mad at Little Charles—she only wants to build him up, and does not subject him to the abuse and criticism the rest of the family does.

Little Charles goes over to the electric piano and asks Ivy to come sit beside him. He plays her a love song he's written for her. In the middle of it, Mattie Fae and Charlie walk into the room and break the spell. She tells Little Charles to get himself together—they are all going home to take care of the dogs. Ivy invites them all to stay at her place, but Mattie Fae insists on going home. She sees that the television is on, and remarks that Little Charles watches so much television he's rotted his brain. She makes fun of him for watching silly game shows and says it's too bad there isn't a job where they pay you to sit and watch TV.

Little Charles and Ivy seem to have a truly sweet, loving relationship—but as Mattie Fae enters the room and sees them connecting, she does everything she can to belittle Little Charles and make him seem unappealing to Ivy. Whether she is doing this because she senses romance between them or whether she simply wants to deny Little Charles a chance at connection remains unclear, but either interpretation reveals Mattie Fae's possessiveness and desire for power.

Charlie tries to get Mattie Fae to quit picking on Little Charles, but she will not stop. Charlie raises his voice, telling Mattie Fae that if she says one more thing to Little Charles he is going to kick her into the highway. Mattie Fae, stunned, turns to face Charlie. Charlie tells Ivy and Little Charles to leave the room, and they do. Barbara is about to enter the room, but hearing a fight brewing, she hovers in the doorway unseen instead.

Charlie has witnessed a lot of emotional abuse in one day, and perhaps it is because of this that he is more keenly aware of the ways in which Mattie Fae abuses their own child. He calls her out on it, in keeping with the day's tradition of telling truths and exposing faults.

Charlie tells Mattie Fae that he can't understand her meanness. He is baffled by the way both Mattie Fae and Violet talk to their own family and remarks that his family never treated one another so terribly. Charlie tells Mattie Fae that to tear into Little Charles on a day like today—a day when their family buried a man whom Charlie "loved very much"—dishonors Beverly's memory. Charlie warns Mattie Fae that if she "can't find a generous place" in her heart for Little Charles, Charlie himself will leave her. He heads out to the car.

Charlie is a decent man who remains constantly bewildered by the terrible way the members of his wife's family treats one another. Charlie does not want to see any more emotional violence or abuse—especially directed at his own child—and his stern warning to Mattie Fae forces her to reckon with the pain she has caused not just Little Charles, but her own husband as well.

Mattie Fae sees Barbara standing in the doorway. Barbara apologizes for eavesdropping, insisting she simply froze when she heard what was happening. Mattie Fae asks Barbara if Barbara thinks that something is going on between Ivy and Little Charles. Barbara attempts to deflect the question, but Mattie Fae asks Barbara to just come on out with the truth. Barbara confirms her aunt's suspicions. Mattie Fae says that a relationship between the two of them "can't happen."

Mattie Fae has clearly picked up on Little Charles and Ivy's energy towards one another, and she seeks confirmation from Barbara about her fears. Barbara is now the head of the family in Mattie Fae's eyes, and as such possesses the answers to her questions.

Barbara points out that both Ivy and Little Charles have both always been different, and perhaps have found solace in one another at last. She then tells Mattie Fae that Ivy and Little Charles are in love—or at least they think they are. Barbara says she knows it's "unorthodox" for cousins to get together these days and seems to be about to suggest that Mattie Fae give the relationship a chance, but Mattie Fae cuts her off, revealing that Little Charles and Ivy are not cousins.

Barbara—who was skeptical of Little Charles and Ivy's relationship just moments ago—seems to have come around to the idea that the two perhaps do bring each other real comfort. Though their relationship is taboo, the Weston family's transgressions against one another are so great that perhaps, in Barbara's view, a genuine loving connection between two of its members might not be the worst thing in the world. This view is about to be challenged, though, by the information Mattie Fae is soon to reveal.

Mattie Fae tells a shocked Barbara that Little Charles is not Barbara and Ivy's cousin, but rather their half-brother. Little Charles is Beverly's child. Barbara asks Mattie Fae if she's sure, and Mattie Fae says she is. Barbara is stunned that Mattie Fae and Beverly had an affair, and asks who else knows about it. Mattie Fae insists that now that Beverly is dead, it is only she herself and now Barbara who know—Charlie is oblivious.

This shocking revelation—a twist on a twist—is meant to show just how deep and unending the Weston family's vortex of lies and secrets truly is. The implications this revelation has for the cause of Beverly's suicide and the tension between Mattie Fae and Little Charles breaks open a whole new horrifying set of possibilities for Barbara.

Barbara asks if Beverly knew that Little Charles was his, and Mattie Fae admits that he did. Barbara asks if it was a one-time thing, if they were drunk, but Mattie Fae reminds Barbara that there is more to her than just "old fat Aunt Mattie Fae." Mattie Fae admits that she is disproportionately disappointed in Little Charles, but wonders if perhaps she's more disappointed *for* him than by him.

Mattie Fae reveals herself, in this passage, to be self-aware enough to admit that her harsh, abusive treatment towards Little Charles stems more from her feelings of self-loathing, regret, and disappointment in her own actions rather than anything Little Charles has actually done.

Barbara warns Mattie Fae that Ivy will be "destroy[ed]" by this information if it ever reaches her. Mattie Fae says that she herself would never tell Ivy—but begs Barbara to find a way to put a stop to the relationship. When Barbara asks why it has to be her burden, Mattie Fae replies, matter-of-factly, that Barbara said she was "running things."

As Mattie Fae reminds Barbara that she claimed to be "running things" in the last act, there is a tongue-in-cheek challenge to her words. She wants to see, perhaps, if Barbara is up to the task of heading this family—and to absolve herself of her role in this terrible secret as well.

ACT 3, SCENE 2

Jean and Steve scamper, giggling, from the kitchen into the dining room. They are sharing a joint and both wearing pajamas. Karen is asleep in the living room on the hide-a-bed, and Bill is asleep on an air mattress in the study. Steve shushes Jean, whispering that she is going to get him busted. The two are behaving flirtatiously, and Jean comments on how strong the marijuana is. Steve offers to shotgun Jean—to blow the marijuana smoke into her mouth. Jean agrees. Steve takes a hit, brings his face close to Jean's, and blows the smoke into her mouth. Jean begins coughing heavily, and sways on the spot. Steve catches her, groping her breasts.

Jean has gotten herself in over her head with Karen's fiancé Steve. Though the teasing between them in earlier scenes could be read as playful but inappropriate, in this scene—away from the prying eyes of the rest of the family—Steve reveals himself to be a true predator and abuser.

Jean pulls away from Steve and calls him an "old perv." Steve asks Jean to show him her breasts. She rebuffs him. He taunts her with the age-old phrase "I'll show you mine if you show me yours." He asks if Jean has ever seen a penis, and Jean claims she has. When he asks if she's a virgin, she at first says she isn't, but then admits she "technically" still is. "That," Steve says, "changes everything," and he begins to move in closer to Jean. Jean warns him that they are going to get in trouble, but Steve protests that he is "white and over thirty"—he doesn't get in trouble.

Steve is preying on Jean in the most disgusting, lurid way possible—by attempting to wheedle her into believing that anything that happens between them is as much her idea as it is his. This predatory behavior suggests that this is not his first time soliciting a young girl for sex—and his subsequent allusion to being able to shirk the law with impunity seems to confirm this idea.

Steve turns off the light and sounds of moaning and heavy breathing can be heard. After a moment, the light clicks back on—Johnna is standing in the entryway from the kitchen, holding a cast-iron skillet. Jean and Steve pull apart from each other, their clothes in disarray. Johnna walks right up to Steve and swings the skillet at him over and over again, eventually hitting him right in the forehead. Throughout the house, everyone else begins to stir.

Johnna's role in this scene calls into question what her emotional and personal involvement in the lives of the Westons truly is. Though it is her job to help them keep house and maintain their "routines," her behavior—and seemingly her investment in their lives—goes above and beyond what is expected of her.

Karen rushes into the room, alarmed, and goes straight to Steve. She asks him what happened, but Johnna answers for him, telling Karen that Steve was messing with Jean. Karen, though, is only concerned with Steve's well-being. Bill and Barbara come in and ask what's going on—Johnna tells them too, that she "tuned [Steve] up" when she caught him kissing and grabbing Jean.

Johnna's plain, stoic way of relaying what has just happened to Barbara, Bill, and Karen reveals how paralyzed she is by the world she has entered. Johnna has to save these people from themselves over and over and over again, and the question of whether it is her "job" to do so is called into question in this scene.

Barbara lunges for Steve, trying to attack him and threatening to murder him. Bill tells Karen to get Steve out of the house. Steve insists he didn't do anything, and Jean tells her parents to calm down. Barbara shouts to Steve that Jean is only fourteen years old—he counters that she said she was fifteen, which enrages Barbara further. Karen pushes Steve into the living room, and they begin packing their bags and dressing.

Steve's disgusting behavior is made even more abhorrent by his discussing justification for his actions—as if Jean's being fifteen makes his attraction to her significantly more defensible than her being fourteen.

In the dining room, Barbara, Bill, Jean, and Johnna reckon with what has just happened. Barbara and Bill tell Jean to take them step-by-step through what happened, but she does not want to "make a federal case" out of things. She tells them that "nothing happened." When Bill insists he and Barbara are just concerned about Jean, she tells them that they "just want to know who to punish." She accuses them of not being able to tell the difference between "the good guys and the bad guys," and using her to sort things out for them.

Jean's defensiveness seems childish at first—but once she reveals that she is no longer willing to do the emotional labor of sorting right from wrong for her parents, a very complicated portrait of a young girl caught in the middle of an endless tidal wave of need from the very adults who are supposed to help her *begins to emerge.*

Barbara insists Jean tell them what Steve did. Jean replies that he didn't do anything—even if he did, she says, it wouldn't be a "big deal." Bill replies that it is a big deal, as she is only fourteen. Jean replies that fourteen is only "a few years younger" than Bill likes his girls. Barbara slaps Jean. Jean bursts into tears and tells Barbara that she hates her. Barbara tells Jean that she hates her, too, and Jean runs away. Bill follows Jean out of the room. Johnna excuses herself and returns to the attic.

This explosive moment between the three members of the Fordham family shows just how destructive this visit has been for all of them. Barbara's shocking retort to Jean reveals how very much at the end of her rope she is—rather than protecting her daughter, she lashes out at her, unwilling to see the ways in which she herself has inspired such cruel speech and derision in her own child.

Barbara goes into the living room, where Karen is alone, putting the hide-a-bed away. Steve is already outside. Karen tells Barbara to spare her a speech. She is leaving now, with Steve, to return to Florida. Karen warns Barbara that she needs to find out from Jean "exactly" what happened before Barbara starts pointing any fingers. Karen says she "doubts Jean's exactly blameless" in everything that went on tonight. Karen says that things aren't black and white all the time—everything is somewhere in the middle. Everyone but Barbara, Karen says, lives in that grey space.

Karen is as narcissistic and disconnected as ever, unable to see—even in the face of hard evidence—that her fiancé is a pedophile and a dangerous man. Karen attempts to insinuate that Jean has had some role in her own assault—though this is a ludicrous claim, Karen couches it in a rather accurate indictment of Barbara's inability to see nuance and complication in the people around her.

Barbara attempts to say something to Karen, but Karen interrupts her. She says she's not defending Steve—she knows he's not perfect, but neither is she. Karen says she's done things she's not proud of in her life and admits that she will probably do more things she's not proud of, because that's what it is to be a person. Come January, Karen says, she'll be in Belize. With that, she leaves.

In this passage, Karen admits to having done bad things in order to secure her freedom from her family. Karen is no angel, and she has made personal sacrifices—and ethical ones, it seems—to make sure that she does not get entrapped within her family once again. She is so afraid of being caught in the Westons' web that she now chooses to return to her life with Steve, even knowing how awful he is, rather than spend another second with her own kin.

Barbara is alone for just a moment before Bill enters the room. He announces that he is heading back to Boulder and taking Jean with him. Jean is "too much" for Barbara to deal with right now. Barbara admits she has failed as a sister, a mother and a wife. Barbara laments that she can't make things up to Jean right now—their reconciliation will have to wait until Barbara gets back to Boulder. Bill tells Barbara that she and Jean have forty some-odd years left to make up.

Barbara reveals in this moment how afraid she is of becoming the kind of mother that Violet is. She has made a mistake in bringing Jean here and exposing her to such untamed emotional violence and abuse and fears she has ruined things forever. Bill must be the one to remind her that all relationships are not as doomed as Barbara and Violet's own—perhaps, for Jean and Barbara, there can be peace and reconciliation.

Barbara tells Bill that she knows he's never coming back to her. He tells her to never say never, but trails off. He implies that he is going to pursue a relationship with the student he's been seeing. Barbara asks Bill if she will understand why he's leaving her, and he says she probably won't. As Bill walks out the door and on to the porch, Barbara calls after him, telling him she loves him. He pauses for a moment, but then leaves. Barbara is alone.

Barbara speaks to Bill in this scene as if he is an oracle, asking him questions about the future of their relationship and allowing him to determine the answers. Her willingness to be dictated to the terms of their future is uncharacteristic, and represents how powerless Barb feels in this moment, overwhelmed by the insanity of her family and the sense of entrapment she feels.

ACT 3, SCENE 3

Barbara and Johnna sit in the study, in the same positions that Beverly and Johnna sat in during the Prologue. Barbara is drunk, and nurses a glass of whiskey. She tells Johnna that the last time she spoke with her father, the two of them were talking about the state of the world, and he lamented that America had lost its sense of promise. Barbara reveals that she now thinks that Beverly was talking about having lost faith in something more specific, or personal, than American in general. She says there was something hopeless in his voice, as if it was already too late—not just for him, but for America.

This scene is designed to mirror the prologue, and to show the similarities between Barbara and Beverly. Barbara, too, is aware of the changing landscape of her country, and seems to intuit that her father's forfeiture of his life is a metaphor for a larger shift in the landscape of her world. Barbara can't possibly know, in calling Johnna into the study and monologuing at her while sipping on whiskey, that she is mirroring her father's earlier behavior—yet for Johnna it must be a disorienting experience.

Johnna asks Barbara if she is firing her. Barbara insists that she's not—rather, she's giving Johnna the opportunity to quit. Barbara doesn't want Johnna to think her services aren't necessary, though. All Barbara is trying to say is that she is here—she is sticking around—and if Johnna wanted to leave, Barbara would still be around. Johnna says she wants to stay. She doesn't to the job for Barbara, she says, or for Violet, but for herself, because she so badly needs the work.

Johnna has witnessed pain, trauma, death, and abuse in her short time working for the Westons—and yet the painful fact is that she needs the work and must stay on in the face of such toxicity. Johnna is just as trapped within the Weston family as any of the Westons themselves.

Barbara finishes her whiskey and asks what Beverly and Johnna talked about. Johnna says that Beverly talked a lot about his daughters, and his granddaughter, and said they were his "joy." Barbara thanks Johnna for lying to her, and then tells her she wants her to stay. She tells Johnna that she herself will pay Johnna's salary. Johnna nods, and leaves the room. Barbara pours herself another glass of whiskey and announces to no one that she is still here.

Barbara makes a decision in this moment that runs counter to everything she seemed to want in the beginning of the play. She proudly announces that she is "still here"—that she is staying on in her family's home and taking an active role in the care of the house and the family in a way her father no longer could. Barbara feels, perhaps, that as the eldest, such a duty is her inheritance.

ACT 3, SCENE 4

It is morning, and the living room is bathed in light. Barbara and Sheriff Gilbeau are standing together in the living room. She offers him some coffee, but he declines. She tells him that he looks good, and he thanks her for the compliment. She asks if he's going to tell her that she looks good, too, and he hurriedly does so. Barbara offers Gilbeau coffee again, and again he declines.

Barbara's own behavior in this scene is decidedly erratic and off-putting. She has trouble keeping track of what she's already asked Gilbeau and is seemingly desperate for his attention. Barbara is being changed by her environment and her extended proximity to her mother and her family's ancestral home.

Barbara tells Gilbeau she feels a **hot flash** coming on, and then asks Gilbeau some more about his life—he is divorced, and she tells him that she'll soon be joining his club. Gilbeau reveals he has three daughters, and that he often thinks about "the Weston sisters" when he looks at them. Gilbeau then asks if Barbara's husband is still here—Barbara says that he went back home, but she can't remember whether he left a few days ago or as many as two weeks ago. There is a silence between them, and Gilbeau asks Barbara if she's okay. She tells him she's "just got the Plains."

Barbara's hot flash symbolizes how stifled and claustrophobic she is beginning to feel. This scene implies that Barbara has settled into a routine here, but Gilbeau's presence—something new, something non-routine—is perhaps shaking her out of herself a little bit and reminding her of the fact that she is in danger of becoming trapped here forever.

Gilbeau asks Barbara if she would like to get lunch someday and catch up. She says that she would. He then reveals the real reason he came—he got a call from the woman who runs a local motel, the Country Squire. When the woman saw Beverly Weston's picture in the paper along with his obituary, she recognized him as someone who had patronized her motel not too long ago. She called the police and told them that he'd stayed at her inn for two nights—the first two nights of his absence. Gilbeau tells Barbara that he is going to check the phone records to see if any calls went out or came in while Beverly was at the motel. Barbara tells Gilbeau that his effort would be useless—no one knew where her father was staying.

The plot thickens here as Gilbeau reveals that there is perhaps more to the case of Beverly's death than originally thought. Barbara, though, is hardly interested in this information. She has been trying to put her father's death behind her and take up the mantle of his legacy, and doesn't see any point in lingering over the fact of his death any longer.

Gilbeau gets ready to leave and asks Barbara if he can call her sometime. In response, Barbara asks Gilbeau to come closer to her. He does, and she touches his face, as if in a trance. She kisses him, and then moves away. Barbara starts to say something but keeps trailing off. When Gilbeau asks her what the matter is, she says that she's forgotten what she looks like.

Barbara is profoundly unsure of what she wants any more—or, it seems, who she is. As she has become more and more entrapped within her family, she has begun to forget who she is, or what her "real" life looks like.

ACT 3, SCENE 5

Barbara and Ivy sit in the dining room. Ivy is dressed, but Barbara is still in pajamas. Ivy asks Barbara if Violet is clean. Barbara says she is—"moderately." Ivy says she's nervous, and Barbara realizes that Ivy wants to tell Violet about her and Little Charles's relationship tonight. Barbara begs her sister not to mess up the uneasy rhythm she and Violet have settled into, but Ivy says it's now or never—she's leaving for New York tomorrow. Barbara tells Ivy it's not a good idea for her and Little Charles to take things any further. There are lots of fish in the sea, she says, and she advises Ivy to "rule out the one single man in the world" she's related to. Ivy says she loves the man she's related to, but Barbara tells Ivy that love is a "crock of shit."

In spite of all the pain and suffering of recent weeks, Ivy seems oddly optimistic about the prospect of revealing the truth of her relationship with Little Charles to Violet. Barbara is clearly being torn apart by having to keep the secret of Little Charles's true parentage from her sister—she does not want to bring Ivy any more harm but cannot let her proceed any further with the relationship, and is biding her time as she decides what to do with the delicate, explosive information she has.

Johnna brings dinner in from the kitchen—she has made catfish. After she exits once again, Ivy asks why Barbara thinks Ivy shouldn't tell Violet the truth. Barbara tells Ivy she needs to rethink her entire relationship with Charles, before urging her to be quiet and eat her catfish. Ivy says she has hoped against hope for years that someone would come into her life, but before she can finish her tragic monologue, Barbara cuts her off and tells her to eat her fish.

Barbara is callous and short with her sister—who only wants reassurance, empathy, and guidance from Barb. Ivy still believes in the power of love—despite all the abuse she has suffered, she is still an idealist, but Barbara, at this point in the play, is completely jaded and full of contempt of any kind of positive thinking whatsoever.

Violet walks into the room, and Barbara calls for Johnna to bring Violet a plate. Violet insists she isn't hungry, but Barbara tells her that she needs to eat. Johnna brings the food in and tells the women that she's going to eat upstairs in her room. Barbara tells Violet to eat her fish, but Violet refuses. Barbara and Violet grow belligerent with one another and begin cursing and shouting back and forth. Ivy interjects, telling Violet that she needs to talk to her about something. Barbara tells Ivy, repeatedly, to shut up, but Ivy keeps pressing the issue. As Ivy continues trying to reveal the truth and Violet complains about not wanting to eat, Barbara repetitiously tells her mother and her sister to shut up and eat their fish.

In this passage, Barbara is trying desperately to exert control over her mother and her sister. They will not listen to her, though, and Barbara understands that in thinking she could affect any change in these women—in anyone in her family—by staying behind on the Plains, she was only deceiving herself. Barbara and Violet have been the two great wordsmiths of the play, but in this scene, Barbara has no linguistic faculties whatever, and neither does Violet. Both have been so worn down, exhausted, and traumatized that they have no rhetorical advantage over one another and are simply competing to see whose voice can be loudest.

Ivy, frustrated, throws her plate on the floor, and it smashes. Barbara asks if they're all going to start "breaking shit now," and says that she can "break shit" too—she throws a vase off the sideboard onto the floor. Violet then throws her plate to the floor, too. Barbara calls for Johnna to come clean up a "little spill" in the dining room. Ivy begins to tell Violet her secret, referring to Little Charles as "Charles." Barbara says that if Ivy doesn't refer to him as "Little Charles" Violet won't know who she's talking about. As Ivy gets closer and closer to breaking through Barbara's interruptions, Violet finishes Ivy's sentence for her—"Little Charles and you," she says, "are brother and sister."

Words and their meanings have devolved completely, and the Weston women resort to physical violence to make themselves seen and heard—even if they are still unable to make themselves understood. The glass shattering symbolically foretells the "shattering" information Violet is about to deliver—as the secret hits Ivy's ears for the first time, there is the sense that something has indeed broken.

Ivy, shocked and believing that Violet is delirious, tries to go ahead with her confession, but Violet is in her own world, and continues speaking. She reveals that she has always known the truth about Little Charles—no one slips anything by her. Barbara urges Ivy not to listen to Violet, but Violet keeps talking. She reveals she knew the whole time Beverly and Mattie Fae were having an affair, and says that Beverly "tore himself up" over Little Charles's true parentage until the day of his death.

The realization that Violet has known her sister and her husband's darkest secret all along adds another layer of depth to the source of Violet's pain and thus her addictive tendencies.

Ivy is devastated. Violet says it's time the girls knew: they are getting older, and "never know when someone might need a kidney." Violet says, though, that the sensitive Little Charles should be protected from the truth. Violet looks at Ivy and asks how Ivy found out. Ivy looks back and forth between her mother and her sister, and then lurches away from the table. She asks why Violet would have told her such a thing—Violet asks why she cares. Ivy accuses Barbara and Violet of being monsters and runs from the dining room.

This is yet another moment in the play which is slightly inscrutable and left up to the actors' interpretation. It could be that Violet truly has no knowledge of Ivy and Little Charles's affair—or it could be that this scene is played as if Violet is very obviously feigning ignorance in an attempt to further belittle and ridicule the already-infantilized Ivy.

Barbara follows Ivy into the living room, begging Ivy to listen to her. She reveals that Mattie Fae told her the truth earlier, but she didn't know what to do with what she'd learned. Ivy screams that she won't let Barbara change her story and runs out to the porch. Barbara follows her. Ivy says she plans to go to New York anyway—she assures Barbara that she will never see her again. Barbara begs Ivy to see that the revelation is not her fault—it was their mother who told her. Ivy proclaims that there's no difference, and then leaves.

In the tragic and dramatic culmination of Ivy's arc, she clings to the tattered shreds of her own desperate grab at agency through her relationship with Little Charles. Ivy insists that the knowledge she has just been confronted with changes nothing, but the impact of this horrible truth on what her ultimate decision will be remains unknown. As she departs, Ivy attempts to hurt Barbara as badly as she herself has been hurt—by telling Barbara that there is no longer any difference between her and the abusive Violet.

Barbara, in a daze, reenters the house, where Violet is lighting a cigarette. She tells Barbara that they "couldn't let" Ivy and Little Charles run off together—Ivy's place is here. Barbara tells Violet that Ivy said she plans on leaving anyway, but Violet predicts that Ivy won't go. Ivy's sweet, Violet says, but she's not strong like the two of them.

Violet's blasé attitude upon Barbara's reentry to the house suggests that perhaps Violet did know all along that Little Charles and Ivy were having an affair—either that, or she overheard the explosive argument on the porch and is either so high or so brain-damaged and disconnected that the information has little effect on her.

Barbara expresses her surprise at the fact that Violet always knew about Mattie Fae and Beverly. Violet says that though she's never told either of them she knew about it, Beverly always "knew [she] knew." Violet says that if she had had a chance to talk to Beverly "at the end," she would've told him not to kill himself over Little Charles and all the "ancient history" between himself and Mattie Fae. Violet says if she had reached Beverly at the motel, she would've told him that feeling "cast down" didn't let him off the hook.

As Violet rambles on and on about all she would have done or could have done for Beverly, she goes a bit too far, and reveals yet another horrific secret in the process. Again, it is unclear whether Violet is high or simply so damaged from the substance abuse that she has truly lost her mind.

Barbara asks Violet what she means by "if [she] had reached him at the motel." Violet admits to calling the Country Squire Motel, but not getting a hold of Beverly—she assumed it was too late, and he'd checked out. She called the motel Monday, after she'd emptied the safety deposit box. She admits that she probably should've called sooner—or called the police, or called Ivy—but she and Beverly had an arrangement. She reminds Barbara that to people of their generation, who never had any money growing up, money is important.

This revelation—that Violet knew where Beverly was staying and had the chance to contact him, but didn't because she wanted to get into their safety deposit box—horrifies Barbara, even as Violet attempts to justify her actions by again invoking the pain and scarcity of her own upbringing.

Barbara asks Violet how she knew where Beverly was, and Violet answers blithely that Beverly left a note saying he could be reached at the Country Squire Motel. She did call him, she reminds Barbara, after she got into the safety deposit box. Barbara points out that if Violet could've stopped Beverly from killing himself, she wouldn't have needed to get into the safety deposit box. Violet replies that hindsight is twenty-twenty.

This dark and painful moment is given an instance of levity as Violet comically but cruelly says she would do things differently if she had a second chance—when of course she has effectively forfeited her husband's life for a little bit of his money.

Barbara asks if Beverly's note said, or implied, that he was planning on killing himself. Violet doesn't answer at first. When Barbara presses her, she says only that if she'd had her wits about her, she would've done things differently. Barbara tells Violet that she is "fucked-up."

Though the exact details of the note aren't revealed, this moment implies that Violet knew Beverly intended to kill himself, but was too angry, money-hungry, or simply intoxicated to care.

Violet calls Barbara a "smug little ingrate" and tells her that one of the reasons Beverly killed himself was Barbara. She tells Barbara that Beverly never would have killed himself if Barbara had been around. Beverly and Violet, abandoned with nothing but the realization that they had "wasted [their] lifetimes" devoting themselves to the care and comfort of daughters who left them behind, turned against one another. Violet tells Barbara that Beverly's blood is as much on Barbara's hands as it is her own.

Violet does not want to admit her complicity in Beverly's demise, and so she attempts to drag Barbara into the equation with her. She blames Barbara for abandoning the two of them and leaving them with a sense of futility, anger, and impotence. Seeing how Violet has been able to influence Barbara time and time again throughout the play by playing to her emotions, it seems as if Barbara may, against all odds, fall for this final manipulation.

Violet goes into the study, muttering about how Beverly did "this" to weaken her, and to make her prove her character. She reveals that she would have waited to call him until after she got the safety deposit box no matter what the note had said, and calls to Beverly that she is stronger than him at last. Barbara agrees. She tells Violet that Violet is the strong one, and then kisses her, collects her own rental car keys, and leaves.

As Violet rails against her dead husband for leaving her—and for testing her mettle—Barbara realizes the extent of her mother's cruelty and vindictiveness. Seeing that there is no help for this woman, Barbara concedes that Violet is "stronger" after all—strong enough to live on her own. Her last act of affection towards her mother is sad and poignant, and feels like a very final goodbye.

Violet calls after Barbara and staggers through the house, pursuing her as Barbara collects her purse and car keys and goes. Violet cannot catch up to Barbara though, and winds up in the kitchen, turning around and around, disoriented, trying to find her daughter. She starts calling for Ivy, too, and then Beverly. She winds up in the living room, where she puts on the Eric Clapton record **"Lay Down, Sally"** and dances for a moment before attacking the machine, destroying the record.

As Violet realizes that she has been abandoned by everyone she cared for, she turns to "Lay Down, Sally" for comfort—but perhaps the song's painful lyrics about the desire to stave off abandonment for just a while longer are too much for her. She flies into a rage, attacking the thing which once brought her joy.

Violet calls for Johnna, and then goes to the stairway. She begins crawling up on all fours, calling for Johnna again and again all the way to the attic. She enters Johnna's room and crawls into Johnna's lap. Johnna soothes Violet while Violet mumbles "and then you're gone, and then you're gone"—over and over. Johnna herself begins intoning a line from a T.S. Eliot poem: "This is the way the world ends."

Violet is completely alone—seemingly for good. She has alienated and pushed away—and as good as killed—everyone who mattered to her, and the only one left is Johnna. As Violet reminded all of her guests at Beverly's funeral dinner, though, this is what Johnna is being paid to do. Johnna and Violet take up separate but related "mantras" and repeat them over and over as the play comes to a close. Violet's reflects her profound loneliness, and Johnna's reflects her state of being overwhelmed in the face of all that has befallen her in the short time since the Westons dragged her into their weird, wild world—which is, at present, seemingly coming to an end.

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