Fefu and Her Friends

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARÍA IRENE FORNÉS

Born in Havana, Cuba in 1930, María Irene Fornés was the youngest of six siblings. She and her family immigrated to the United States in 1945 following the death of her father. She worked as a teenager in a shoe factory before pursuing an education in painting and abstract art, studying with the famous painter and teacher Hans Hoffman. While working as a visual artist, Fornés met the model and writer Harriet Sohmers, with whom she developed a romantic relationship. Fornés moved to Paris to live with Sohmers in 1954. Inspired by a production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, she took an interest in theater and eventually started writing plays of her own in the 1960s. She was especially inspired to start writing after she met the author Susan Sontag in 1959. The two women became romantic and were in a relationship for several years. Fornés's first play, *There! You Died*, premiered in San Francisco in 1963 and was renamed *Tango Palace* when it was staged a year later in New York City at the Actors Studio. Two years later, she won an Obie Award for her play *Promenade* and had, by then, firmly established her reputation as an influential playwright of abstract, experimental theater. She built on this reputation with her 1977 play *Fefu and Her Friends*, which deconstructed conventional methods of staging. She explored issues surrounding feminism and gender dynamics throughout her career, writing more than 40 plays and winning many prestigious awards.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *Fefu and Her Friends*, Emma—one of Fefu's friends—recites a passage from a book called *Educational Dramatics* by Emma Sheridan Fry, an actor and educator who developed a method of teaching theater to children in impoverished areas of New York City in the early 1900s. The program she helped develop was part of an organization called the Educational Alliance, which served the growing immigrant population of the Lower East Side. Although the Alliance was already a vital resource for the immigrant community, a social worker named Alice Minnie Herts noticed that the programming didn't provide opportunities for children to enjoy suitable entertainment. At the time, theater wasn't seen as something that could be used as a tool to empower and uplift disadvantaged young people. Nonetheless, Herts established a theater program at the Educational Alliance, bringing in Emma Sheridan Fry (who was a fairly successful stage actor) to help her run it. Together, they developed a means of teaching theater that encouraged participants to invest in their communities and view creative expression as a worthwhile, life-affirming cornerstone of the human experience. Why, exactly, Fefu's friend Emma quotes *Educational Dramatics* is never made clear, but the reference seems to suggest that the women in this play are concerned with using things like education and theater as tools for social advocacy and activism.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

María Irene Fornés was profoundly influenced by a production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, an absurdist and abstract play that features two characters as they wait for a mysterious figure named Godot. The play resists a conventional narrative structure and, in this way, feels like a precursor of sorts to *Fefu and Her Friends*—both plays have a simple premise that is nonetheless abstract and rather unclear, thus placing emphasis not on the plot but on the dialogue and staging. To that end, *Fefu and Her Friends* is also somewhat similar to Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, which also uses absurdism to buck narrative and dramatic conventions. In terms of the feminist themes in *Fefu and Her Friends*, it's worth considering the play alongside Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*, which also examines the harmful toll that sexist, male-dominated societies exacted on women in the early- to mid-20th century.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Fefu and Her Friends
- **When Published:** 1977
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Abstract Theater
- **Setting:** New England in the 1930s
- **Climax:** After a strange and abstract conversation with Julia, Fefu grabs her gun, goes outside, and shoots a rabbit. When she returns with the dead rabbit in her hand, she sees that this action has somehow also killed Julia.
- **Antagonist:** Sexism and the suffering that can come from living in a patriarchal society

EXTRA CREDIT

Fake It Till You Make It. According to legend, Fornés started writing mainly to encourage her lover at the time, Susan Sontag, to get started on a new project. According to Fornés, Sontag was complaining about having trouble starting a novel, so Fornés suggested they go home that instant to write, at which point she started writing her own piece in a show of solidarity.

PLOT SUMMARY

Fefu and Her Friends takes place over the course of a single day in the 1930s. Fefu—a seemingly wealthy woman with a nice home—is hosting seven of her friends to plan a fundraiser for a cause that has something to do with education (the exact cause is never explicitly stated). In Part I, Fefu, Cindy, and Christina wait for everyone else to arrive. As they do so, Fefu tells her friends about her relationship with her husband, Phillip, whom she thinks married her simply to have a "constant reminder of how loathsome women are." Christina—who has never actually met Fefu before—is shocked by this statement, but Fefu doesn't mind, insisting that she likes ideas that are "revolting." When Fefu sees Phillip walking up to the house, she grabs a shotgun and shoots at him. Cindy and Christina are horrified when Phillip falls down, but Fefu assures them they don't need to worry—this is just a joke she and her husband play. Whenever he walks up to the house, she shoots at him with a blank, and he plays along by falling down. As he gets up and continues across the yard, Fefu says that Phillip has threatened to load the gun with real bullets, but she doesn't believe him. Her friends are bewildered, but it all makes sense to Fefu, who thinks she might end up legitimately shooting Phillip if she didn't pretend to.

The other women begin to arrive. One of them is Julia, who recently suffered a terrible accident and is now in a wheelchair. As Fefu shows her to her room, Cindy tells Christina about what happened, since she was there to witness it. Julia and Cindy were out hunting with a man. The man spotted a deer and shot it, and right as the deer fell, Julia did too. As the deer died, Julia seemed to suffer alongside it, even convulsing in the same way as the doomed animal. Cindy thought that the hunter had somehow shot Julia, but this wasn't the case. Julia's forehead was bleeding, but only because she had hit her head when she fell, which was perhaps why she was convulsing. She also started raving in a strange way, saying nonsensical things because of some kind of "spinal nerve injury." These days, Cindy says, Julia still "blanks out" because of a scar on her brain—that is, she suffers from petit mal seizures.

Emma, one of Cindy and Christina's charismatic and theatrical friends, arrives, interrupting their conversation about Julia's "hallucinations" (which involve Julia talking about how she is "persecuted" and tortured). Sue also comes into the room, along with Paula, who compliments Fefu on a "Flossie Crit" (a dated term for feminist criticism) speech she recently gave somewhere. As everyone settles in, Julia picks up the gun and examines it. She then becomes "absent," staring off as Cindy and Cynthia wonder what to do. She remarks that the gun is filled with a "blank," and then she cryptically says, "She's hurting herself." Then, seeming to return to her senses, she decides to go lie down right as Cecilia—Fefu's final guest—arrives.

In Part II, the play divides into four separate scenes, all of which take place in different rooms at the same time. The audience is broken into four groups and goes from room to room, watching each scene before rotating to the next one. In one scene, Fefu and Emma bring vegetables up from a root cellar as Emma tells Fefu that she thinks about genitals quite frequently—everyone has them, she says, but they act like they don't. She then sets forth a theory that people go to heaven based on how well they have sex. Fefu likes this idea, but she ends up talking about how she's in a constant state of pain, though this pain isn't physical—it's just that life feels unbearably difficult.

In another scene, Christina tells Cindy about how confusing she finds Fefu. Christina is, in some ways, a conformist, so she feels somewhat threatened by Fefu's nonconformism. Cindy then tells her about a dream she had that ended in her being chased by a strange young man. Meanwhile, in yet another scene, Julia lies in a bedroom by herself and narrates a "hallucination" she's having. She says that a mysterious group of "judges" have beat and tortured her. When she told them that "the stinking parts of the body are the important ones"—that is, "the genitals, the anus, the mouth, the armpit"—one of the judges told her that these body parts have to be "kept clean and put away." Later, she insists that these judges are responsible for what happened when the hunter shot the deer. The bullet really hit *her*, she says, not the deer, but she ended up living while the deer died, at which point the judges told her not to tell anyone what happened. As if speaking directly to these judges, Julia asks why they have to kill Fefu, but they seem to reply by saying, "Not kill, cure. Cure her." Julia's "hallucination" stops when Sue brings her some soup.

In the fourth scene of Part II, Paula and Cecilia talk about a romantic relationship they used to have with each other. They haven't spoken in a while, and it's clear that Paula wants to reconnect, though she insists that she's not trying to win Cecilia back—she just wants to express how much she has missed her and how "abandoned" she felt after Cecilia stopped contacting her. A bit more reluctant than Paula, Cecilia eventually says she has missed Paula, too.

In Part III, the women talk about the value of community while lounging in the living room. Julia acknowledges that her "hallucinations are madness," but she still often yearns to be around other people who experience the same thing as she does. She has even *tried* to get admitted to a psychiatric ward, but doctors never send her to one, so she feels isolated amongst people who don't understand what it's like to "hallucinate." As this conversation wraps up, the women do a practice run of what each person will talk about at the fundraiser. Emma is the most prepared and theatrically gifted, delivering a speech taken from a book by a female educator and actor named Emma Sheridan Fry. After this rehearsal, the friends have a water fight, with many of them trying to dump water from their glasses on the others. When this dies down, Fefu briefly "hallucinates" and sees Julia walking into the living room, but when she later talks to Julia and encourages her to

stand from her wheelchair, Julia says she can't. During this conversation, Julia asks about Fefu's relationship with Phillip. Fefu says things aren't going well but that she can't leave Phillip because she has come to depend on him. She then tries to get Julia to stand, accusing her of having "given up" and trying to jostle her out of the chair, though she stops and apologizes when Christina walks in.

Having apologized, Fefu grabs the gun and claims she's going to clean it. Once she's out of the room, Julia nervously asks Cecilia—who has also entered the room—if she (Julia) told Fefu anything, but Cecilia doesn't know what she's talking about and asks *what*, exactly, Julia would have told Fefu. In response, Julia just says, "She knew." Then, from outside, comes the sound of a gunshot. Christina and Cecilia go to see what happened, but Julia just touches her forehead. Her hand comes away bloody, and then her head drops backward. Fefu rushes in with a dead rabbit, exclaiming that she shot and killed it. When she sees Julia slumped in her wheelchair, Fefu slowly walks to her, at which point the rest of the women enter and all stand around her, too.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Fefu – Fefu is a seemingly well-off woman who hosts seven of her friends at her house so they can plan a fundraiser. Her friends see her as unconventional, and even she accepts that she isn't like other people. Still, she wants her friends to like her, as evidenced by her conversations with Christina, whom she has just met. Fefu wants Christina to like her, but Christina has a hard time understanding Fefu, especially when Fefu picks up a shotgun and shoots at her husband, Phillip, as he walks toward the house. Fefu explains that this is just a joke she and her husband play, saying that the gun is loaded with blanks. Fefu's admission unnerves Christina, and it becomes clear that Fefu and Phillip have an extremely fraught relationship—so fraught that Fefu even claims that Phillip only married her to have a "constant reminder of how loathsome women are." It is perhaps because of this problematic relationship that Fefu seems to wrestle with a strange (and mostly unexplained) internal world of suffering, which mysteriously connects her to her friend Julia, who was injured in a hunting accident and, as a result, often has frightening "hallucinations" in which she speaks to antagonistic male figures whom she calls "judges." Like many things in the play, Julia and Fefu's bond is abstract and difficult to define, but it's clear that they're connected through some sort of suffering, as Julia talks to the "judges" about Fefu in a way that implies that Fefu is subject to the same kind of anguish that Julia herself has gone through.

Julia – Julia is one of Fefu's friends. Like the others, she comes to Fefu's house to help plan a fundraiser. Many of the other women are eager to know how she's doing, since they all heard she was recently injured in a hunting accident. The accident itself was very odd and ultimately remains open to audience interpretation. She was out hunting with Cindy and a man. When the man spotted a deer and shot it, Julia suddenly fell down as if the bullet had hit *her*. She was bleeding from the forehead, but the hunter who fired the gun was quick to point out that he hadn't shot her—she simply hit her head as she fell. Still, the impact did damage to her brain, and she now has *petit mal* seizures in which she "blanks out" and "hallucinates," often speaking aloud in ways that unnerve the people listening to her. She also uses a wheelchair. All of her friends are very caring and supportive, but she tells them that she sometimes wishes she would be admitted to a psychiatric ward—at least then she would be surrounded by people who understand what she's going through, she says. In one particularly strange and haunting scene, she "hallucinates" having a conversation with a group of domineering men whom she refers to as "judges." In this conversation, the "judges" force her to recite a long theory about how the entire world is made for men, not women. These "judges" seem to antagonize her, and she eventually pleads with them to spare Fefu, though it's never made clear what, exactly, is going to happen to Fefu. In this mysterious capacity, Fefu and Julia are connected by a certain kind of internal suffering, which is perhaps why Julia predicts that harm will befall Fefu. In the play's final scene, Fefu shoots a rabbit, and this somehow ends up killing Julia.

Christina – Christina is one of the seven women who visit Fefu's house to plan a fundraiser. Unlike the others, though, she doesn't know Fefu, whom she finds jarring and hard to understand. She isn't sure she likes Fefu, though it quickly becomes clear to her that Fefu hopes Christina will accept her and her strange ways like the rest of the women do. For Christina, though, Fefu's nonconformist attitude feels a bit threatening, as Christina recognizes that she herself is something of a conformist—anyone who deliberately rejects convention, therefore, makes her feel challenged and uncomfortable. In this way, Christina serves as a foil to Fefu, ultimately calling attention to Fefu's eccentricities.

Paula – Paula is another one of Fefu's friends. It isn't long after she arrives at Fefu's house to plan the fundraiser that she finds herself in a serious conversation with Cecilia, with whom she used to have a romantic relationship. The two women haven't spoken much since the dissolution of their affair, and Paula wants to express how sad this makes her—being with Cecilia gave her a certain sense of meaning and purpose in her life. Without Cecilia, though, Paula feels rudderless and lost. But Paula is also eager to tell Cecilia that she's not trying to win her back. Rather, she just needs to express how much she misses her.

Cecilia – One of Fefu's friends, Cecilia used to be in a romantic relationship with Paula, but the two women haven't stayed in

touch in the aftermath of their breakup. Cecilia is less forthcoming about her emotions than Paula is, mainly listening as Paula talks about how much their relationship meant to her. However, in a gesture of tenderness after Paula starts crying in front of their friends, Cecilia kisses Paula, perhaps suggesting that their romantic relationship isn't *completely* over after all.

Emma – Emma is one of the women who visits Fefu's house to plan a fundraiser. Trained in the theater, she is charismatic and eloquent, coaching the other women about how to present themselves during their speeches at the upcoming fundraiser. At one point, Emma rehearses what she's going to say, quoting a famous education reformer named Emma Sheridan Fry and, in that way, hinting to the audience that the fundraiser has something to do with improving access to education.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Cindy – Cindy is one of Fefu's friends. She's familiar with Fefu's quirks and is amused by watching Fefu try to endear herself to Christina, who doesn't know her and isn't sure what to think of her boisterous personality.

Sue – Sue is one of the seven women who visit Fefu's house to plan a fundraiser.

Phillip –Phillip is Fefu's husband. He never actually appears onstage, but Fefu frequently talks about him and the disdain he seems to have for her, characterizing him as a sexist and cruel man.

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.

ABSTRACT REPRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION

As an experimental play that prioritizes the audience's experience and perception over the actual plot or narrative arc, *Fefu and Her Friends* uses abstract representation to capture a certain feeling of reality. Of course, the play doesn't fall under the umbrella of Realism, but its experimental elements *do* invite audience members to immerse themselves in the lived experience of the characters. This, in turn, places an emphasis on what it feels like to move through life, which often involves trying to interpret and connect seemingly disparate events and ideas. The basic structure and staging of the play illustrate this well, as Act II is divided into four separate scenes that all play out simultaneously in different rooms. During the performance, the audience splits into four sections, with each section going to a different room, watching a scene, and then rotating to another room before eventually reconvening for the play's final act. This approach takes the emphasis off of linear storytelling, instead presenting the play as a subjective experience for the audience members to piece together—after all, people will experience the play differently based on the order in which they view the four scenes in Act II, thus turning the entire show into an exploration of subjectivity and interpretation.

Interestingly, the scenes in Act II don't have any throughline or plot-related relevance to one another. Instead, they simply showcase the thoughts and conversations that the women in each room have, which occasionally have some sort of thematic overlap. Fefu and Julia, for instance, both talk about some form of suffering, even though they do so in different scenes. Furthermore, all four scenes touch on sex or sexuality in some way or another. And yet, the conversations and concerns that the characters have don't create any sort of cohesive narrative. Rather, the play simply exists as an abstract collage representing a day in the life of eight women spending time together in the first half of the 21st century. In this way, *Fefu and Her Friends* is, at its core, a play about lived experience and how people make sense of life. Furthermore, the abstract, highly interpretive nature of the play itself invites readers to consider the fact that life is often disordered, disjointed, and difficult to understand. In turn, the process of trying to understand the play mirrors what it's like to simply move through life.

EMPOWERMENT, FEMALE INDEPENDENCE, AND FEMINISM

Fefu and Her Friends is often considered a feminist play, largely because of its tacit acknowledgement and rejection of society's repressive gender norms. The women staying in Fefu's house are all very aware of the ways in which restrictive gender dynamics influence their everyday lives, but the play itself actually focuses on the women's complete *independence* from men. To that end, no men appear in the play, making *Fefu and Her Friends* an ensemble play with an all-female cast—a significant detail, since the play takes place in the 1930s, when many men would have expected their wives to stay home and care for them or their house. Instead of adhering to such expectations, though, the women at the center of this play congregate with one another in an environment that is intrinsically characterized by a sense of female independence, empowerment, and self-sufficiency.

What's more, it's not just that these women come together, but that they do so to plan a fundraiser for a specific cause. Of course, the play never explicitly names this exact cause, but it seems to have something to do with education. Given that Fefu and her friends all appear to have gone to college together during a period in which it was still somewhat uncommon for

women to attend university, it seems likely that the cause they're advocating for has something to do with improving access to higher education—an idea reinforced by the fact that Fefu's friend Emma recites some words by Emma Sheridan Fry, a famous playwright and educator who used theater to empower and educate disadvantaged communities in the early 1900s. There is, therefore, an underpinning of social advocacy and equality in *Fefu and Her Friends*, as the whole reason the characters have gathered is to push for the kind of societal change that they themselves have benefited from as educated women living in an otherwise sexist, male-oriented society. At its core, then, *Fefu and Her Friends* is a play that celebrates female independence and empowerment while also spotlighting the hard work and activism that must be done to challenge sexist and repressive norms.

ATTRACTION, ROMANCE, AND COMPANIONSHIP

The characters in *Fefu and Her Friends* often talk about their romantic relationships, ultimately exploring the tensions and complexities of being romantically involved with another person. Paula and Cecilia are particularly good examples of people who struggle to understand their own romantic feelings, since they used to be lovers. Now, though, they're trying to find a way to be in each other's lives in the aftermath of their affair—a task that is especially difficult because of an apparent lack of resolution in their previous romantic relationship. As Paula tries to express how much Cecilia meant to her (and *still* means to her), she ends up making things awkward between them. And though she clarifies that she's not trying to get back together with Cecilia, it's clear that she doesn't want to *lose* Cecilia altogether—in other words, she wants Cecilia's companionship. Similarly, Fefu's relationship with her husband, Phillip, is quite fraught and flawed, but she can't bring herself to conceive of a world in which she's not with him. She tells her friends that Phillip is dismissive and even scornful of her, but she still feels like she needs him, suggesting that she has come to depend on the companionship they've established together. Of course, the play doesn't imply that this attitude is healthy or rewarding for Fefu, but it *does* underscore the power that close romantic relationships can sometimes have over people. Human beings, the play seems to argue, are naturally inclined to develop romantic bonds; and, more importantly, when love and attraction fade away, a strong sense of connection often remains.

FRIENDSHIP AND MUTUAL SUPPORT

Although *Fefu and Her Friends* is highly experimental and abstract, one thing is quite clear: it is, in its most simplistic form, a play that examines the ins and outs of friendship. The play's title itself demonstrates this, in addition to the fact that the play centers around a gathering of eight old friends. All of the women who have come to Fefu's house have different relationships with each other. Christina and Fefu, for example, don't know each other very well and thus are in the beginning stages of their relationship. But Paula and Cecilia, on the other hand, are intimately acquainted because they used to be lovers. Regardless of how well the women know each other, though, there's a prevailing belief amongst them that community and mutual support are vitally important, since this is the best way for them to avoid the loneliness and alienation that unfortunately comes along with the period's sexist expectation that women should lead mostly isolated domestic lives. "We cannot survive in a vacuum," Cecilia says at one point. "We must be part of a community, [...]." In keeping with this idea, Julia—who has frequent "hallucinations"—says that she has actually *asked* to be hospitalized in the past, since she'd like to be surrounded by people who are going through the same thing as her. Unfortunately for her, though, doctors aren't sure how to diagnose her, so they don't want to send her to a psychiatric facility. As a result, she often feels "isolated" from other people, since nobody around her understands what she's experiencing. Although she is surrounded by friends at Fefu's house, then, she doesn't necessarily feel the same sense of "community" that the other women experience. And though the circumstances surrounding Julia's death at the end of the play are quite strange and hard to fully understand, the fact that she dies perhaps reinforces the idea that human beings "cannot survive in a vacuum." Everyone needs some sort of support network, the play implies, especially people who are facing hardship and struggling with mental health issues.

SUFFERING, REPRESSION, AND VIOLENCE

On its surface, *Fefu and Her Friends* explores a day in the life of eight friends who have gathered to plan a fundraiser, but the play goes deeper by hinting at the ways in which these women privately suffer in their personal lives. At the beginning of the play, Fefu insists that her husband, Phillip, married her "to have a constant reminder of how loathsome women are." By saying this, she foregrounds the play with an acknowledgment of the animosity women face not just in society at large, but in their daily lives. Her husband, it seems, is an embodiment of the rampant and hateful sexism of 1930s American society. Of course, this doesn't change the fact that the play is, in many ways, a celebration of female independence, but Fefu's fraught relationship with her husband still hovers in the background, creating a sense of sustained turmoil. In fact, this turmoil expresses itself in rather violent ways. For instance, the main way Fefu connects with her husband is by pretending to shoot him every time he approaches the house. The couple's strange joke startles Fefu's friends, since Fefu legitimately shoots at Phillip with a rifle—meaning that, though the rifle is

loaded with blanks, the violent gesture itself is very real. Despite Fefu's insistence that she depends on her husband's companionship, then, it becomes clear that there's something sinister and violent in their bond.

What's more, Fefu admits that she's in "constant pain," though not in any sort of physical way. The suffering she experiences is abstract, and the play never fully clarifies the nature of her pain. Similarly, Julia's "hallucinations" give the audience a glimpse into a whole world of suffering, though the actual circumstances of this suffering are never explained—except that Julia thinks there are malicious "judges" forcing her to internalize the idea that the world is made for men. She even says during one hallucination that women eventually go to hell, where "through suffering" they purify themselves and "return to earth as man." Needless to say, such ideas are highly abstract and not intended to make perfect sense, but they *do* illustrate how the sexist, male-oriented world can cause terrible private suffering for women. And this suffering, in turn, can lead to forms of violence that are difficult to fully comprehend, as evidenced by the play's bizarre ending, in which Fefu shoots a rabbit and ends up killing Julia without even hitting her with the bullet—a possible representation of the unexpected and potentially catastrophic ways in which internalized sexism and repressed suffering can manifest themselves.

SYMBOLS

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

THE GUN

The gun that Fefu keeps in her house symbolizes the repressed resentment and animosity that she feels toward Phillip and—on a broader level—toward the sexist society in which she lives. At the beginning of the play, she shoots the gun at Phillip as he approaches the house, lightheartedly explaining to her friends that this is a "game" they play: whenever she sees him coming, she fires a blank at him and he pretends to die. Although she calls this a game, she later confirms the symbolic nature of this strange ritual, admitting that she might feel the need to legitimately shoot Phillip if she didn't pretend to shoot him—a sign that the ritual truly is a way of acting out the violent tension that plagues their relationship. And yet, the play also subtly implies that this kind of indirect violence can still have dire consequences. Failing to confront certain issues (like, say, a husband's sexist condescension toward his wife) can end up hurting *other* people, the play suggests, since Fefu later unintentionally kills Julia with the same gun with which she normally pretends to shoot Phillip. In fact, she doesn't even point the gun at Julia, but Julia still dies. The strange, indirect nature of this accident suggests that bottled-up resentment often manifests itself in unpredictable and destructive ways, as the gun itself comes to represent not just Fefu's anger at her husband but also the ways in which this anger poisons the rest of her life.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the PAJ Publications edition of *Fefu and Her Friends* published in 2017.

Part 1 Quotes

FEFU: My husband married me to have a constant reminder of how loathsome women are.

CINDY: What?

FEFU: Yup.

CINDY: That's just awful.

[...]

FEFU: Don't be offended. I don't take enough care to be tactful. I know I don't. But don't be offended. Cindy is not offended. She pretends to be, but she isn't really. She understands what I mean.

CINDY: I do not.

FEFU: Yes, you do.—I like exciting ideas. They give me energy.

CHRISTINA: And how is women being loathsome an exciting idea?

FEFU: (*With mischief.*) It revolts me.

Related Characters: Fefu, Christina, Cindy (speaker), Phillip

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7-9

Explanation and Analysis

As Fefu, Cindy, and Christina wait for the other women to arrive at Fefu's house, they talk about marriage. Fefu provocatively suggests that the only reason her husband, Phillip, married her is because he wants "to have a constant reminder of how loathsome women are." Given that Fefu goes on to tell her friends not to be offended and that she likes "exciting ideas," it seems as if she's actively trying to be provocative—that is, she's going out of her way to say something shocking. This is made especially clear by the stage direction in this line: "FEFU: (*With mischief.*) It revolts me." The fact that Fefu says this "with mischief" indicates that she wants to get a rise out of her friends. On a broader

level, though, her interest in ideas that "revolt[]" her suggests that she genuinely wants to explore challenging, unsettling topics—like, for instance, the notion that sexism sits at the heart of her very own marriage.

If it's truly the case that Phillip married Fefu to remind himself how "loathsome" women are, then their entire relationship is founded on sexism, animosity, and resentment. And yet, Fefu will later reveal that she can't tear herself away from Phillip, despite how toxic their relationship has become. It makes sense, then, that Fefu likes thinking about challenging, "revolt[ing]" ideas, since her own love life has shown her that some things in life are messy and confusing: her relationship is flawed and problematic, but she still has strong feelings for her husband. It is perhaps because of this tense dynamic that she has become accustomed to thinking about troubling—and even "revolt[ing]"—ideas in the first place.

FEFU: There you have it! You too are fascinated with revulsion.

CHRISTINA: Hmm.

FEFU: You see, that which is exposed to the exterior . . . is smooth and dry and clean. That which is not . . . underneath, is slimy and filled with fungus and crawling with worms. It is another life that is parallel to the one we manifest. It's there. The way worms are underneath the stone. If you don't recognize it . . . (*Whispering.*) it eats you. That is my opinion.

Related Characters: Fefu, Christina (speaker), Cindy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

After Fefu makes the provocative statement that her husband married her just to have a "reminder of how loathsome women are," she defends her interest in "revolt[ing]" ideas. To make her point, she asks Christina and Cindy if they've ever picked up a rock and stared at its slimy, wormy underside. When they admit that they have, she argues that this is evidence that they, too, are "fascinated with revulsion." For Fefu, simply ignoring troubling things won't make them go away—if she didn't pick up a rock and look at its disgusting bottom, worms and rot would still teem beneath it. "It's there," Fefu says, going on to suggest that refusing to pay attention to "revolt[ing]" things can be detrimental to a person's wellbeing. When she says that failing to "recognize" such things can "eat[] you," the play hints at the internal suffering that Fefu seems to experience—a suffering that, though largely undefined, will become increasingly pronounced over the course of the play. With this willingness to examine her own suffering, it's no wonder that she makes provocative statements like that her husband finds women "loathsome," as this seems to be her way of refusing to ignore—and thus refusing to acquiesce to—the problems in her life.

FEFU: That's all right. I scare myself too, sometimes. But there's nothing wrong with being scared . . . it makes you stronger.—It does me.—He won't put real bullets in the guns.—It suits our relationship . . . the game, I mean. If I didn't shoot him with blanks, I might shoot him for real. Do you see the sense of it?

Related Characters: Fefu (speaker), Christina, Cindy, Phillip

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

When Fefu shoots the shotgun at Phillip, Christina and Cindy are—unsurprisingly—very alarmed. But she puts them at ease (to a certain extent) by explaining that the gun is loaded with blanks. A few moments later, though, she mentions that Phillip has recently been threatening to load the gun with *real* bullets. Given that she just shot at him, this is a rather startling and revealing statement, as it suggests that she's willing to take the risk of killing her own husband. However, Fefu isn't all that bothered by this risk, partly because she thinks being scared "makes you stronger," but also because she doesn't think Phillip will ever truly load the gun with real bullets. Her confidence in this regard provides some insight into the nature of their relationship: they seem to actively seek out a sense of danger because it helps stabilize their otherwise tumultuous bond. Fefu even explicitly states this herself, saying that she "might shoot him for real" if she didn't pretend to shoot him. The implication here is that pretending to shoot Phillip is a way to release some tension from their relationship without doing anything too drastic. And yet, the entire situation makes it quite clear that a violent animosity lurks at the heart of their marriage, perhaps because Fefu resents

Phillip for his sexist and condescending worldview.

FEFU: [...] I still like men better than women.—I envy them. I like being like a man. Thinking like a man. Feeling like a man.—They are well together. Women are not. Look at them. They are checking the new grass mower. . . . Out in the fresh air and the sun, while we sit here in the dark. . . . Men have natural strength. Women have to find their strength, and when they do find it, it comes forth with bitterness and it's erratic. . . . Women are restless with each other. They are like live wires . . . either chattering to keep themselves from making contact, or else, if they don't chatter, they avert their eyes . . . [...]—Have I offended you again?

CHRISTINA: No. I too have wished for that trust men have for each other. The faith the world puts in them and they in turn put in the world. I know I don't have it.

Related Characters: Fefu, Christina (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

In this conversation, Fefu thinks she's saying something provocative again, but she discovers that Christina actually agrees with her. Both women think that men naturally place a certain "trust" in each other—a "trust" that women find is generally harder to come by. The implication here is that this "trust" (or confidence, ease, and respect) comes from the fact that the broader world is essentially structured for men. Christina touches on this when she mentions the "faith" that the world puts in men, implying that society automatically empowers men to move through the world however they want. For women living in a patriarchal society, though, it's much harder to find this inherent sense of belonging and empowerment, and both Fefu and Christina indicate that this struggle to simply get by can unfortunately turn women against each other, making them "restless with each other." For this reason, both Fefu and Christina recognize how much easier men have it in the world.

CINDY: He shot. Julia and the deer fell. The deer was dead . . . dying. Julia was unconscious. She had convulsions . . . like the deer. He died and she didn't. I screamed for help and the hunter came and examined Julia. He said, "She is not hurt." Julia's forehead was bleeding. He said, "It is a surface wound. I didn't hurt her." I know it wasn't he who hurt her. It was someone else. He went for help and Julia started talking. She was delirious.—Apparently there was a spinal nerve injury. She hit her head and she suffered a concussion. She blanks out and that is caused by the blow on the head. It's a scar in the brain. It's called the petit mal.

Related Characters: Cindy (speaker), Fefu, Julia, Christina, Phillip

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17-18

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Cindy tells Christina about the accident that led to Julia's injury. She explains that she, Julia, and a man were hunting together one day. When the man shot a deer, Julia fell down as if she had been shot, too, but—as the man was quick to point out—she hadn't actually been hit by the bullet. Still, she seems to have hit her head when she fell, and this caused a serious injury in her brain—an injury that causes her to have "petit mal" seizures (otherwise known as "absence" seizures), which cause people to unexpectedly blank out for short periods of time.

Cindy's explanation of what happened on the hunting trip is important because it sets the stage for Julia's later "hallucinations," but also because it firmly establishes the abstract nature of the play. After all, what happened to Julia doesn't make much sense—it's not straightforward or logical, since it's unclear what, exactly, caused her injury. One possible interpretation is that the mere suggestion of violence toward another living thing was enough to harm Julia, though the fact that Julia was already on a hunting trip, suggesting that she had no reservations about killing animals, complicates this interpretation. Still, the play suggests a clear connection between violence and a strange, undefined kind of internal suffering—a connection first hinted at by Fefu's tense dynamic with her husband and their "game" involving the shotgun.

(*[…] Julia goes to the gun, takes it and smells the mouth of the barrel. She looks at Cindy.*)

CINDY: It's a blank.

(*Julia takes the remaining slug out of the gun. She lets it fall on the floor.*)

JULIA: She's hurting herself. (*Julia looks blank and is motionless. Cindy picks up the slug. She notices Julia's condition.*)

CINDY: Julia. (*To Christina.*) She's absent.

CHRISTINA: What do we do?

CINDY: Nothing, she'll be all right in a moment. (*She takes the gun from Julia. Julia comes to.*)

JULIA: It's a blank . . .

CINDY: It is.

JULIA: She's hurting herself. (*Julia lets out a strange whimper. She goes to the coffee table, takes a piece of chocolate, puts it in her mouth and goes toward her room. After she crosses the threshold, she stops.*) I must lie down.

Related Characters: Julia, Christina, Cindy (speaker), Fefu, Phillip

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17-18

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after Julia arrives at Fefu's house, she sees the shotgun and goes into an absence seizure. When Cindy explains that the gun is loaded with a "blank," the audience might pick up on a double meaning, since the word (in combination with the sight of the gun) seems to trigger Julia's absence seizure, which ultimately causes her to "*look[] blank and […] motionless*." Of course, this moment is quite abstract and can't be interpreted in a straightforward, simplistic way. However, it's clear that there's a direct link between Julia's seizure and the shotgun—a link that makes sense, considering that her injury happened on a hunting trip.

More importantly, though, when Julia says, "She's hurting herself," it's possible that she's trying to articulate something about Fefu and her relationship with Phillip. This interpretation would suggest that Julia thinks Fefu is "hurting herself" by going through the motions of the strange, faux-violent ritual with her husband—that is, the ritual of pretending to shoot and kill him every time he approaches the house. Although this might seem to Fefu like something that empowers her, it's possible that the odd game is nothing more than a way for Fefu to cope with—and even ignore—her own suffering, which is the result of her fraught relationship with Phillip and his sexist worldview. Even though Fefu claims to like ideas that are "revolt[ing]" and challenging, then, this game with the gun is actually a way to avoid actually dealing with the toxic nature of her marriage—instead of actually addressing Phillip's sexism and condescension, she satisfies herself by pretending to shoot him, which gives her an illusion of power and control. In reality, though, as Julia implies, Fefu is really "hurting herself" by failing to confront her marital issues directly.

Part 2: On the Lawn Quotes

FEFU: […] I am in constant pain. I don't want to give in to it. If I do I am afraid I will never recover. . . . It's not physical, and it's not sorrow. It's very strange Emma, I can't describe it, and it's very frightening. . . . It is as if normally there is a lubricant . . . not in the body . . . a spiritual lubricant . . . it's hard to describe . . . and without it, life is a nightmare, and everything is distorted.

Related Characters: Fefu (speaker), Emma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

While Fefu and Emma take vegetables from the cellar and load them onto a wagon, Fefu confides in her friend about just how hard—and miserable—life often feels to her. What she describes isn't necessarily the sort of pain or misery that one may easily identify and address. Rather, Fefu suffers on a more abstract, existential level, as she makes clear when she says, "It's not physical, and it's not sorrow." This is an important distinction, as it rules out two of the most common and obvious kinds of pain or suffering. What's left, then, is a nearly indescribable kind of dread that, perhaps because of its ambiguity, can feel "very frightening." After all, difficult emotions or feelings are easier to deal with when they fit into a certain category of understanding. When such feelings are amorphous and abstract, though, they can be extremely difficult to process. At a loss for how to describe what she's experiencing, Fefu uses a metaphor to suggest that she lacks a certain kind of "spiritual lubricant" that normally helps people get through life. In other words, she feels like the mere act of existing is dreadfully challenging and torturous, and by articulating this, she ultimately spotlights the plays interest in exploring the complex modes of suffering that even the most gregarious, affable people (like Fefu herself) undergo on a

daily basis.

Part 2: In the Study Quotes

CHRISTINA: […] I think she is an adventurer in a way. Her mind is adventurous. I don't know if there is dishonesty in that. But in adventure there is taking chances and risks, and then one has to, somehow, have less regard or respect for things as they are. That is, regard for a kind of convention, I suppose. I am probably ultimately a conformist, I think. And I suppose I do hold back for fear for being disrespectful or destroying something—and I admire those who are not. But I also feel they are dangerous to me. I don't think they are dangerous to the world; they are more useful than I am, more important, but I feel some of my life is endangered by their way of thinking.

Related Characters: Christina (speaker), Fefu, Cindy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Because Christina doesn't know Fefu as well as the other women do, she tries to articulate—in Fefu's absence—how she feels about her. The other women have told her not to pay too much attention to Fefu's provocative nature, but Christina evidently can't help but analyze what it is about Fefu's way of moving through the world that rankles her. She doesn't necessarily frown upon Fefu's "adventur[ous]" attitude, but she does admit that there's a certain element of Fefu's adventurousness that makes her uncomfortable, since having an adventurous mindset often means railing against "convention." And because Christina herself is something of a "conformist," she feels inherently threatened by Fefu's worldview. Rather than seeing Fefu as an empowering figure, then, Christina sees her as something of a loose cannon, or somebody who might "endanger[]" certain aspects of everyday life to which Christina herself still clings.

And yet, none of this keeps Christina from acknowledging that people like Fefu—who challenge the status quo—are "useful" and important when it comes to moving society forward. By examining how she feels about Fefu, Christina effectively illustrates that even people who want to change society for the better (like Christina) often fear the actual process of doing so, since going against "convention" can be a daunting, arduous, and even painful process.

Part 2: In the Bedroom Quotes

JULIA: […] Why do you have to kill Fefu, for she's only a joker? (*With a gravelly voice.*) "Not kill, cure. Cure her." Will it hurt?

(*She whimpers.*)

Oh, dear, dear, my dear, they want your light. Your light my dear. Your precious light. Oh dear, my dear.

Related Characters: Julia (speaker), Fefu

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

In this odd, disjointed, and very abstract scene, Julia has a "hallucination" in which she converses with mysterious "judges." The play never clarifies who, exactly, these "judges" are, but it's quite obvious that they're malicious. Elsewhere in the play, Julia claims that they've threatened to kill her if she ever talks to anyone about them. In this moment, she fills in their side of the conversation, responding to herself in a "gravelly voice" after asking them why they have to kill Fefu. In and of itself, this question suggests that Fefu is in danger of encountering the same hardships that have befallen Julia, though it is unclear why this would be the case. Nonetheless, Julia is convinced that the judges intend to go after Fefu, so she tries to protect her friend by saying that "she's only a joker." The fact that she says this implies that the "judges" see Fefu as a problematic figure, perhaps because—as Christina has already pointed out—she is a nonconformist who challenges the status quo. By saying that Fefu is just a "joker," then, Julia tries to present Fefu as somebody who doesn't pose a threat to the patriarchal society in which she lives. The "judges," however, insist that they're going to "cure her," thus implying—very problematically, of course—that women who embody independence and challenge the status quo need to be somehow altered to better fit in with the rest of society.

The human being is of the masculine gender. The human being is a boy as a child and a grown up he is a man. Everything on earth is for the human being, which is man. To nourish him. […] Woman is not a human being. She is: 1—A mystery. 2—Another species. 3—As yet undefined. 4—Unpredictable; therefore wicked and gentle and evil and good which is evil.

Related Characters: Julia (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

When Julia is deep in a "hallucination," a group of unidentified but clearly malicious "judges" forces her to recite an odd monologue about how the world is set up for men, not women. The play implies that the "judges" genuinely believe in and endorse the things Julia says here, but the content of her rant ultimately calls attention to just how absurd it is that society prioritizes men over women. When Julia says, "Woman is not a human being," the play seems to outwardly mock the narrowminded worldview that patriarchal societies advance—a worldview in which men are so superior to women that women are hardly even treated as human. Julia's strange speech also spotlights the ridiculous and uncomfortable patriarchal idea that women are only useful insofar as they "nourish" men or provide them with pleasure. Her monologue essentially pushes common sexist viewpoints to an extreme, forcing audience members to recognize how untenable it is for people to take it for granted that men should for some reason have privileges that society denies to women.

PAULA: I felt small in your presence . . . I haven't done all that I could have. All I wanted to do. Our lives have gone in such different directions I cannot help but review what those years have been for me. I gave up, almost gave up. I have missed you in my life. . . . I became lazy. I lost the drive. You abandoned me and I kept going. But after a while I didn't know how to. I didn't know how to go on. I knew why when I was with you. To give you pleasure. So we could laugh together. So we could rejoice together. To bring beauty to the world. . . . Now we look at each other like strangers. We are guarded. I speak and you don't understand my words. I remember every day.

Related Characters: Paula (speaker), Cecilia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39-40

Explanation and Analysis

When they get a moment alone, Paula tells Cecilia how much she has missed her since the dissolution of their romantic relationship. She speaks very honestly and openly about her feelings, making it clear that she's still processing their breakup. What's interesting about her monologue here is that she doesn't just talk about what it has been like to lose Cecilia as a lover—she also talks about the breakup in a more nuanced way, ultimately highlighting the fact that sometimes breakups can make people feel as if they've lost *themselves*. Paula misses Cecilia, but she also misses the person she used to be when she was in a relationship with Cecilia—a person who, by her own account, had more "drive" and tried to "bring beauty to the world." By saying these things, Paula touches on the idea that relationships have the power to shape people, effectively changing the way they move through the world. Relationships, this idea implies, enable lovers to actively construct both the nature of their bond and who they want to be within that bond. And though this is a beautiful, liberating idea, it also means that the end of a romantic relationship can unfortunately cause people to feel lost and out of touch with themselves, since they're no longer entrenched in the social context in which they constructed their own sense of self.

Part 3 Quotes

JULIA: [...] My hallucinations are madness, of course, but I wish I could be with others who hallucinate also. I would still know I am mad but I would not feel so isolated.—Hallucinations are real, you know. They are not like dreams. They are as real as all of you here. I have actually asked to be hospitalized so I could be with other nuts. But the doctors don't want to. They can't diagnose me. That makes me even more isolated. (*There is a moment's silence.*) You see, right now, it's an awful moment because you don't know what to say or do. If I were with others who hallucinate, they would say, "Oh yeah. Sure. It's awful. Those dummies, they don't see anything." (*The others begin to relax.*) It's not so bad, really. I can laugh at it. . . .

Related Characters: Julia (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

In a conversation with the rest of the women, Julia speaks openly about her "hallucinations." Although she recognizes that these "hallucinations" are a symptom of her brain injury, she points out that they still feel extraordinarily real. Her point emphasizes the fact that, though hallucinations aren't accurate depictions of an objective reality, the *experience* of hallucinating is a form of reality—after all, a person's subjective experience is always real to that person. The

problem, though, is that Julia's hallucinations make her feel "isolated" from the people around her, since none of them knows what it's like to undergo such an experience. For this reason, she wishes she could be in the company of other people who hallucinate. In other words, she wants to be part of a community—one in which she's not the only person who knows what it's like to deal with the rather intense experience of having frequent (and seemingly terrifying) hallucinations. By outlining this desire, then, she expresses a yearning for a kind of camaraderie and support that her friends unfortunately can't give her. In turn, it's all the more tragic when she senses her friends' discomfort and ends up dismissing her own need for support by turning the matter into a joke.

EMMA: After a few visits the psychiatrist said: Don't you think you know me well enough now that you can tell me the truth about the paper? He almost drove her crazy. They just couldn't believe she was so smart.

Related Characters: Emma (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Emma remembers a woman that she and her friends went to college with. This woman wrote a very intelligent essay, but her professor didn't believe she was the one who'd written it, making the sexist assumption that she couldn't possibly have such good ideas. When she refused to say that she had plagiarized, the school administration stepped in and ultimately sent her to the resident psychiatrist, who was yet *another* man who didn't believe she'd written the essay. After seeing the woman for quite a few sessions, he tried to get her to admit that she had plagiarized the essay. The entire experience, Emma says, "almost drove [the woman] crazy"—a depressing irony, considering that the point of going to psychiatry is generally to work through problems and *avoid* going "crazy." But the irony at play here unfortunately illustrates the double bind many women find themselves in when living in a sexist society. No matter what this woman did, she couldn't win: either she sold herself short by undermining her own intelligence and confessing to something she didn't do, or she risked going "crazy" trying to stand up for herself.

JULIA: He loves you.

FEFU: He can't stand me.

JULIA: He loves you.

FEFU: He's left me. His body is here but the rest is gone. I exhaust him. I torment him and I torment myself. I need him, Julia.

JULIA: I know you do.

FEFU: I need his touch. I need his kiss. I need the person he is. I can't give him up. […]

Related Characters: Fefu, Julia (speaker), Phillip

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

In a conversation about Fefu's relationship with Phillip, Julia tries to console her friend by insisting that Phillip loves her. Fefu, however, is less optimistic. She recognizes that basically everything about her relationship with Phillip has deteriorated, even saying that he's no longer present when he's around her—he's physically present, but he doesn't seem to care enough about her or their relationship to engage with her on an emotional level. And yet, Fefu can't find her way out of the relationship. "I torment him and I torment myself," she says, but then she unexpectedly says: "I need him, Julia." It's almost as if the tension at the heart of their relationship has become a stand-in for genuine affection. Put another way, the animosity between Fefu and Phillip is the only thing keeping their relationship alive, even if it also fills Fefu's life with pain, anger, and resentment. When Fefu tells Julia that she "need[s]" Phillip, the play intimates that sometimes human emotion goes against all logic. Fefu knows that her bond with Phillip is toxic, but she can't tear herself way from the relationship, ultimately betraying a yearning for companionship—a yearning that can be so strong that it overrides even the most dismal relational circumstances.

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.

PART 1

The play opens in Fefu's nicely furnished New England home, where Fefu suggests to her friends Cindy and Christina that her husband surely married her as a reminder of how "loathsome women are." Cindy is scandalized by this statement, insisting that nobody would ever marry for such a reason, but Fefu says that her husband frequently tells her that this is what he did. Cindy thinks this is awful, but Fefu says that she just laughs off the comment whenever her husband brings it up—after all, she says, she he has a point: women *are* "loathsome." Cindy is shocked. Fefu says that she takes back everything she has said, though she encourages her friend to think about the idea a little bit.

From the very beginning of the play, it's clear that Fefu likes to rankle her friends by making provocative statements. She wants, it seems, to get a rise out of Cindy and Christina when she says that her husband married her to remind himself how "loathsome women are." At the same time, though, it's worth noting that this idea—regardless of whether or not it's intentionally provocative—highlights the fraught gender dynamics at play in Fefu's life. Even if it's not true that her husband married her as a reminder of how "loathsome women are," there must be some kind of animosity and sexism in their relationship, otherwise it's unlikely that she would think to say such a startling thing about her marriage.

Cindy asks Christina what she thinks of what Fefu has just said. Christina agrees with Cindy—she can't believe what she's hearing. But Fefu tells Christina not to be offended. She also insists that Cindy isn't truly offended, even if she's pretending to be. Cindy knows what she means, Fefu explains. As for Fefu herself, she appreciates "exciting ideas," which give her "energy." And the idea that women are "loathsome" is exciting because it's repulsive. She likes that such an idea gives her "something to grapple with."

Fefu now confirms that she likes to say challenging things. However, it becomes clear that she doesn't do this solely out of a desire to shock her friends—rather, she wants to challenge herself, *as evidenced by her assertion that she likes ideas that give her "something to grapple with." She is, then, somebody who doesn't shy away from difficult ideas or conversations, which is perhaps why she's willing to think so cynically about the gender dynamics at play in her marriage.*

Christina and Cindy tell Fefu that they generally try to avoid things that they find "revolting." But Fefu asks if they've ever picked up a rock, turned it over, and stared at the worms and fungus teeming along its underside. They say that they have. Fefu asks if they found the experience "revolting"—they did. But they also admit—at Fefu's urging—that they were also "fascinated" by the disgusting rock. Fefu goes on to say that this is a good representation of life: people might seem clean on the outside (like the top of a rock), but there's also an unsightly griminess hidden beneath their presentable exterior.

Although Fefu has already established that she likes to "grapple" with challenging or provocative ideas, what she says here seems like more than a mere thought experiment—her comments about the ugliness hiding in most people suggests that she has a cynical, almost fearful view of humanity and life in general. Once again, then, it seems as if there's something troublesome going on in Fefu's life, though it's unclear what, exactly, has driven her to speak so pessimistically.

Fefu breaks off her conversation with Christina and Cindy, announcing that it's time for lunch. But then she sees through the open French doors that her husband, Phillip, is approaching the house with some other men. Fefu asks Christina if she has ever met Phillip. Christina says she hasn't and asks which one he is. Picking up a **shotgun** that has been leaning by the French doors, Fefu shoots it at Phillip and says, "That one!" Christina and Cindy are astounded, but Fefu casually tells them not to worry, pointing out that Phillip—who fell over when she fired the shot—is already getting up. She explains that this is a game they play: whenever he approaches the house, she shoots a blank at him and he pretends to have been shot.

Christina and Cindy are understandably taken aback when Fefu shoots a gun at her husband. Even though she eventually explains that the gun is loaded with blanks, the gesture in and of itself is still shockingly violent, effectively imbuing Fefu and Phillip's relationship with a sense of hostility and violence. Given that Fefu has already suggested—albeit offhandedly—that there's a feeling of sexist resentment at the core of their marriage, the fact that she pretends to shoot Phillip seems incredibly fraught with animosity, as if this is the only way they're able to express the turmoil that clearly plagues their bond.

Fefu heads upstairs, leaving Cindy and Christina alone in the living room. They both feel like they need a drink, so Cindy prepares one for Christina, giving her an ice cube with just a few drops of bourbon on it (as per Christina's strange request). They the talk about Fefu. This is the first time Christina has met Fefu, and she's not so sure about her. Cindy tries to tell her that she's "lovely," even if she's a bit odd. She explains that Fefu and Phillip have a very strange marriage, as they both make each other crazy. Christina wants to know why they don't just leave each other, but Cindy says it's because they're in love. She also explains that Fefu's **gun** is loaded with a blank.

Cindy is familiar with Fefu's strange relationship with Phillip, but that doesn't mean she understands it. Nonetheless, by pointing out that they don't leave each other because they're in love, she offers a very simple but genuine explanation for why Fefu and Phillip stay together—sometimes, the play suggests in this moment, love mysteriously survives despite toxic surrounding circumstances. Even so, though, the play doesn't necessarily imply that this is always a good thing.

Fefu appears at the top of the stairs and announces that she has just fixed the toilet in Cindy's room. Christina is surprised to hear that Fefu does her own plumbing, but Fefu doesn't think much of it, instead going on to talk about how Phillip scared her by falling down so realistically when she shot him. Cindy and Christina are a little perturbed—doesn't Fefu only shoot blanks at him? "I'm never sure," Fefu says. She then explains that Phillip once said that he might secretly put real bullets in the **gun**, but she thinks he only said this to make her nervous. When Christina says that Fefu frightens her, Fefu says that she frightens herself, too. But she also says that the game she plays with Phillip is good for their relationship—if she didn't pretend to shoot him, she might do it for real.

When Fefu says that this twisted game she and Phillip play is actually good for their relationship, she confirms the idea that a certain violent animosity lurks at the core of their bond. The only way to neutralize this animosity, it seems, is to pretend to indulge it. By play-acting this violent aggression, she and Phillip are able to keep their fraught dynamic at bay. And yet, the mere fact that Fefu doesn't know whether or not the gun is really loaded with blanks suggests that their play-acting isn't as safe as it seems. And this, in turn, implies that the resentment at the center of their relationship is unavoidably toxic and dangerous.

Christina wants another drink. When Fefu learns that she likes an ice cube with just a drop of bourbon on it, she decides to make little ice-cube popsicles by putting little sticks in the cubes for later. Christina thinks this is weird, but Fefu doesn't mind being strange, saying that everyone who loves her loves her for exactly who she is. Christina, however, finds Fefu frustrating, and she insists that Fefu surely infuriates everyone around her.

The more time Christina spends with Fefu, the less she seems to like her. In this way, she serves as a foil for Fefu, ultimately highlighting just how abrasive and challenging someone like Fefu can be—after all, Fefu did *say that she likes challenging ideas, indicating that she's the type of person who might push others out of their comfort zones. As a character, then, Christina plays off of Fefu's abrasiveness, creating a contrast that helps the audience grasp that Fefu is a somewhat divisive person.*

Fefu delivers a monologue about how she likes men better than women and even feels jealous of men. She enjoys thinking and acting like a man, especially because she thinks men get along better with each other than women do. She likes that men have "natural strength" and resents the fact that women have to "find their strength," since she thinks this means that whatever power they end up cultivating is full of "bitterness." And this, she thinks, makes women uncomfortable and "restless" with each other. To her surprise, Christina actually agrees—she has also envied men for these reasons, particularly because the world puts so much trust in men, which ultimately makes it easier for them to have faith in the world itself.

At first glance, Fefu's point seems—to contemporary audiences, at least—somewhat regressive, since she voices an affinity for men over women. However, what she expresses isn't necessarily an anti-feminist statement; rather, she seems to take issue with how hard society has made it for women to "find their strength." Christina helps refine Fefu's point by saying that the world gives men the benefit of the doubt by assuming that they have "natural strength." This, in turn, allows men to move through the world as if it's made for them, without questioning anything about their independence, authority, or competence. But society doesn't automatically assume that women are independent and strong, which means that women are forced to establish this strength on their own—and doing this, of course, is quite difficult and taxing.

Fefu goes upstairs to check on the plumbing again. Christina is emotionally fatigued from their conversation, but she turns her attention to the fact that one of their other friends, Julia, has just arrived. Julia is in a wheelchair, and both Christina and Cindy pay close attention to how she's doing—but she seems perfectly chipper. When she goes to get set up in her room, though, Cindy and Christina talk about how Julia isn't "better" yet. Cindy explains that she was with her when the accident happened: they were out hunting, and a hunter aimed at and shot a deer, but Julia fell down at the same exact time as the deer. She was having convulsions, seizing just like the deer was. But then the deer died, and Julia did not.

The story of Julia's injury is highly abstract and open to interpretation. In other words, there's a sense of mystery surrounding what, exactly, injured her. Although she didn't actually get shot, she reacted as if she did. Something about the mere suggestion of violence, then, seems to have impacted her in a terrible way, though this is strange because she was on a hunting trip, suggesting that she previously had no problem with the idea of shooting and killing living beings. Nonetheless, the play doesn't necessarily intend for audience members to fully grasp the meaning behind Julia's injury—the implications are left intentionally vague, encouraging the audience to reach for interpretation in the same way that Fefu likes to "grapple" with difficult ideas.

Cindy explains that Julia's forehead was bleeding, but the hunter quickly pointed out that this was because she hit her head when she fell down—not because he shot her. While he went for help, Julia started speaking in a strange, disturbed way. Cindy says that Julia sustained some sort of "spinal nerve injury," explaining that she has a "scar in the brain" from hitting her head after passing out, and she sometimes has absence seizures in which she suddenly spaces out.

Absence seizures (also known as petit mal *seizures) cause a passing lapse in attention. From Cindy's description, Julia seems to have sustained brain damage when she fell, suggesting that her injury (and subsequent brain condition) was the result not of getting shot, but of falling down. Still, though, her fall is inexplicably connected to the hunter's gunfire—he didn't shoot her, but he might as well have. And although it's never explicitly stated, this link between Julia's lasting, life-altering injury and the gun shot hints at a kind of violent suffering that continues to plague Julia.*

When Julia was "delirious," she talked about how she is being "persecuted" and "tortured." She said that judges condemned her to death—via the bullet from the hunter's gun—but allowed her to live as long as she never talked about it. If she *did* talk about it, she would be tortured and murdered. Cindy explains all of this to Christina, adding that she has never repeated these things to anyone before. She's afraid for Julia.

What Julia says about antagonistic judges threatening to torture and murder her is difficult to fully comprehend—the play doesn't give the audience concrete details about Julia's experiences. What is clear, though, is that Julia is suffering and, moreover, that this suffering is somehow tied to strange authoritative figures, which is perhaps an abstract representation of the kind of all-encompassing, sexist hostility and subjugation that Julia and her female friends face in society at large.

Fefu overhears everything Cindy has just said about Julia. She comes in and asks who, exactly, hurt Julia, but Cindy says she doesn't know. Fefu then tells Christina—who has only met Julia once before—to remember Julia as she used to be, saying that Julia was once very knowledgeable and confident. She knew everything and was afraid of nothing.

Even Julia's friends are confused about what happened to her. It's noteworthy that Fefu wants to know who *hurt Julia, and that Cindy says she doesn't know, since this line of questioning implies that the incident was more than just a freak accident—although it's unclear what happened, the women seem to agree that there's some antagonistic force working against Julia. Even if none of them understand Julia's dissociative rants about mysterious judges who torture her, then, they at least appear willing to believe that someone (or something) is persecuting her.*

More friends begin to arrive at Fefu's house. Emma, Sue, and Paula all come inside and greet everyone else, and Paula tells Fefu how much she liked the lecture Fefu gave at "Flossie Crit," prompting Julia to complain that Fefu didn't tell her about it—she would have gone if she'd known. But Fefu downplays the event, insisting that it wasn't very good. Then, before all of the women have lunch, Sue suggests that they should run through what everyone will be covering in the presentation they're going to give later on, just so nobody ends up talking about the same thing.

At this point in the play, it's still unclear why this group of women has gathered at Fefu's house. The comments the women make in this moment, however, provide some insight into the context surrounding their meeting. First of all, "Flossie Crit" is slang for feminist studies (or, more accurately, feminist criticism), so it's reasonable to conclude that Fefu (and her friends) are engaged in feminist thought. Moreover, the fact that Fefu gave a speech suggests that she is active in the field of feminist criticism. Lastly, when Sue says that they should all run over what they're going to say in a presentation, it becomes clear that the women have assembled to organize some sort of public function—perhaps one that has to do with feminism or some other social cause.

Everyone goes upstairs except Julia, Cindy, and Christina. Julia sees the **gun** and picks it up. Cindy explains that it's loaded with a blank, but Julia just stares at the gun and then unloads it, letting the blank drop to the floor. She then starts to space out, staring off as Cindy and Christina wonder what to do. "It's a blank…," she eventually says, before adding, "She's hurting herself." Still lost in her own mind, Julia lets out a pained whimper before coming to and announcing that she has to go lie down. As she leaves, Cecilia—the final houseguest—arrives at the front door.

It's unclear what, exactly, is going on in Julia's mind. There is, though, a clear double-meaning at play when she says, "It's a blank," since she's both referring to the blank loaded in the gun and, perhaps, to her own state of mind—after all, she has just "blank[ed]" out by going into an absence seizure. More broadly, though, her morbid fascination with and fear of the gun suggests that she has significant trauma surrounding her hunting accident. When she says, "She's hurting herself," it's unclear what she means, but the mysterious statement hints at the idea of internal, private suffering and agony—even if the nature of this suffering remains obscure and difficult to grasp.

PART 2: ON THE LAWN

The four scenes in Part 2 all happen simultaneously, with the audience splitting into groups and viewing one scene at a time before moving to the next. Outside, Fefu and Emma load boxes of vegetables onto a wagon. As they work, Emma asks Fefu if she thinks about genitals "all the time." Fefu says she doesn't, but Emma admits that she herself constantly thinks about them—she can't help but wonder about everyone's genitals and thinks it's odd that people don't make a bigger deal of the fact that everyone has genitals. She thinks people act like they don't even *have* them, which baffles her.

In many ways, Part 2 of Fefu and her Friends *is less about what happens in each scene than it is about creating an experimental immersive experience for the audience. By breaking each scene up and having them take place simultaneously, the play enables audience members to walk through the lives of the characters, almost as if they've entered the world of the play itself. This also means that the way audience members interpret the play will depend on the order in which they experience the four scenes in Part 2. In this scene, Fefu and Emma simply make conversation while loading a vegetable wagon, but their conversation relates to the play's interest in gender dynamics and the way society conceives of the various distinctions between men and women (the conversation also implicitly touches on feelings of sexual repression and society's unwillingness to acknowledge sexuality). On its own, this conversation isn't all that meaningful, but when considered alongside the other scenes, it will perhaps help create a cohesive whole.*

Emma talks about how most people think that if they're good they'll go to heaven and if they're bad they'll go to hell. Fefu thinks this is right, but then Emma says that the criteria that determines whether someone is good or bad is specifically tied to sex—people who are good at sex go to heaven, and people who aren't go to hell. Therefore, heaven is full of fantastic lovers.

Emma's theory is lighthearted and humorous, but it also underscores the play's suggestion that so much of life has to do with sex and sexual desire, even if society as a whole refuses to acknowledge this fact.

Fefu likes Emma's idea, especially because it would mean that angels observe people having sex to determine whether or not they're worthy of heaven. Emma enjoys this comment and says she always has a good time when she's with Fefu. But then Fefu delivers an odd monologue about how she's always in pain—but not physical pain, and not sadness, either. She can't describe it, except that it feels as if she's missing some kind of "lubricant" that's supposed to be present in the body, and without this "lubricant," life is excruciatingly difficult. She says that a stray cat started visiting her home, so she began to feed it. But then one day it came in and had diarrhea all over her kitchen. But she still feeds him—she's afraid of him now, she says. The two women then go to play croquet.

Fefu's comments about how she's always in pain draw attention to the internal world of suffering she apparently experiences. This kind of suffering, however, is somewhat vague—it's unclear what, exactly, makes her feel this way. In fact, even Fefu herself isn't quite sure why she's in pain; all she knows is that life often feels unbearable.

PART 2: IN THE STUDY

Sitting in the study, Christina reads a French textbook and practices her French while Cindy flips through a magazine and tells bad jokes ("A lady in Africa divorced her husband because he was a cheetah," she says). The two women start talking about Fefu, since Cindy wants to know what Christina thinks of her. Speaking honestly, Christina says that Fefu confuses her. She isn't sure whether or not Fefu is authentic. It's clear that she likes to be adventurous, but Christina can't tell if this is just an act. At the same time, Christina recognizes that she herself is somewhat conventional and conformist, so encountering an unconventional person like Fefu is inherently fraught, since she feels as if people like Fefu challenge her conformist worldview, though she also recognizes that such people are probably good for society.

Again, Christina struggles with Fefu's abrasiveness. Fefu herself has already made clear that she likes to "grapple" with challenging ideas, and she seems to model the way she treats others off of this provocative attitude. Unsurprisingly, then, Christina—who considers herself something of a conformist—feels uncomfortable around Fefu. What's particularly interesting, though, is that she questions whether or not Fefu's thorny, provocative personality is actually authentic—a question that subtly invites the audience to wonder if Fefu's bold way of interacting with others is actually some kind of defense mechanism designed to hide her own troubles and suffering.

Cindy narrates a dream she had. She was at a dance and saw a doctor she'd recently visited. The doctor approached her and said he had spoken to her husband and that everything was fine, but she didn't understand why he'd felt the need to talk to her husband. Then two policemen tried to force a singing teacher to fix somebody's voice, but he couldn't do it, so one of the policemen grabbed him and threw him out. The policeman then took hold of Cindy from behind and felt her nipples before pushing her away, at which point the doctor started swearing at her, but she said, "Stop and listen to me." It worked, but what she really wanted to tell him was to respect her.

Cindy's dream is strange, and it doesn't do anything to advance the plot or action of the play. However, certain elements of the dream do feed into the play's central themes, like the fact that a policeman sexually assaults her and that, though she stands up for herself, she fails to say what she really means. It's almost as if asking the people in her dream to respect her is too difficult, which is a possible representation of how hard it is for women to get the respect they deserve in the patriarchal world of 1930s American society.

In Cindy's dream, a man told her to run or else risk getting killed by a young man in attendance. She jumped into a taxi and sped away, but the young man who wanted to kill her somehow caught up. He was just about to open the door when she woke up.

Cindy's dream is ominous, especially because it ends on an open-ended but decidedly sinister note. As Cindy desperately runs away from a violent man in her dream, the play underhandedly suggests that the women in Fefu and her Friends *are all tasked with trying to outrun the violence and animosity of a sexist society.*

PART 2: IN THE BEDROOM

Julia is lying in an extra room that has been turned into a bedroom for her stay. The mattress is on the floor, and she's wearing a hospital gown as she "hallucinates," talking about a group of people who severely beat and demoralized her. She refers to these people as "the judges," though it's unclear who, exactly, they are. Nonetheless, she says that they beat her while she tried to maintain a smile—if she stopped smiling, they would hit her, claiming that they did so because they loved her. If she objected to this idea, they would kill her.

Again, the exact meaning of Julia's predicament is left intentionally vague. At the simplest level, what she says is just an abstract representation of internal suffering as a result of living in a hostile world. The play never clarifies who the "judges" are, but it's arguable that they're nameless manifestations of a kind of menacing patriarchal influence on Julia's life—they are, in other words, an embodiment of the many ways in which women are forced to endure suffering and hardship while living in a sexist society.

Julia explains—to nobody in particular, since nobody is in the room with her—that she tried to tell the judges that "the stinking parts of the body are the important ones: the genitals, the anus, the mouth, the armpit." But the judges said that these parts of the body must be "kept clean and put away." One judge insisted that women have heavier "entrails" than men and that, for this reason, they shouldn't run. Moving rapidly, this judge claimed, was "anti-aesthetic," so women should try to hold themselves in ways that suit their bodies (and "entrails"). Women who exert themselves physically, the judges believe, are crazy, but Julia voices her disagreement.

Again, it's not entirely clear who these "judges" are, but what they say to Julia taps into the play's exploration of the hardships women face while living in sexist and domineering patriarchal societies. The idea that genitals have to be "kept clean and put away" hints at the strict narrow-mindedness of American society in the 1930s—a society in which most people repressed and refused to acknowledge sexuality (hence why Emma previously complained about how everyone pretends like they don't even have *genitals). Similarly, what the mysterious judges say about women's bodies is yet another sign of the wide-ranging and unreasonable restrictions patriarchal societies place on women.*

As soon as Julia disagrees with the judges, her entire head jerks to the side as if she has just been slapped. She has a strange conversation, and it's unclear whether she's talking to the audience or to the "judges"—either way, she says, the judges are after Fefu, too. She also says that the bullet didn't hit her on the hunting trip—it hit the deer. And yet, Julia says that *she's* the one who died, not the deer. But then she "repented" and ended up staying alive while the deer died. "They said, 'Live but crippled. And if you tell…,'" she says, trailing off and pantomiming slitting her own throat.

The stage notes in this section of Fefu and her Friends *very clearly state that Julia is "hallucinating," so what she says here isn't necessarily supposed to make perfect sense. Rather, her story about these malicious judges is little more than an abstract representation of what it feels like to deal with the internal suffering that living in a harsh, sexist society causes.*

Julia then asks the judges why they have to kill Fefu, considering that she's "only a joker." In response, the judges seem to say that they aren't going to kill Fefu—they're going to "cure" her. This causes Julia to despair, lamenting the fact that the judges want to take Fefu's "precious light" from her.

The play links Fefu and Julia, implying that they are connected by their internal suffering. However, what makes it particularly difficult to understand the nature of this suffering (or why Julia came about such hardship in the first place) is that the play doesn't provide any information about Julia's life before *the hunting accident. In contrast, the audience already knows that Fefu is in a tumultuous, strained relationship with her husband—a relationship with violent tension at its core. This, in turn, suggests that Julia has perhaps experienced a similar kind of tension in her life, even before her strange accident. But this, of course, is mere speculation, as the play is mostly interested in exploring an abstract representation of suffering, ultimately leaving most of the details surrounding this suffering vague and undefined.*

The mysterious judges force Julia to deliver a monologue about how the entire world is set up to accommodate men—every idea about human nature is based on an understanding of humanity rooted in masculinity. Any kind of evil on earth is simply there for men to "conquer" and turn "into good" so that these things can "nourish" men. Women are one of these evils, Julia says. They aren't human—they're mysterious and "undefined." But they are man's "mate," so they're a "cross [he] must bear."

The fact that the strange "judges" force Julia to say these things suggests that the nature of their menacing antagonism represents—in the world of the play, at least—the extent to which 1930s American society is structured to accommodate men instead of women. Julia and her friends all have to navigate a world that is not only built for men but also outwardly hostile toward women, as Julia's suffering symbolizes.

The judges listening to Julia seem to hit her again, but she doesn't know what she did wrong—she was just saying her "prayer," which she genuinely believes. But they hit her again, prompting her to explain (presumably to the audience) that they've told her that she'll finally be able to forget the judges once she genuinely *believes* the "prayer" she has just said. And, conversely, once she forgets the judges, then she will truly be able to believe the "prayer." According to the judges, believing the "prayer" and forgetting the judges happen simultaneously, and all women have undergone this process. And yet, Julia doesn't know why *she* can't seem to do the same. At this moment, Sue comes in and gives Julia some soup, and Julia promises to come downstairs.

The judges' strange rules are essentially incomprehensible, partly because they contradict themselves and partly because the audience doesn't have enough contextual information to fully grasp what, exactly, this section of the play even means. What's clear, though, is that Julia is in a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situation—only by internalizing the judges' sexist worldview will she ever be able to forget about the judges themselves, but she'll only be able to fully internalize it if she forgets them. Either way, she's forced to effectively accept a sense of powerlessness in the face of the judges' influence.

PART 2: IN THE KITCHEN

Sitting in the kitchen, Paula writes something out on a notepad and then tells Sue that she has a working theory that love affairs always last exactly seven years and three months. First, there are three months of initial love, then there's one year of trying not to pay attention to the fading romance, then another year trying to figure out what's wrong, two years of putting off a breakup, and a year of trying to end it. After the breakup, she says, there's another two years of trying to figure out what even happened—and all of this adds up to seven years and three months. There's no way to avoid this, she says. Even starting an affair in the middle of another relationship won't disrupt the process.

Sue's theory about romantic relationships might seem somewhat depressing, since she takes it for granted that every relationship will come to an end—and, moreover, that real romance starts draining from a relationship after just three months. At the same time, though, her theory also normalizes the idea that people don't just flit in and out of each other's lives without leaving a lasting impact. The fact that she thinks every relationship requires two full years of emotional processing suggests that it's completely normal and reasonable to spend time doing the hard work of mourning romantic loss in the aftermath of a meaningful relationship.

Paula's conversation with Sue about love affairs takes place as Sue is preparing the soup she's going to take to Julia (that is, the soup she brought her in the previous scene). When she leaves to take the soup upstairs, Cecilia enters. She and Paula have a somewhat tense conversation, as Cecilia notes that she has been meaning to call her. It slowly becomes clear that they used to be romantically involved, and Paula talks about how much she has thought about Cecilia in the years since they last saw each other. She has wondered how Cecilia would see her now—their lives went in different directions, and Paula misses Cecilia deeply. She feels as if she has become "lazy" and has "lost the drive" without Cecilia in her life.

That Paula has spent so much time thinking about Cecilia subtly reinforces Sue's theory—after all, Paula is clearly still processing the end of her romantic relationship with Cecilia, which is in alignment with Sue's idea that every love affair requires two years of trying to figure out what, exactly, happened to the relationship. However, it doesn't necessarily seem like Paula has managed to emotionally heal in the aftermath of her and Cecilia's relationship. To the contrary, she seems to feel that she is worse off now that she's no longer involved with Cecilia.

Paula notes that Cecilia "abandoned" her and that she didn't know how to move on. Her entire purpose in life when they were together was to bring Cecilia pleasure, but now they seem like strangers to each other, even if Paula still vividly remembers every moment of their relationship. As she says this, Fefu enters and invites Paula and Cecilia outside for a game of croquet, then she leaves again. Paula apologizes to Cecilia for letting the conversation get too serious, promising that she's not "reproaching" her. Cecilia says that she knows this and takes Paula's hand, saying that she has missed her, too. They walk outside together.

Again, it's clear that Paula is still processing the emotional fallout of her and Cecilia's former relationship. In fact, even Cecilia admits that she still misses Paula, too, thus reinforcing Sue's theory that it's necessary for people to take time to mourn the end of a romantic relationship.

PART 3

That evening, the women gather in the living room. Cecilia starts talking about the importance of community, which leads Julia to reflect on her "hallucinations." She knows they're not real, but she still wishes she could be around other people who experience the same things—being with other people who hallucinate is comforting, since they know how *real* hallucinations actually feel. As Julia explains this, she notes how awkward the conversation has become. She cites this awkwardness as an example of how it's uncomfortable to always be around people who don't struggle with the same mental health issues as she does. But she also makes light of the whole idea, and this puts her friends at ease again.

Although Julia's friends all seemingly want to be supportive, it's clear that she feels somewhat isolated when she's with them. After all, none of them are really capable of understanding what she goes through on a seemingly daily basis. Julia eventually makes light of this feeling, but she does so mainly to put the others at ease, thus emphasizing the extent to which she is forced to suffer in isolation, downplaying her own hardships and dealing with them on her own.

The women briefly go through what they're going to say at the charity event they're hosting. Because she's the most experienced and theatrical, Emma gives the others pointers. Then, when it's her turn to rehearse, she delivers a monologue taken from the prologue to "The Science of Educational Dramatics" by Emma Sheridan Fry, which talks about how "environment" influences the way people behave. Everyone loves Emma's delivery. They continue the rehearsal, deciding that Sue will go last and ask for money from the audience.

Emma Sheridan Fry was a real-life educator who used her experience in the theater to empower impoverished immigrant communities in New York City in the early 1900s. Why Emma quotes her is never made explicitly clear, as the reference and its examination of how "environment" impacts behavior remains largely abstract and open to interpretation. Nevertheless, the fact that Emma quotes a well-known educator suggests that the charity event she and the others are hosting has something to do with education, perhaps signaling that the fundraiser aims to improve access to education—after all, it was not yet the norm in the 1930s for women to attend college. Given that Emma and the other characters all seem to have gone to college, then, it's possible that their fundraiser has something to do empowering women to pursue an education.

As some of the women go into the kitchen to do dishes, a water fight breaks out. Everyone is laughing and trying to get each other wet, running in and out of the kitchen and onto the lawn. Meanwhile, Julia and Cindy catch up. Julia asks about how things are going with Cindy's husband, and Cindy says she hasn't actually seen him since Christmas. Julia, for her part, says she doesn't need a love life these days, since she's always thinking about bigger matters—like death, for instance. She thinks humans are always living under the threat of death.

Julia and Cindy's conversation hints that all of the women in Fefu's house are privately dealing with their own hardships. For Cindy, these hardships have to do with her marriage, and though the details surrounding the issue remain hazy, it's clear that she and her husband aren't on the best terms—and yet, it's quite possible that this wouldn't have even come up if Julia hadn't explicitly asked, thus underscoring the idea that each character in Fefu and Her Friends *struggles with a private kind of suffering. Everyone, the play implies, is wrestling with something.*

Julia herself has been on the verge of death before, but "guardians" rescued her, though she doesn't know who they were. She reflects on the idea of caring for someone, suggesting that human beings are each other's "guardians" when they "give love." Still, Julia worries that someday she will once again feel on the verge of death—and this time there won't be any "guardians" to save her, so she'll die "for no apparent reason." Cindy doesn't know what to say, but then Paula and the water fight interrupt their conversation.

Again, the exact nature of Julia's suffering is largely undefined and abstract. What matters, though, is that she's clearly struggling with some pretty dire feelings, and though she has faith in the power of love and mutual support to help her through trying times, she also pessimistically thinks that she will eventually be left to face hardship on her own—that is, she predicts that, when it matters the most, she will suffer (and ultimately perish) in isolation.

Once the water fight is over, Cecilia and Paula stay in the living room while the others go in the kitchen. Cecilia says that she and Paula should really talk, but when Paula starts to say something, she tells her that they should talk at some point in the future, promising to call her soon. Paula tells Cecilia that she's not currently pursuing her in a romantic sense, but Cecilia says she already knows this. She then declares that she's going to leave after they all have coffee.

It's unclear whether or not Cecilia truly wants to reconnect with Paula. When she says that she wants to talk, it seems like she's interested in unpacking the emotions that have arisen in the aftermath of their relationship. But then she clarifies that she wants to talk later, *not now—a distinction that makes it difficult to discern whether or not she genuinely wants to have this conversation at all, potentially leaving Paula on her own to process her difficult emotions.*

Cecilia goes into the kitchen while Paula starts to go upstairs. Fefu appears at the top of the steps and starts to come down, but she stops and starts to hallucinate. In her hallucination, Julia comes into the living room—but she's not in her wheelchair. She walks in, picks up a sugar bowl, lifts it toward Fefu, and then returns to the kitchen. Then, Fefu stops hallucinating and Sue's voice sounds out, delivering a monologue about going to school and feeling exhausted. She remembers how she and the other female students often had to get medical checkups. The college often forced women to see a psychiatrist for arbitrary reasons, like because they felt nervous or for going out with multiple men.

The disjointed nature of the play is on full display in this moment, as Sue's monologue about her time in college (and the way university officials treated female students) begins abruptly after Fefu's strange "hallucination," in which Julia is able to walk. It's worth pointing out that, though the script of Fefu and Her Friends *indicates that Fefu is only hallucinating the vision of Julia walking into the room, audience members don't have the benefit of this stage direction. Therefore, the audience is left to piece together these strange events for themselves—they see Julia walk into the room, and though they might sense something strange at work, they have no choice but to fully immerse themselves in the experience of watching the play. This only heightens the sense of confusion and abstract representation at the heart of the play.*

Listening to Sue, Emma and Julia help her recall one fellow student who wrote a very intelligent essay for a class. The professor didn't believe the student was capable of writing something quite so good, but the student insisted that she wrote it, so the school sent her to a psychiatrist, refusing to believe she could have written the piece. After a while, the psychiatrist asked why the student wouldn't just admit to him that she didn't write it—he almost drove her crazy, Emma says.

There's a frustrating irony to the situation that Emma and Julia recall in this moment: a perfectly healthy woman is made to feel mentally ill simply for demonstrating her intellectual prowess. Worse, the psychiatrist who unnecessarily takes it upon himself to help her ends up nearly driving her crazy. This story underlines the aggravating tendency of sexist, patriarchal societies to doubt, demean, and pathologize intelligent and independent women.

Paula launches into a monologue about what it was like when they were all in college. Some of them spent their summers on lavish vacations, but Paula never had the means to do such a thing. She didn't like the privilege that many of the women around her had, and she noticed that the richest, most fortunate people tended to be the ones who would steal and cheat, which made no sense to her. She thinks that poor people should receive the benefits of education while rich people fend for themselves. Saying this, though, she recognizes that this is exactly what she and the other women—and especially Emma—have been trying to do. But she's not sure they've done enough.

In this monologue, Paula sheds some light on the nature of the charity event she and the other women are staging, effectively confirming that they're working toward improving access to education. More specifically, she says that they're trying to give people with less money the chance to pursue higher education. And though she herself grew up wealthy, she thinks the educational system should prioritize people who live in poverty, perhaps because she thinks that education is the best way to empower people who might otherwise have trouble breaking out of poverty.

Paula starts crying and says she's going to go wash her face, clarifying on her way out that she respects all the other women. Cecilia follows, wraps her arms around Paula, and kisses her. Paula quickly steps back and looks frightened, and then they both exit the room. Just then, Fefu reenters and addresses Julia, telling her that "every breath is painful." She says that she thinks Julia understands, but Julia insists that she doesn't—she has hardly been in touch with Fefu lately, though she thinks about her often. Julia asks how things are going with Phillip, and Fefu says that their relationship isn't going well because Phillip can't "stand" her. She feels as if he has left her, though he's still physically present.

Cecilia's display of emotion toward Paula suggests that she is still invested in their relationship, despite the cool, detached attitude she displayed earlier. On another note, Fefu and Julia's strange connection through suffering comes to the forefront of the play in this moment, as Fefu clearly feels as if she can be straightforward with Julia when it comes to talking about her own hardship, perhaps because she thinks Julia knows what it's like to be unhappy. When she says that "every breath is painful," she presents her daily life as unbearably difficult and agonizing—something Julia likely understands, since her injury is a constant reminder of her own suffering.

Though things are strained with Phillip, Fefu explains, she genuinely feels like she *needs* him. She needs his touch and can't imagine going through life without him. She then makes eye contact with Julia and says that she sees death in her eyes. "Fight!" Fefu urges Julia, but Julia says she can't. Fefu insists that she just saw Julia walking on her feet instead of sitting in the wheelchair, but Julia refutes this—she *can't* walk. But Fefu urges her to try, accusing her of being "willingly" "nuts." She even says that Julia is "contagious," claiming that she—Fefu—is going crazy because of Julia. Julia doesn't refute this, saying that she tries to stay away from Fefu for this reason.

Again, it's not exactly clear what's going on here, other than that Fefu seems to be suffering internally. It's also evident that Fefu has made a connection between her own suffering and Julia's injury. It's as if she wants to see Julia get better in order to prove that it's possible to be independent and resilient in the face of hardship—Fefu wants this, perhaps, because her feelings for her husband have compromised her own independence. She recognizes that their relationship has soured, but she still depends on Phillip. Unable to tear herself away from a seemingly toxic relationship, she looks to Julia, possibly hoping that seeing her friend overcome a difficult injury and its psychological complications will help her (Fefu) overcome her own challenges. The problem, though, is that Julia can't just get up and walk; she can't, in other words, simply overcome her own suffering.

Fefu says she wants to rest but doesn't know how. She's scared. She then tells Julia to "fight" again and grabs her wheelchair, shaking it hard and urging Julia to stand. She pulls Julia up, but Julia only says, "May no harm come to your head," repeating this line but changing the last word to "hands," "eyes," "voice," and "heart."

Although it doesn't seem to be a direct reference to anything in particular, the strange chant that Julia repeats in this moment—"May no harm come to your head," etc.—has a biblical ring to it, as if Julia is reciting some sort of prayer for Fefu. Considering that Julia spoke about Fefu earlier in the play while hallucinating a conversation with the mysterious "judges," it seems likely that she fears Fefu will soon be subjected to the same kind of torture that she herself has experienced at the hands of the "judges." This quick incantation, then, is possibly Julia's attempt to protect Fefu from falling prey to the same suffering that she herself faces.

Finally, Christina enters, so Fefu lets go of Julia. Fefu recognizes how bad this looks and says that Christina can call her a monster if she wants, though she then turns to Julia and asks for forgiveness, which Julia grants. But then Fefu picks up the **gun** and declares that she's going to clean it. Christina is frightened and tries to convince Fefu to put the weapon down, but Fefu doesn't listen, instead moving toward the lawn. As she does this, Christina asks Julia if she's all right, but Julia is mainly worried about whether or not she told Fefu anything she wasn't supposed to. Cecilia enters and asks what, exactly, Julia isn't supposed to tell Fefu, but Julia just says, "She knew."

Once again, the exact meaning behind this scene is hard to pinpoint. However, when Julia says, "She knew," it seems likely that she thinks Fefu somehow knows about the mysterious and malicious "judges" that have been tormenting Julia since her injury—and, moreover, that these "judges" are now pursuing Fefu. Earlier in the play, when Cindy first explained what happened to Julia on the hunting trip, she noted that Julia ranted and raved in a state of delirium. In this state of mind, Julia spoke about the "judges" and said that if she ever talked about what happened to her, she would be tortured and murdered. This, it seems, must be why Julia is suddenly so nervous about whether or not she told Fefu too much.

A shot rings out. Christina and Cecilia run outside, but Julia quickly covers her forehead with her hand, which she then brings away and stares at. There's blood all over her face. Her head drops right as Fefu enters with a dead rabbit. Fefu announces that she shot and killed the rabbit, but then she notices Julia and drops the animal, going over to her friend. All of the other women enter and surround Julia, who remains slumped in her wheelchair as the lights fade.

The final moments of Fefu and Her Friends *are highly abstract and hard to translate into any sort of straightforward analysis. However, there is a circularity at play here, since Julia's strange death recalls her initial injury. In both cases, Julia gets shot without actually getting shot. Broadly speaking, this is possibly a representation of the ways in which certain kinds of violence and suffering are inescapable, especially for women living in antagonistic, sexist societies. On another level, though, Julia's death seems to be a sacrifice of sorts—she has tried to warn Fefu about the "judges" and the kind of torturous suffering coming her way, and she has now paid the price by dying. But in doing so, it is feasible—according to the play's strange internal logic—that she has saved Fefu, effectively breaking the rules set by the "judges" in order to help her friend escape the same miserable fate that she herself has been forced to endure. In turn, the play becomes an abstract examination of friendship, sacrifice, and support—an idea underscored by the fact that all of Julia's friends slowly gather around her as the stage lights dim.*

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