August: Osage County Study Guide

August: Osage County by Tracy Letts

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The play begins with a prologue, which consists of a conversation between writer / professor Beverly Weston and Johnna, the young Native American woman he is interviewing for a position as housekeeper. Beverly, who may or may not be somewhat drunk, refers to the difficult relationship he has with his medication-addicted wife Violet, who interrupts the conversation, behaves disrespectfully to both Beverly and Johnna, and then withdraws into a pill-induced sleep.

The action of the play as a whole begins a few days later, in the aftermath of Beverly's disappearance and the resultant gathering of Beverly and Violet's family: eldest daughter Barbara (along with her husband Bill and daughter Jean); middle daughter Ivy (long single, but in the middle of beginning a new relationship); and youngest daughter Karen (and new boyfriend Steve). Also present are Violet's blunt-speaking sister Mattie Fae, her husband Charlie, and their son Little Charles. As members of the family arrive, bicker, and try to comfort each other in the aftermath of Beverly's disappearance, old issues and conflicts resurface; new conflicts emerge; and tensions between Violet and the rest of her family intensify, partly as a result of Violet's continuing use of pills. At the end of the first act, the family learns that Beverly's body has been found, and Violet has disappeared into a pill-induced unreality.

The second act consists of a single extended scene set primarily around the dining room table. In the aftermath of Beverly's funeral, the family gathers for a meal prepared by Johnna. As various family members attempt to have conversations on subjects ranging from family inheritances to vegetarianism, Violet (who has taken a large number of pills) interrupts with angry, very cutting comments. Confrontations triggered by those comments eventually leads to an eruption of anger and frustration from Barbara, which in turn leads to a physical confrontation between the two women. As family members break the confrontation apart, Barbara calls for a "pill raid" (i.e. a search through the house for Violet's hidden pills) and shouts that she's running things now.

The third act begins a few days later. Violet has managed to stay relatively clean of her pills, but still interacts with her family from a place of resentment and aggression. Barbara confers with her sisters about how the family can/could move forward, but meets resistance from both of them about how involved they want to be in Violet's rehabilitation. Meanwhile, revelations of various family secrets (including various aspects of the identity of Ivy's new boyfriend; the budding illicit relationship between Jean and Steve; and further, long-concealed details of the relationship between Beverly and Violet) lead to further confrontations. As a result of these confrontations, Bill leaves the house, Johnna intervenes violently between Steve and Jean; and Barbara, somewhat desperately, makes an effort to reconnect with an old boyfriend.

Eventually, and as a result of confessions made by Violet and one last confrontation between her and her mother, Barbara leaves the house. Violet, suddenly feeling very alone and deserted, finds comfort in the arms of the last person the audience might expect: housekeeper Johnna.

Prologue

Summary

Stage directions sum up the appearance of the house and imply that a particular attitude on the part of its owners has led to its current appearance. More detailed stage directions describe the location and relationship of the plentiful rooms and their rather dated contents.

In his study, Beverly speaks with housekeeper Johnna, who is described as being an American Indian. In what amounts to a virtual monologue, Beverly quotes poet T.S. Eliot who describes life as “very long”; commenting on how other poets might have experienced life differently; and on how he can’t relate to Eliot who, after enduring years of his wife’s emotional difficulties, packed her off into an asylum. As Beverly continues, he and Johnna hear his wife muttering in another part of the house, the intellectual and thoughtful Beverly commenting on how the pills she’s taking influence her. He reveals that while his wife Violet takes pills, he drinks; that there is not necessarily a cause-and-effect relationship between the two on either side; but that both habits have made life difficult. He also speaks of having burnt a lot of “debris” the night before, and apologizes for the house being as hot as it is. Violet, he says, doesn’t like air conditioning.

Meanwhile, conversation with Johnna reveals that Beverly knew her father, and that she has gone back to the original aboriginal translation (Monevata) of the name he used (Youngbird).

Violet appears, trying to ask a question but unable to formulate it because of how all the pills she’s been taking affect her. Difficult conversation (difficult because Violet is having serious problems speaking clearly) reveals that Beverly is hiring Johnna to help around the house. Violet mocks Beverly’s way of speaking, his idea of having someone around to help out, and Johnna’s presence, curtsying to her clumsily. Beverly tries to get her to go back to sleep, but she curses at him and leaves the room.

Beverly tells Johnna more about the job, pointing out that the hours will be irregular and there will be a lot of demands placed on her. He reveals that Violet has mouth cancer, and will need to be taken to see her doctor. He also lists the pills Violet is taking, and reveals that she went through rehab once, but “chose for herself this reality instead.” As the conversation concludes, he reveals that books are his refuge, his simple pleasure. He tells Johnna to read if she wants, but that it’s not a “job requirement”.

Analysis

This brief scene establishes several key elements that reappear throughout the narrative, influencing events and relationships. These elements include the tension between Violet and Beverly (both overt, as manifest in their dialogue, and implied, by Beverly’s weary comments before Violet enters); their respective addictions (particularly

Violet's addiction to pills, which plays a key role in subsequent action); and Violet's attitude towards Johnna. This last is particularly interesting, in that here, Violet's attitude manifests as one of disrespect for someone that she – Violet – perceives as an inferior because of the job she's being asked to do. Later in the narrative, however, that attitude takes on darker qualities that, in turn, color the relationship as portrayed here.

There are other foreshadowings in this section, but of later circumstances that ultimately have less significant influence on the story. These include the reference to Violet's cancer, the reference to Violet having been in a rehabilitation center, and Beverly's diffident suggestion that Johnna might want to read some of his books. References to these circumstances recur, but as side issues rather than defining ones.

The references to heat foreshadow symbolic references later in the play to how hot and stuffy the house tends to be, references that have metaphoric resonance with the apparent emotional heat playing out in relationships and confrontations. Ultimately, the whole scene is a significant piece of foreshadowing: its quiet mood, some subtle hints (i.e. to the burning of "debris"), and the references to the T.S. Eliot quote all foreshadow the family-shattering events of subsequent scenes.

Finally, there is the reference to Johnna's name. There is the sense that within the context of the scene and its content, there is a degree of metaphoric significance, while later in the narrative, there is a sense that Johnna's original name, and her reasons for returning to that name, have metaphoric resonance with her emerging sense of identity.

Discussion Question 1

What do the stage directions imply about the attitude of the house's owners to its maintenance and upkeep?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Beverly pays so much attention to this particular quote by T.S. Eliot? What does the reader / audience learn and/or hear about his life that resonate with this quote?

Discussion Question 3

What is the metaphoric significance of the English-version of Johnna's name?

Vocabulary

brilliantine, sufficient, ecclesiastical, asylum, purity, equilibrium, partake, inconsequential, burdensome, abstinence, sobriety, anonymous, winsome, differentiate, mundane, chemotherapy, behemoth

Act 1, Scene 1

Summary

Ivy, Mattie Fae, and Charlie sit in the living room. Violet and Johnna are visible in other parts of the house. Conversation in the living room reveals that Beverly has disappeared, and that he's done it before. As Charlie and Mattie Fae bicker over whether Mattie Fae was right to encourage Violet to throw Beverly out of the marriage the first time he left, Ivy comments that this time feels different to her. Further bickering conversation reveals that the shades over the windows have been taped shut for two years (Mattie Fae starts to open them over Charlie's protests); that Ivy doesn't know which of her parents had the idea to cover the windows; and that Charlie sees similarities in attitude and mental abilities between Beverly and his and Mattie Fae's son Little Charlie.

Violet appears, and tells the others that Sheriff Gilbeau has checked the hospitals, that there's no sign of Beverly, and that Beverly's pontoon boat is gone. Charlie suggests Beverly might have taken the boat out on his trailer, but Mattie Fae says the trailer is still by the shed. Violet leaves, followed by Ivy. Charlie asks Johnna to get him a beer, but Mattie Fae tells him angrily that she's not a waitress. After Johnna goes out, Mattie Fae tells Charlie to show a little more respect for the situation and not drink so much. He reminds her that she's drinking scotch, but she says that's different. They smell something cooking and go out to investigate, Charlie commenting that the news about the boat isn't good.

In another part of the house, Violet and Ivy confer, their conversation revealing that eldest daughter Barbara and her husband Bill are on their way; that Beverly has been missing for five days; and that Violet is irritated that Ivy can't remember more about what Barbara said during their conversation. After Violet vents her frustration about being left to handle the running of the house on her own, Ivy reveals that she also called youngest daughter Karen. Violet says she needs Barbara, and then belittles Ivy for not taking better care of her appearance, for picking a bad boyfriend, and for not yet having a husband. Violet then says how glad she is that one of her girls stayed nearby (meaning Ivy). They then bicker about whether Ivy called Mattie Fae after Beverly's disappearance (Ivy finally saying she did), with Violet saying that Charlie smokes a lot of marijuana.

Outside the house, Barbara and Bill arrive. Before going in, they try to take a moment of calm, Barbara complaining about how hot Violet keeps the house and how isolated the house is. Both of them comment on how their daughter Jean is still in the car, smoking. As Bill tries to initiate a moment of connection, Barbara pulls away. Jean appears, and the three of them go into the house, Barbara calling for Violet.

Mattie Fae and Charlie greet the new arrivals (Mattie Fae loudly, Charlie quietly) and then Violet appears, bursting into tears when she sees Barbara, who comforts her.

Conversation reveals that there's not been any word from Beverly, and that Violet is both disoriented and frightened. Ivy appears, and Barbara comments on how good she looks.

As the family goes into the living room, Violet tells Barbara and Bill that she needs them to help her go through Beverly's papers and other effects. They also work out sleeping arrangements, with Violet insisting that Mattie Fae and Charlie (who had planned to go home that night) stay and that they can stay with Ivy. Barbara is surprised to learn that Jean can't stay in the attic room where she usually sleeps because Johnna is there. Johnna, Violet says, is "the Indian who lives in [her] attic." At that moment, Johnna comes in. The scene ends.

Analysis

The most significant plot element in this section is the revelation about Beverly's disappearance – not just the fact of his disappearance, but its circumstances. This is not, however, the end of Beverly's story, but rather its beginning: there are several more layers of mystery associated with his disappearance through which the narrative eventually travels. At the same time, the narrative also introduces its primary theme: its exploration of mother / daughter relationships, manifest first in the tense, complex relationship between Violet and Ivy and then, more notably, in Violet's comments about Barbara and Barbara's eventual appearance. The Violet / Barbara relationship is, in fact, the most significant manifestation of the mother / daughter theme in the play: for example, it's important to note that almost as soon as Barbara appears, the narrative begins to draw parallels between and contrasts between her and Violet, beginning with how they each respond to Ivy and developing in other ways.

Other important foreshadowings / developments here include the reference to Sheriff Gilbeau, which is important for two reasons: as foreshadowing of later appearances in which he brings more news about Beverly; and as foreshadowing of another later appearance in which he plays a significant role in developments relating to co-protagonist Barbara. Two more examples of foreshadowing include: Charlie's comments about similarities between Little Charles and Beverly (which foreshadow later revelations about the true nature of their relationship); and the reference to marijuana (which foreshadows later events in which a member of Barbara's family gets into trouble because of smoking pot).

Finally, there are the requests and comments made of Johnna, which in some ways reflect the play's thematic interest in racism, and in some ways seem ambiguous.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways do the events of this section of the play reflect the parallels or contrasts between Violet and Barbara?

Discussion Question 2

Ivy says she doesn't know which of her parents covered the windows. Given what you know of Violet and Beverly so far, which of them do you think was primarily responsible?

Discussion Question 3

How do you respond to how Johnna is treated in this section of the play? How racist an environment is she in? How do you respond to her responses to how she's treated – or, for that matter, her lack of responses?

Vocabulary

obligation, contradict, upholstery, initiative, delinquent, penitentiary, pontoon

Act 1, Scenes 2 and 3

Summary

Scene 2 - Barbara, Bill and Violet are in the dining room. Elsewhere, Johnna is reading, and Jean listens to music on her I-pod. Stage directions indicate that the pills Violet has been taking are starting to have an effect on her speech. Her conversation rambles as she reveals the circumstances of Beverly's disappearance (leaving on a Saturday night); why she delayed calling Barbara until the following Monday (because she, Violet, wanted to retrieve the contents of her and Beverly's safety deposit box – they had an "arrangement", she says about what they would do if one of them died); and how uncomfortable she, Violet, is with Johnna in the house. Barbara's discomfort with how Violet refers to Johnna as "that Indian" leads the two women into bickering – about language, about how Barbara was Beverly's favorite, and how Beverly, according to Violet, was disappointed that Barbara both moved so far away (to Colorado) and "settled" for an academic career instead of being a writer. Bill's attempts to keep the peace are ignored, and he eventually leaves.

Barbara and Violet argue over Violet's use of pills, with Barbara insisting that she will not again go through what Violet put her family through the first time she (Violet) became addicted, and Violet insisting that she needs the pills because she's in so much pain because of the cancer and the chemotherapy she's receiving to treat the cancer. As Bill returns, Violet cries about Barbara returning when Beverly disappeared but not when the cancer was diagnosed. Barbara tries to calm her mother, telling her that she thinks Beverly is safe.

Attention shifts to Jean, who goes to visit Johnna in the attic bedroom. Jean asks if Johnna wants to smoke some marijuana with her, but Johnna refuses. Jean then asks if it's all right to smoke in the attic, explaining that there's no place in the house that's safe. Johnna agrees, and Jean prepares her marijuana and smokes it during the rest of the scene. Jean reveals that her dad is fine with her smoking, but her mother isn't; that her dad smokes as well; and that her parents are separated because her dad is having an affair with one of his students. Conversation also reveals that Johnna's parents are dead, and that she had been close with them. Johnna shows Jean a wedding picture in which her (Johnna's) parents are dressed in traditional Native American clothes. Johnna also reveals that she's reading one of Beverly's books (poetry by T.S. Eliot). Jean reveals that Barbara "freaked" when she got the news about Beverly. Johnna then reveals that the beaded pouch around her neck (which Jean admires) contains her umbilical cord, explaining that carrying their cords with them is a tradition of the Cheyenne nation from which she comes. Jean asks her to keep the secret of Barbara and Bill's separation.

Scene 3 - As Barbara unfolds the hide-a-bed in the living room, Bill comes in with a hardcover copy of Beverly's book, with conversation revealing it was a book of poetry called "Meadowlark". In academic language that sounds much like Beverly's in the

Prologue, Bill comments on the pressure to write again (and write well) that Beverly must have felt in the aftermath of the book's publication and critical success, and wonders whether that pressure was the reason Beverly never wrote again. Jean appears and listens as Barbara tells Bill that Beverly stopped writing for a variety of reasons, and that she's sick of listening to Bill talk about the book. Her language is similar to Violet's, in that their dialogue includes a lot of curse words. Barbara's comments trigger an argument about Bill's affair with his student, Barbara's need for support from him in this difficult time for her family, and how Bill feels that Barbara's rage is powerfully triggered not just by his affair, but by being in the same house as Violet. After a while, he tries to postpone the conversation to a more appropriate time, and Barbara agrees, getting into bed as she makes a pointed comment about sharing it with her "husband". When Bill suggests they can talk more when Beverly comes home, Barbara says that she believes her father is dead.

Analysis

There are several significant elements in this scene. First, there is Violet's attitude towards Johnna, which on one level seems to be anchored in racism (making Violet's comments thematically significant) but which, on another level, seem to be about insecurity and fear (i.e. Violet being afraid of being replaced in her own home). In either case, the comments reveal important aspects of Violet's character and identity. Second, there is the reference to the safety deposit box, which plays a significant role in later conflicts (particularly eventual revelations about Violet's behavior in the aftermath of Beverly's disappearance. Third, there is the reference to Barbara's writing and academic careers. This is significant because her career path parallels that of Beverly's, a circumstance that clearly plays into comments made by Violet about whether she or Beverly saw Barbara as their favorite child, here and elsewhere in the story. A fourth, and related, point to note has to do with increased tension between Violet and Barbara around the issue of the pills and Barbara's presence in the family: there is the sense, in their conflict over when / whether Barbara should have visited previously, that Violet is deliberately trying to goad Barbara into confrontation, agreement, or just acknowledgement. The conflict here foreshadows the events of Act 2, at which point their conflict explodes.

When the focus of Scene 2 shifts to Jean and Johnna, there are more significant elements. The first is Jean's smoking of marijuana, which is important for a couple of reasons: it foreshadows later confrontations triggered by Jean's smoking, and it develops the theme of mother / daughter relationships into grandmother/granddaughter relationships, which in turn finds echoes in later parallels drawn between Violet's mother and Barbara. Then there are Jean's revelations about the state of her parents' marriage (comments about the age of her father's girlfriend foreshadow Jean's angry return to the issue later in the play); and, finally, the references to Johnna's family, which in many ways provide significant contrast to other elements of the story unfolding around her.

The brief and concentrated Scene 3 gives the reader / audience significant insight into the relationship between Bill and Barbara, providing information about Bill's affair, how

Barbara is handling it, and about Barbara's relationship with her mother. If the reader / audience hadn't picked up on it before, they will at this point: Barbara seems to be more similar to her mother than she (Barbara) would like. The comments, and apparent similarities arising from them, can be seen as foreshadowing of later revelations, offered by Violet, about the history of her relationship with Beverly. In any case, the content of the scene reflects, in many ways, the play's thematic interest in mother/daughter relationships.

Another significant elements in Scene 3 is the reference to Beverly's one-book publishing career and Bill's insights into it, which might in turn offer insight to the reader / audience about why Beverly disappeared, and in the context of future revelations about that disappearance, why it has the qualities that it does. Finally, there is the silent appearance of Jean in this section, with what she learns about her parents' relationship returning to haunt them in later confrontations. This can seen as the first of several examples of the novel's thematic interest in the consequences of learning about family secrets.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways do events and conversations in both sections of this scene reflect or manifest the play's thematic exploration of the longing for connection?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways do Johnna's possessions, and her apparent feelings around them, contrast the events and circumstances around her?

Discussion Question 3

How do events around Johnna and her possessions relate to the play's thematic interest in racism?

Vocabulary

oblivion, unfathomable, umbilical, narcissistic, masochistic, hunker

Act 1, Scene 4

Summary

Lights from a police car flash across the front of the house as Sheriff Gilbeau waits outside. Johnna wakes Bill and Barbara, and after she tells him the Sheriff is there, they get dressed. First Johnna and then Barbara tries to wake Violet but can't, eventually giving up to meet with the Sheriff themselves. Jean is also awake, and waits upstairs as Barbara, Bill, and Johnna open the door to Gilbeau.

When Gilbeau says that Beverly is dead, Barbara collapses into tears, and is comforted by Johnna as Gilbeau explains that a body that he believes to be Beverly's was found near his boat. Barbara suddenly pulls herself together and asks what needs to be done. When Gilbeau tells her that a blood relative needs to come and identify the body, she's reluctant, but agrees when Bill says he'll go with her. Johnna starts making coffee as Barbara and Jean go out so Barbara can get dressed. Gilbeau takes advantage of their absence to warn Bill that Beverly's body is going to be difficult to look at, it having been in the water for three days. He also says, in response to Bill's careful question, that it was probably suicide, but the official cause of death will be listed as drowning.

In another room, conversation between Barbara and Jean reveals that Barbara and Gilbeau were once prom dates; Gilbeau's father stole his son's car on the night of the prom; and that the two of them decided to not go to prom at all but "got a six-pack and broke into the chapel, stayed up all night talking and kissing." She describes seeing him now as "surreal" and then asks Jean to die after she does. "I don't care what else you do, where you go, how you screw up your life, just – survive. Outlive me. Please." Jean promises to try. Bill appears, ready to go. Barbara asks for a bit more time.

In another part of the house, Violet appears and speaks with Gilbeau – or at least she tries to. The drugs have affected her ability to talk so that she can barely be understood: it seems as though she's talking about Beverly being missing. She plays some music on the record player and starts dancing, smoking, and shouting for Barbara.

Barbara, Bill, Jean, and Johnna all appear, watching as she dances, mumbles, "separates invisible threads in the air", and repeats "and then you're here" over and over and over again.

Analysis

There are several important elements in this scene, which contains a pair of climaxes to end the first act. The first climax relates to what might be described as the play's "mystery plot" – that is, the question of what happened to Beverly. Gilbeau's report of the discovery of Beverly's body, and the subsequent revelation that he believes Beverly to have committed suicide, combine to make these moments in the play one of the emotional and narrative high points (i.e. climax) of the play to this point. The other

climax comes in the scene's final moments, with an image that indicates just how far into her addiction, and into mental and emotional dissociation from reality, Violet has descended. This image indicates to her family, most significantly to Barbara, just how much trouble her mother, and therefore the rest of the family, is in. It forms the climax to what might be described as the play's "Violet Plot" – that is, the question of what exactly is going on with Violet.

Further to the revelations in the mystery plot: aside from putting pressure on the remaining Weston family simply because they now know they have to deal with a death, the audience / reader now knows, because of Gilbeau's reference to Beverly's probable suicide, that there was even more pressure on BEVERLY than had previously been indicated. In this context, information offered by the play about Beverly's history with Violet; his history as a writer; and his history as an alcoholic take on new meaning. This is an example of an effective writing technique that sees new information / revelations casting a new light / offering new insight into actions, relationships, and situations that have gone before. It could be argued, in fact, that this particular revelation hints at the play's thematic interest in the presence and/or revelation of family secrets.

Other important elements in this scene include the revelation of the previous relationship between Barbara and Gilbeau (which foreshadows a later incident in which one of them tries to recapture the relationship that was); the reference to Gilbeau's father (which, simply because it evokes a difficult father / child relationship, carries with it resonances with the rest of the story); and Barbara's semi-serious plea to Jean, which manifests the play's thematic interest in mother/daughter relationships from a new and different angle.

Finally: at this stage in the play, the conclusion of the act, it's possible to see that much of what has transpired to this point relates to the play's thematic interest in the longing of individuals for connection. Virtually every relationship, every conversation, every action can be seen as reflecting, one way or another, this thematic consideration: people reaching for new connections; people struggling to repair broken connections; people breaking connections.

Discussion Question 1

Given Gilbeau's suspicions about the circumstances of Beverly's death, what are the implications of Beverly's decision to hire Johnna?

Discussion Question 2

What other father – child relationships are explored / commented upon in this play up to this point? Consider those which are referred to both directly and indirectly: how does the father/son relationship commented upon here relate to those other relationships?

Discussion Question 3

What are the possible metaphoric meanings / ironies associated with Violet's final, mumbled, drug-affected words?

Vocabulary

proximity, surreal, inability

Act 2, Part 1 (pages 57 – 67)

Summary

Stage directions suggest that the action of this act begins shortly after Beverly's funeral as the house has been cleaned up, the study is tidied, and the dining room table has been set, ready for a big family meal. It is also stated that Violet is "relatively sober" as she stands in Beverly's study, holding a bottle of pills. "Karen and Barbara are in the dining room. Johnna is in the kitchen."

Alone in Beverly's study, Violet takes pills as she looks through a copy of "Meadowlark", and comments ironically on how he dedicated the book to her. She adds that all she can dedicate to him is their daughters, and that what happened is entirely because of him - he made his choice, and it had nothing to do with her.

In the dining room, youngest daughter Karen chatters about how her life turned out so differently from what she had hoped, and how she's trying to focus on the present. Karen said she finally learned how to deal better with reality after years of accepting the abuse of a guy she cared for a lot; how she had determined that she was the only person responsible for her life, took action, and had success. She said it was only then that she meet a decent man. Karen says she's realized how impossible and foolish it is to plan for the future, leading Barbara to comment that things like your father drowning himself can really mess things up. Karen agrees, but then says that that's an example of how good a guy her new man (Steve) is: in spite of having an opportunity he's worked hard to realize, when he found out Beverly died he dropped everything to be with her.

After a brief interruption by Johnna during which plans for the meal are discussed, Karen reveals plans for her wedding to take place in Florida and is scheduled so Barbara and Bill could attend, also expressing her hope that she and Barbara could get to know each other better. Meanwhile, Barbara tries to get her to talk about what they're going to do about Violet, eventually wondering why the people sent to get wine (Bill, Jean, and Steve) aren't back yet.

In another part of the house, Violet tries to get Ivy to put on a dress instead of the suit she wore to the funeral. Meanwhile, Mattie Fae is looking through a box of photographs to find one to put in the dining room, and asking Violet where they were taken, some of which were taken in New York. This leads Mattie Fae to comment that her son Little Charles is planning to move to New York, and that he'd never survive. Her conversation distracts Violet from Ivy, who is becoming increasingly angry about what Violet is trying to get her to do. The three way conversation eventually leads Violet into an eruption-like meditation on how she's clearing out the house; how she no longer feels or looks beautiful; and how women lose their attractiveness as they age, meaning that younger women become increasingly attractive to older men. After she's finished, she returns her attention to Ivy, this time joined by Mattie Fae, both of them badgering Ivy about finding a husband. Ivy is goaded into revealing that she has a man, but then refuses to

say any more about him, running off giggling when she's asked if she's in love. Mattie Fae and Violet follow her.

Analysis

Act Two is one long, single scene, and begins with an intriguing juxtaposition: Violet in the study, talking about how she had no responsibility for Beverly's disappearance, or for his unhappiness; and Karen in the dining room, talking at length about her experience of being the only person responsible for herself and her own life. There is the sense here that the play, and the characters involved in these parallel scenes, are making a point about how people who refuse to see / take responsibility for how their actions affect others. In other words, people who think their responsibilities in life are limited to themselves are in denial, since there is the very strong sense that Beverly felt how he felt and did what he did at least in part because of Violet. In other words, there is the sense here that in saying what she does, Karen is deluding herself. A related, and contrasting, point, has to do with what Karen says about Steve – specifically, about his compassion. The irony here (of which Karen seems completely unaware but which Barbara, it seems, is FULLY aware) is that Steve seems to be self-sacrificing and compassionate in a way that neither Karen nor Violet seem able or prepared to do. This, in turn, can be seen as yet another way in which the narrative manifests the "like mother, like daughter" theme – only in this case, it's not parallels between Barbara and Violet that are being drawn, but between Violet and Karen.

The mother / daughter relationship appears again in another part of the house, as Violet once again belittles the hapless Ivy. There are other important elements in this scene: for example, the hints that Ivy has found someone to love and that she's thinking of moving to New York (which does two things: indicates that Ivy is at least thinking about making an effort to break away from her mother's influence / control / abuse; and foreshadows later revelations about who Ivy is in love with and what their plans are). Here it's interesting to note how revelations about Ivy's possible relationship are juxtaposed with Mattie Fae's comments about the photographs, which seem to suggest that at some point, Beverly and Violet at least made an effort to be happy together. Finally, Violet's comments about aging women clue the reader / audience into an aspect of her character / identity that, in turn, might be affecting her need for pills. They also carry with them a resonance of an aspect of the Bill / Barbara plot – specifically, how Bill has begun an affair with a younger woman.

Discussion Question 1

What are the metaphoric / symbolic implications of the stage directions – specifically, their comments on how the house has been cleaned up?

Discussion Question 2

Which comments in this section can be seen as manifesting the play's thematic interest in the longing for connection without tying that longing to a specific relationship?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is ironic about Beverly's dedication of "Meadowlark" to Violet?

Vocabulary

pathetic, deluded, contingency, inedible, morbid

Act 2, Part 2 (pages 67 – 82)

Summary

Jean, Bill, and Steve come in, Jean hurrying to sit in front of the television, Steve and Bill going into the kitchen with bags of groceries and alcohol. Their conversation about Steve's security business is interrupted by Barbara, who comes in search of wine and who berates Jean for being in such a hurry to watch a movie on television on the day of her grandfather's funeral.

After Barbara and Bill go into the kitchen, Steve reveals to Jean that he knows she's been smoking marijuana, and after teasing her a bit, reveals that he's got some very good stuff. Jean confesses that she really needs to get high. Their innuendo-filled conversation is interrupted by Karen coming in search of cigarettes, which Steve says he forgot to get. Jean surprises them both by revealing that not only does she have cigarettes, but she has their brand. After taking cigarettes and telling Jean to not smoke, Karen and Steve tease each other playfully, comment on how hot the house is getting, and go outside, Karen wanting to show Steve the fort she and her sisters used to play in. As he passes Jean, Steve whispers to her that he'll get her some drugs later.

Outside, Charlie and Little Charles arrive, Little Charles apologizing for missing the funeral and Charlie telling him not to bother. Little Charles starts crying, telling his dad that he knows how everyone feels about them and how sorry he is he's let his father and everyone else down. Charlie reassures him, telling he's "a fine man, very loving, with a lot to offer." They tell each other they love each other, and go into the house.

In the dining room, as Johnna comes in and out, putting food on the table, Bill and Barbara finish setting the table as they argue over Jean watching the movie, an argument that Bill feels is more about their relationship than about Jean – Barbara seems to think Bill is being a bad father, Bill tries to defend himself and asks Barbara to be fair, Barbara shouts that she's tired of being fair, Bill says that Barbara is using Jean as a buffer between her and Violet, Barbara brings up Bill's girlfriend, and Bill erupts, saying that he went to the girl because Barbara is "not open … hard … [and] a pain in the ass.

Suddenly all the family appears, and three conversations happen simultaneously: Mattie Fae welcomes the apologetic Little Charles sarcastically, Ivy tells Violet to stay quiet about Ivy's boyfriend, and Karen talks to Barbara about how badly the house and yard have been maintained. Everyone goes into the dining room and sits, Bill calling to an angry Jean, who becomes even more angry (as does Charlie) when she realizes she's being seated at "the kid's table" with Little Charles. Meanwhile, as Little Charles is sent out to his car to collect a casserole of Mattie Fae's that he was assigned to bring, Johnna agrees to sit at the kids' table too.

Ivy and Little Charles meet on the front porch as Little Charles is on his way in with the casserole. Their conversation reveals that Little Charles, her cousin, is the man with whom Ivy is in love. She warns him that she told Violet that there is someone in her life, and Little Charles mentions that he had been planning to move to New York. Ivy tells him that she thinks it's a good idea to let the family know about them bit by bit, and he says he adores her.

Analysis

Several points to note about this section: the introduction of new characters (Steve, Little Charles); the further development of the mother/daughter theme (most notably in terms of the Barbara / Jean relationship); the introduction of the Jean / Steve subplot (which has significant repercussions later in the narrative); and the revelation of the Ivy / Little Charles relationship. This last is particularly significant, for a couple of interrelated reasons: it manifests the play's thematic interest in hidden family secrets; and foreshadows a couple of important further revelations related to this relationship that play significant roles in the action later in the play.

Other important elements: Karen's wanting to reconnect with her past in the form of the outside fort; the introduction of another father-son relationship; and the anger of the younger members of the family (Jean and Little Charles) when they're told they have to sit at the "kids table". This last is particularly interesting, in that it serves as another example of how members of the dysfunctional Weston family seem to be breaking free of family rules, traditions, and assumptions of behavior. The placement of Ivy and Little Charles at the kids' table, in this context, can be seen as being particularly ironic, in that they both seem intent upon being more adult (i.e. their desire to be together and move to New York). This irony is perhaps what fuels their anger and resentment. One last element to note: Karen's reference to the heat in the house, which can be seen as being metaphorically reflective of the building emotional tension (i.e. heat) between various members of the family, and which can also be seen as metaphorically foreshadowing the explosion of "hot" temper in the following scene, in which the climax of the second act takes place.

Discussion Question 1

Given what Karen has said previously (Act 2, Part 1), why is her desire to show Steve the fort (i.e. reconnect with her past) significant and/or ironic?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways is the apparent relationship between Charlie and Little Charles similar and/or contrasted to the other father/son relationships referred to in the play so far?

Discussion Question 3

Here again in this scene, Bill makes the point that Barbara is like her mother, and creating as many difficulties in her marriage as Violet did in hers. What is your interpretation of his comments – do you see them as being justified, or is he just trying to deflect attention from his affair? Is it possibly a combination of both? What do you think is going on for / with him?

Vocabulary

perpetual, mercenary, entirety, Gordian, precocious, whimsical, spastic, credibility, smidgen

Act 2, Part 3 (pages 82 – 97)

Summary

As all the family but Violet starts dinner, Mattie Fae erupts in anger when Little Charlie accidentally drops and spills her casserole, and the family taunts Jean for being a vegetarian. Violet arrives with a photograph of her and Beverly she wants placed on the sideboard, and everyone comments on how nice both it and the table are. Violet then suggests that someone should say grace. Charlie, as the eldest male in the family, starts to do so, but is interrupted by Steve's cell phone going off, and Steve going out to take the call. After Charlie finishes saying grace, asking for God's support for the family in this difficult time and recognizing the blessing that is family, Steve returns, and the meal begins.

As the family passes food and eats, there is conversation about Jean's vegetarianism, Steve and Karen's relationship (conversation revealing that Steve has been married three times), about the good quality of the funeral service, about Karen missing some of the things from her childhood, about Beverly's poetry (some of which was read at the funeral), and about the high quality of Johnna's cooking. Each time Violet stops the conversation with sharp, angry comments that eventually lead Barbara to ask angrily what pills Violet has taken and how much. Violet never answers, instead starting to talk about Beverly's will and how he changed it so everything of value would go to her. The girls can have some of the furniture, but the money and the house are Violet's. The daughters agree, Karen being prompted to do so by Barbara, who also makes a pointed comment about inheriting things after Violet dies.

After another couple of pointed attempts to change the subject of the conversation, Violet starts angrily making pointed comments that reveal she knows everything about the disintegration of Bill and Barbara's marriage. When Barbara accuses her of attacking everyone in the family, Violet becomes even more angry, telling her that Mattie Fae saved her (Violet) from an attack from one of their mother's many boyfriends; that Beverly had a horrible childhood living in a car; and that she and Beverly made huge sacrifices for their daughters, daughters that Violet implies are ungrateful and wasteful. Barbara accuses her of screaming at the family; Violet says it's time some truth got told; and Little Charlie suddenly stands, indicating he wants to tell a truth. Ivy quietly begs him not to, and Little Charles announces …

… that he forgot to set his alarm clock that morning, and that's the reason he missed the funeral. He then runs out as Mattie Fae berates him to Charles, Ivy becomes upset, and Violet comforts her, recognizing that she's "always had a feeling for the underdog". Barbara then brings up another truth, that Violet is a drug addict. Violet reacts violently, shouting that the pills are her "best fucking friends". Barbara tries to wrestle them away from her, and there's a fight in which everybody either joins in or shouts. The fight spreads through the house, with Bill and Charlie eventually separating the women.

Barbara calls for a pill raid, telling everyone to search the house for Violet's pills the way they did in the past. Violet protests that it's her house, but Barbara, "with a burst of adrenaline", shouts "I'M RUNNING THINGS NOW!"

This marks the end of Act Two.

Analysis

This section contains the climax of the act, and arguably the climax of the play to this point: the physical confrontation between Violet and Barbara. There seems to be several triggers for this fight, some of which have to do with the relationship the two women have with each other, and some of which have to do with situations in the lives of each woman that have nothing to do with that relationship. See "Discussion Question 3". Meanwhile, this climax – specifically Violet's part in triggering it – includes several painful family revelations, clear manifestations of the play's thematic interest in family secrets and the dangers associated with their being put out in the open. Here it's important to note a key contrast: while Violet throws out family secrets as weaponry in attacks on her children, Little Charles ultimately chooses to NOT reveal HIS truth out of sensitivity and/or respect for Ivy: he keeps secrets out of compassion while Violet uses secrets out of anger. Note, now, the similarity between the name "Violet" and the word "Violent".

What's particularly interesting about the family secrets Violet reveals is that they tie in with another of the play's themes – the mother-daughter relationship. There is the very clear sense, in Violet's eruption of temper and truth, that her own mother had, in many ways, similar attitudes towards her children as Violet has towards hers: selfish, insensitive, and unable to protect them. Here, there is the sense that mother-to-daughter issue-passing does not relate just to the three generations seen so far (Violet-Barbara-Jean), but there is a fourth generation in the chain of abuse.

Other important elements include a reiteration of Karen's longing for the past (ironic here as elsewhere in the play because of her previously stated determination to live life in the present); the reference to Johnna's cooking (which metaphorically suggests, as other aspects of her character and influence tend to do, both earlier and later in the narrative, that she is bringing good things into this deeply dysfunctional family); and the final lines of the scene which, perhaps more than anything else, tightly draws the "like mother, like daughter" connection between Violet and Barbara.

Discussion Question 1

Given Mattie Fae's apparent attitude towards Little Charles (i.e. belittling and patronizing), and his apparent determination to get away, what are the possible metaphoric values of his "accidental" destruction of her casserole?

Discussion Question 2

What aspects of this section of the play manifest its thematic interest in breaking free? Think both literally and metaphorically.

Discussion Question 3

What factors in the lives of Barbara and Violet, aside from their relationship with each other, can be seen as powerful triggers for their explosion of anger and their physical confrontation?

Vocabulary

liable, patriarch, replenish, adrenaline, legitimate, ravenous, adversarial, antagonize, crux, scintillate

Act Three, Scene 1

Summary

A few days after the end of Act Two, Barbara, Karen, and Ivy sit in the study and drink whiskey while the other members of the family stay in other parts of the house. Violet is off by herself.

Conversation between the three sisters reveals that Violet's doctor thinks she needs to go to an institution; that her doctor didn't realize she was taking so many pills; that Violet was getting pills from several doctors; and that nothing has really changed for Violet since she went into rehab the first time, and smuggled pills in with her in her vagina (which Barbara suggests might be called by several different names, which sets her and her sisters laughing). Further conversation reveals that Barbara was trying to keep the situation between her and Bill a secret from her sisters; that the sisters have an idea about Ivy's relationship with Little Charles; and that their relationship began, Ivy says, after she found out she had cervical cancer and had a hysterectomy. Further conversation leads to arguments over who is going to take care of Violet now that she's going to be even more difficult in the aftermath of Beverly's death. Those arguments reveal that Ivy hasn't felt the same sisterly bond that Barbara and Karen say they feel; that she and Charles (which is what she insists on calling Little Charles) have something special and are moving to New York in order to make it a reality; and that there is disagreement over which daughter was the favorite of which parent, with Ivy telling Barbara that she, Barbara, was their MOTHER'S favorite, not their father's. Ivy also suggests that family means nothing more than a connection because of "a random selection of cells", that Beverly's choices were Beverly's responsibility, and that because she and Karen are both moving away, taking care of Violet is now Barbara's responsibility alone.

Violet comes in, telling her daughters that she always somehow identified with the girlish, sisterly side of their lives, and telling a story about how she longed for a beautiful pair of cowboy boots because a boy she liked had a pair she liked, and how her mother teased her with ideas of a wonderful Christmas present – but how, on Christmas morning, she woke up to find that her present was a pair of "men's work boots, holes in the toes, chewed up laces, caked in mud and dog shit." Her daughters respond with empathy and horror, while Violet comments that she must have gotten her mean-ness from her mother. Barbara asks Karen and Ivy to leave, and they go. Barbara apologies to her mother for what happened after the funeral. The two declare a truce, and Barbara asks how she can help Violet beat the pills this time. Violet insists she doesn't need help, and that she will manage.

In the living room, Little Charles apologizes to Ivy for almost telling their secret, and she forgives him. As he's singing her a tender song, they are interrupted by Charlie and Mattie Fae, who berates her son. Little Charles tries to fight back and Charlie tries to calm her down, but she continues – until, that is, Charlie sends Little Charles and Ivy

out and then, with Barbara overhearing, takes Mattie Fae to task for being so mean … as mean as her sister and her mother. Mattie Fae tries to argue, but Charlie says that for her to be so mean dishonors the memory of Beverly, who Charlie says was a good man, adding that if Mattie Fae doesn't change the way she acts towards their son, their marriage isn't going to make it to its next anniversary.

After Charlie goes, Barbara apologizes to Mattie Fae for eavesdropping. Mattie Fae asks her to tell the truth about whether there is something going on between Little Charles and Ivy. Barbara hesitates; Mattie Fae insists; Barbara says there is; and Mattie Fae tells her she (Barbara) has to put an end to it, revealing that Little Charles is the product of a long-ago affair between her and Beverly and telling Barbara that it's her responsibility to do something because, as she said at the funeral dinner, she's running things.

Analysis

The primary focus in this scene is on the unveiling of family secrets, everything from Violet's ways of keeping her pills secret to the truth about Ivy and Little Charles to Mattie Fae's revelation of Little Charles' true parentage. There is the sense here, as there is throughout the play, that characters reveal secrets about themselves and their situation in an attempt to work through guilt and/or pain; to help other characters face truths about a particular situation; and / or to create a different environment in which to face the future. In other words, the telling of secrets can be seen as relating / manifesting two others of the play's central themes: the desire to break free, and the longing for connection.

Meanwhile, there are also developments in the play's thematic emphasis on mother – daughter relationships. Violet's story about the boots given to her by her mother reinforces the previously referenced idea that her relationship with her mother was as difficult as her (Violet's) relationship with her daughters, and for similar reasons that Violet herself now seems able to identify. The question here, given what Mattie Fae says about Little Charles, is how exactly her mother affected HER relationships: the narrative indicates that while there is clearly a tendency towards verbal violence passed between mother and both daughters, there is also a sense, in the mother-Mattie Fae relationship, of parallels in their attitudes towards men.

The final noteworthy point about this scene relates to Ivy's comments about the nature of family – specifically, that it's a "random collection of cells". There are several elements of this statement that are worthy of considering: does Ivy think this way because she's so desperate to get away from her family? Does she really think this is true? Is she trying to deny the plainly evident genetic and/or emotional similarities between her sisters (particularly Barbara) and their mother? Between their mother and HER mother? The narrative makes it entirely clear, but it does seem fairly significant that Ivy makes this statement in the middle of a play that suggests there is nothing random at all about the connections / similarities between members of the same family.

Discussion Question 1

How, specifically, does the telling of each family secret relate to the theme of breaking free? Of longing for connection? How does the teller of the secret hope to engineer freedom? How does the teller of the secret hope to engineer connection?

Discussion Question 2

What do you imagine might be Barbara’s reaction to hearing that she was her mother’s favorite child, not her father’s? The narrative doesn't suggest one: what do you think she might think / feel as a result of hearing this information? Is Violet telling the truth, or not?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the trigger for Mattie Fae revealing the truth about Little Charles to Barbara? What specific incident makes Mattie Fae decide that this is the right time to reveal the truth?

Vocabulary

pensive, malpractice, cervical, hysterectomy, perpetuate, obligation, alleviate, procreate, whimsy, cumulative, begrudge, prerogative, lucid

Act Three, Scenes 2, 3, and 4

Summary

The lights suddenly go back on. Steve and Jean's clothes are messy as they turn to look at Johnna, facing them down with a heavy frying pan in her hand. Steve tries to calm her, but she hits him with the pan and knocks him down. His shouting in pain brings in Bill, Barbara, and Karen, who reacts with a scream and runs to Steve. Johnna explains what she saw, Barbara attacks Steve, Karen tries to defend him, Bill tells Karen to get Steve out, Steve shouts that Jean said she was fifteen, Barbara reveals that she was fourteen, Karen tells her to back off, and she and Steve go into the living room and pack their things. Barbara erupts in anger, Bill tries to calm her down, Jean tries to get them BOTH to calm down, saying they only smoked some pot. Barbara tells her that that's not all that happened, Bill reminds her she's only fourteen, Jean says that's only a few years younger than HE likes them – and Barbara slaps her, calling her a freak. Jean runs off, Bill asks Barbara what's wrong with her, and Johnna leaves.

Steve also goes, carrying suitcases. Barbara goes in to talk to Karen, but before Barbara can say anything, Karen announces that she and Steve are leaving; that Barbara should honestly find out how much Jean was involved in what just happened; and that nothing is ever as black and white, about anything, as Karen says Barbara believes it is. Karen then goes, reminding Barbara that in a few months, she and Steve will be on their honeymoon.

Bill comes in, announcing that he's taking Jean home with him. Barbara apologizes for being a failure "as a sister, as a mother, as a wife". As he tries to convince her she didn't, he tells her she's got about forty years of fighting and making up ahead of her. Until she dies. Barbara confirms with him that it's not likely he's coming back … and that she's never really going to understand why. Bill goes. Barbara watches him, sobbing out "I love you."

Scene 3 - Barbara, after a few drinks, talks with Johnna in Beverly's study. She reminisces about the last time she talked with her father, and how he seemed to be grieving something: his marriage, his family, America – she doesn't know, but he sounded hopeless. Johnna quietly interrupts to ask whether she's fired. Barbara says she isn't, that she's welcome to stay but doesn't have to – after all, she (Barbara) is still around. Johnna says she's prepared to stay because she needs the work. Barbara asks what her father told Johnna. She says he told her that his daughters and granddaughter were "his joy". Barbara thanks her for lying, and then promises to keep paying Johnna's salary. After Johnna goes, Barbara pours herself some more whiskey and says to herself "I'm still here, goddamn it."

Scene 4 – Barbara has a flirtatious conversation with Sheriff Gilbeau in which he reveals that he's divorced with three daughters; in which she reveals that she is probably going to get a divorce; and that he has discovered that for the two nights

before he died, Beverly was staying in a nearby motel, but there's no evidence as to why. Barbara suggests he was building up the courage to kill himself: Gilbeau suggests he was "overcoming the courage not to." Barbara says she doesn't quite understand. After "a sad, still moment", Gilbeau asks if he can take Barbara out for lunch. She starts touching him – he resists – she starts kissing him – he starts to take her arms – she moves away. He becomes confused. She says she's forgotten what she looks like.

Analysis

The emphasis in this section is on Barbara: her discoveries, her transformations, her reactions, her conflicts, her choices, and her longings. Virtually all of the play's themes manifest across and throughout the narrative of these three scenes: various aspects of mother / daughter relationships (Barbara and her mother, Barbara and her daughter); family secrets (Jean's secret marijuana use; Karen's comment that nothing in families is black and white, implying that there are always secrets; longing for connection; and breaking free. About the only theme that isn't overtly explored here is the play's interest in racism – or perhaps it is, given that Barbara's efforts to make a connection with Johnna seem, on some level, to be an attempt to countermand and/or compensate for the racist attitudes that Johnna has experienced at Violet's hands.

There is the strong sense that over the course of these three scenes, Barbara seems to be making an effort to change things about herself and the situation she's in: she seems aware, or at least to be becoming aware, just how much like her mother she is; how much more like her she has the potential to become; and how much she wants to be different. The former manifests in her confrontation with Jean, which can be seen as a trigger for Barbara's realization that, for lack of a better term, she's in trouble. The latter (i.e. Barbara's determination to be different) manifests most vividly in her scene with Gilbeau, in which she seems to be trying to be found attractive in a way that her mother earlier said that older women were NOT. The fact that she pulls away from him suggests that she's still confused, perhaps a little frightened, by the longings and confusions and uncertainty in her … that while she knows she doesn't want to be her mother, she doesn't know who she DOES want to be. The violence in both Act 2 and Act 3, in this context, can be seen as an external manifestation of the conflict and anger working INSIDE Barbara: her rage and frustration become physically vented, and in their release, become frightening enough to her that she feels the desperate need to change that results in her approaching Gilbeau.

Other important elements to note include Barbara's reference to the final conversation with her father (which suggests that the narrative has, on some level, something other than family dynamics on its mind), and the return of the "mystery" plot – that is, the question of what happened to Beverly. This manifests in the reference to the two days in the hotel, which adds an interesting layer of intrigue to a narrative line (sub-plot) that had lain quite quiet for a substantial chunk of the narrative. There is also Jean's reference to Bill's affair (in her comment in response to HIS comment about her age), and Barbara's comment about "I'm still here", which can be seen as referring to Violet's

drug-induced rantings at the end of Act 1, and as foreshadowings of similar rantings to come at the end of the play.

Discussion Question 1

Consider Barbara's impressions of her conversation with her father. Given what has happened in the play to this point – its violence, its lies, its secrets – what do you think Beverly might have been referring to in his reference to America in this context?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Johnna really is lying about what Beverly says? Why or why not? If not, if she is telling the truth, why does Barbara believe that she is?

Discussion Question 3

Why is it significant that it's not until this scene that Barbara says "I love you" in relationship to her feelings about Bill? How do you think this ties in with her comment, after her scene with Gilbeau, that she's forgotten what she looks like?

Vocabulary

brandish, grimace, hubris, dissipation, cataclysm, incongruous, nymphomaniac, proposition, infuriate

Act Three, Scene 5

Summary

Scene 5 – Ivy and Barbara are in the dining room. Initially, their conversation refers to how “clean” Violet is from her drug use, with Barbara saying that things are improving – not perfect, but improving. Ivy worries about whether to tell Violet about her and Little Charles, and Barbara tries to talk her out of the whole idea. As Johnna brings them a catfish dinner, Violet appears, making her way to the dining room. Barbara speaks roughly and crudely to Ivy; Ivy asks “who are you to speak to me like this?” and at that moment, Violet appears, intending to join Ivy and Barbara at the dinner table.

Barbara calls for Johnna to bring another serving of fish, which she does and then goes out, saying she’ll eat in her room. An argument ensues over whether Violet is going to eat, which Ivy tries to interrupt with what she has to say about her and Little Charles. Barbara gests increasingly upset, the three women end up throwing various pieces of china and breaking them, and Barbara finally gives in: Ivy can say what she wants. Just as Ivy is saying “Little Charles and I”, Violet interrupts and completes the sentence “Little Charles and you are brother and sister. I know that.” Much to the shock of both Ivy and Barbara, Violet confesses that she knew about the affair between Beverly and Mattie Fae; that Beverly “tore himself up over it for thirty some odd years”; and that she figures it’s best for everyone if the truth comes out. Ivy pushes herself away from the table, hurtling through the house and out the front door followed by Barbara, who tries to get Ivy to not blame her: it was Violet who did this. Ivy says that there’s no difference between the two of them, Violet and Barbara, and leaves.

Barbara goes back to Violet, who is convinced that Ivy will change her mind and stay, adding that she’s not strong like either her (Violet) or Barbara. She goes on to say that she hopes Beverly’s suicide wasn’t related to his knowing about Little Charlie, and about his knowing that SHE knew, adding that when she called him at the motel … at that Barbara interrupts her, realizing that her mother knew where her father was. Violet reveals that she knew, and that she called on the Monday after she got the safety deposit box, but that he’d already checked out. She reveals that Beverly left her a note for her to call him, which she did, reiterating that she did so after she got the safety deposit box and referring again to the “arrangement” they had about their money. Barbara reacts with shock, asking whether the note said that Beverly was planning to kill himself. Violet doesn’t answer, but goes on to say that part of the reason Beverly killed himself was his loneliness and anger at Barbara leaving. Violet then goes into Beverly’s study, shouting about the cruel joke he played on her by leaving all his papers. He thought, she says, that he could prove she was weaker than he was, so she waited to get the safety deposit box, and then shouts to Beverly that she’s finally proven to him that she’s stronger.

Barbara quietly agrees, kisses Violet, collects her things, and leaves. Violet chases her, calling out first her name, then Ivy’s. When she realizes that neither of them is there,

she panics. She calls for Beverly, briefly plays some music and then scratches the record into silence. She then calls for Johnna, eventually crawling up the stairs to Johnna's room. Johnna takes Violet's head into her lab and calms her as Violet repeats "and then you're gone" over and over and over again … Johnna sings quietly to comfort her.

End of Play.

Analysis

This scene contains the play's thematic and narrative climaxes. The latter comes at the point not where the final pieces of the "what happened to Beverly?" mystery fall into place, but rather at the point where Violet goes into the study and shouts at him. There is the very clear sense here that the events of the play, the events of the days between the events of the play, and arguably the events of Beverly and Violet's marriage have been, at least for Violet, a competition to see who was the stronger – who could outlast whom. Violet clearly sees her situation at this point (her having possession of the valuable contents of the safety deposit as well as possession of the house and what she believes to be control of her daughters' lives) as a victory over her husband, a perception perhaps enhanced by the mysterious contents of the note he left behind. The play doesn't come out and explain what happened, but it does seem to suggest that Violet at the very least believed that he intended to kill himself; that she intended to leave him alone with that intention; and that she planned all along to make sure that she got control of the contents of that safety deposit box, again as part of her determination to have victory over him.

The moment in the study is the climax of the play's story: the climax of its primary theme (mother/daughter relationships) comes in the moments afterwards, in which Barbara seems to realize that she is on too dangerous a path to stay on: the confrontation with Ivy seems to join forces with Violet's overheard shouting in the study to show Barbara how dangerously close she is to treating people the same way her mother does, perhaps that she's already crossed the line. She seems to take steps (literally) to make sure that she doesn't become any worse.

Other important themes that climax in this scene include the "family secrets" theme (which climaxes in the entirely unexpected revelation that Violet knew about Beverly, Mattie Fae, and Little Charles); and the themes of longing for connection and racism, both of which climax in the final moments of the play – that is, the scene between Johnna and Violet in Johnna's room. The moment is hugely ironic, given how negatively Violet has viewed Johnna over the course of the play: it also illustrates just how much Violet has come to realize how alone, and how desperate for connection, she has become. Meanwhile, the fact that Violet finds that connection and collapses in the arms of the one character in the entire play who has consistently behaved responsibly, respectfully, and out of compassion for her fellow human beings shows just how empty Violet's seemingly racist reactions have been.

The ultimate irony, of course, is that Violet realizes, and acts on, her need for human connection after she's lost just about every relationship from which she might have had it – her husband, her daughters, perhaps even her granddaughter. She might still be able to get connection from Mattie Fae, but given that they are both monstrous daughters of the same monstrous mother, that possibility seems unlikely. The irony is that Violet gets the connection she needs not just from a stranger, but from the one person who has withstood, relatively unscathed, her abuse.

Perhaps the ultimate irony is that moments after she proclaims that she's the stronger, she becomes the weakest and most vulnerable she's ever been.

Discussion Question 1

Who is Violet referring to, do you think, when she talks at the end of the play about someone being "gone"?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think was in the note that Beverly left for Violet? Was it a suicide note? Explain your answer.

Discussion Question 3

Who do you think Violet is referring to when, in Johnna's room, she repeats "and then you're gone" over and over?

Vocabulary

disoriented, ingrate

Characters

Barbara Fordham

Barbara is the first of the play's two major characters, the second being her mother, Violet. Their relationship, and Barbara's apparent character / identity, manifest the play's thematic exploration of mother-daughter relationships, and most specifically how daughters end up like their mothers. Barbara, much as she would hate to admit it, is very like her mother, at least as the play begins: angry, bitter, foul-mouthed, and at times quite aggressive, even vicious. Over the course of the play, as both characters are faced with more and more challenges, the similarities become more apparent: they both have a tendency towards verbal and emotional violence; they both have unhappy marriages; and they both have extremely difficult, complicated relationship with their daughters.

That said, there are a couple of immediately apparent differences between the two characters: Barbara seems to have a more immediate, more present sense of vulnerability, which in turn seems to be connected to the sense that the difficulties with her marriage and her daughter are more recent than similar difficulties experienced by Violet. There is also the very clear sense that Barbara is still in love with her husband, and beneath her anger and frustration, still has longings for their relationship to work. Finally, there is the sense that Barbara, in spite of her tendency towards anger and emotional violence, has an accessible sense of remorse in the aftermath of her actions. Violet, on the other hand, seems not to: any remorse she might feel seems to be buried beneath bitterness and anger.

The primary difference between Barbara and Violet, however, is that Barbara seems to experience some important realizations, and the beginnings of important transformations, as the result of the events of the play. She recognizes the need for change in herself: there is the sense that it might be too late to repair all the damage that has occurred in her life and relationships, but there is also the sense that it's not too late for Barbara to repair the damage to her identity. All in all, this aspect of her character sets her further apart from her mother than these other differences, and defines the answer to a key question about the play: which character is its actual protagonist.

Violet Weston

Violet is the second of the play's two central characters. Violet is in her sixties, is addicted to various kinds of pain-killing medication (taken in the form of pills), is suffering from cancer of the mouth, and as the play begins, has been unhappily married to poet and academic Beverly for several years. Shortly after the play begins, however, Beverly disappears: later in the action, Violet and the rest of her family learn that Beverly has died: the audience learns that it was quite possibly suicide. As a result of

this discovery, Violet's anger, frustration, and viciousness seem to intensify, leading her into confrontations with her family that are both emotionally and physically violent. By the narrative's conclusion, however, her vituperative behavior and out-of-control addictions have driven her family away, and she is left alone with Johnna, someone whom she had reviled in nastily racist terms throughout the story.

All that said, the narrative clearly communicates the likelihood that Violet's anger, frustration, and nastiness spring from deep, long-standing pain. At various times, comments made by various characters (including Violet herself) suggest that she suffered significant emotional abuse at the hands of a mother who, it seems, was as vicious to her children as Violet is to hers. There is also the sense that in many ways, Violet and Beverly drifted into a mutually painful, thoroughly unhappy marriage fairly early on, and as a result found themselves in positions where they both ended up in addictions; both ended up feeling isolated; and both had whatever love and/or affection they had for each other turn to hatred, rivalry, and disgust.

As the play concludes, Violet finds herself in a place of loneliness and desperation, fear and abandonment. There is little or no sense of what she is going to do next with her life: there is, however, the very clear sense that whatever it is, she is going to do it virtually alone. In that sense, her story is one that reflects the darker side of the play's thematic interest in the power of / need for connection: what happens to someone when important connections are broken.

Beverly Weston

Beverly is Barbara's father, and Violet's husband. He appears only in the play's prologue, but the influence of his actions (i.e. in apparently killing himself) plays out throughout the entire narrative. He is a poet and academic, an alcoholic parent, and the long-suffering husband of Violet's violence. His apparent suicide seems to be a clear attempt to escape various aspects of his life, but because there is no explicitly identified suicide note, the specific reasons for his doing what he did / does remain unidentified.

Ivy Weston

Ivy is Beverly and Violet's middle daughter. Quiet, nervous, and sensitive, there is the sense that of the couple's three children, she is the one most evidently troubled by her mother's verbal and emotional abuse. Her determination to get away from the painful family environment in which she finds herself is a vivid manifestation of the play's thematic interest in the importance and/or value of breaking free.

Karen Weston

Karen is Beverly and Violet's youngest daughter. Having come out of several troubled relationships, she comes into the play and into the difficult family situation it dramatizes with a new boyfriend (Steve - see below) and a new outlook - that she is going to be

responsive only to herself and her needs. This leads to what might be interpreted by audiences and readers as essentially selfish, at times willfully blind responses to the circumstances around her.

Bill Fordham

Bill is Barbara's husband. Like both Barbara and her father, Bill is an academic. Well meaning and long-frustrated by Barbara's anger and volatility, he strives to smooth the waters of their relationship as much as he can, even though those waters have been stirred up by his recent affair. His perceptive comments on Barbara's similarities to her mother trigger a number of confrontations and realizations, with his departure from the family home (and presumably from the marriage) being the final, perhaps most significant, triggers in Barbara's eventual transformation.

Jean Fordham

Jean is Bill and Barbara's teenage daughter. Rebellious and dissatisfied, her frustrations lead her to confrontations with both her parents that, in many ways, echo confrontations between her mother and grandmother. Jean's habit of smoking marijuana, meanwhile, leads to one of the play's defining moments, a confrontation that leads to further revelations of difficult family secrets.

Steve Hiedebrecht

Steve is Karen Weston's new boyfriend, someone in whom she has placed a lot of trust and affection and who, ultimately, proves to be unworthy of both. His drug-defined relationship with Jean, and the confrontations that result from the discovery of that relationship, seem to have little or no effect on Karen's attitude towards him, although the play leaves open the question of how their relationship will unfold in the aftermath of their departure from the Weston home.

Mattie Fae Aiken

Mattie Fae is Violet's sister. Blunt, somewhat insensitive, and as emotionally violent as her sister and her mother, Mattie Fae carries with her an important family secret that comes as a surprise to many of the characters who hear it, but not to Violet who, in a surprise revelation, has known all along the truth that Mattie Fae reveals.

Charlie

Charlie is Mattie Fae's long-suffering husband, whose tolerance of his wife's angry outspokenness parallels that of Violet's husband Beverly, and Bill's tolerance of

Barbara. Unlike Beverly, however, but like Bill, Charlie finds the strength and the courage to challenge his wife on her behavior.

Little Charles

Little Charles is the son of Mattie Fae and Charlie. He comes across as self-conscious, nervous, and timid, primarily the result of his mother's abusive attitude towards him. This attitude is the primary reason why he, like and alongside Ivy, makes at least the first steps to break away. The revelation of Little Charles' true parentage (i.e. that he was the result of a long-ago affair between Beverly and Mattie Fae) triggers important confrontations between various family members, and is a key manifestation of the play's thematic interest in the power / danger associated with family secrets.

Johnna Montevata

The quiet but always present Johnna is the new housekeeper hired by Beverly. As truths about the reasons for Beverly's disappearance emerge, there is the sense that she is hired so Beverly's family (particularly Violet) will be taken care of in the aftermath of his death. Johnna is Native American, has a positive connection with her family, and is generally both well-intentioned and quietly strong willed, all aspects of her identity that create / define various aspects of her relationship with members of the Weston family.

Sheriff Gilbeau

The Sheriff appears only a couple of times in the narrative. On both occasions he brings important information associated with Beverly's disappearance, but that is not the only function of his character. Later in the play, Barbara attempts to rekindle a relationship that they had several years previously, an attempt that ultimately fails but which serves as an important trigger for revelations / actions associated with Barbara's journey of transformation as the play's protagonist.

Violet and Mattie Fae's Mother

This character never appears in the play, but is spoken about several times and plays an important role in manifesting one of the play's key themes. Her violent, at times cruel treatment of her daughters comes across as having a defining effect on how Violet and Mattie Fae treat THEIR children, meaning that the references to her play an important role in manifesting the play's thematic interest in mother / daughter relationships.

Symbols and Symbolism

"Meadowlark"

"Meadowlark" is the name of Beverly's one published book of poetry. Written and published early in his career / academic life, and dedicated to Violet, it represents the hope and possibility of his early years, both aspects of his life that because of his frustrating career and marriage, never reached their full potential.

Violet's Pills

Violet is addicted to a wide variety of pain killing substances. They represent her inability to face the pain and frustrations in her life, and also triggers that she uses as a release for her anger.

Alcohol

In the same way as Violet is addicted to pills, Beverly is addicted to alcohol and drinking, and for the same reasons: his inability to face / cope with the disappointments and pain in his life. There is the sense throughout the narrative that Barbara is on her way to using the same technique to cope with the same sort of difficulties.

Marijuana

In the same way that Violet uses pills, and in the same way as Beverly and Barbara to use alcohol (i.e. to help deal with emotional pain), Jean seems to use marijuana to deal with her emotional / personal difficulties. Also like the use of pills and alcohol, the use of marijuana leads to painful confrontation and revelation.

The Safety Deposit Box

Several times in the narrative, Violet refers to a safety deposit box kept in her and Beverly's bank. The box contains important documents and other papers that Violet is determined to retain control of, said control seeming to be extremely important to her. Her decision to gain that control before contacting police in response to Beverly's disappearance indicates how important both the control and the documents are to her.

Beverly's Papers

Beverly's other papers (i.e. the ones not kept in the safety deposit box but in his study) are a trigger for frustration and anger in Violet. They seem to represent, for her, aspects

of his life that she can't control, that sort of control over him being extremely important to her.

Johnna's Personal Belongings

Johnna keeps pictures of her parents in her room, and also keeps her umbilical cord (i.e. the cord that physically tied her to her mother while she - Johnna - was in her womb). The fact that Johnna regards both these aspects of her family and her history with them with respect and affection is a vivid contrast to the angry, resentful ways in which virtually all the cross-generational members of the Weston family regard their family and its history.

Heat

Throughout the play, there are references to how hot Violet insists upon keeping the family home. There is the sense that this physical heat is a metaphorical representation of the emotional heat and intensity (i.e. the emotional "temperature") of the relationships within the family.

Light

In the same way that heat tends to represent the emotional tensions of the home, light (or its absence) seems to represent emotional openness / truth. In the first act, the house is kept deliberately dark: as the narrative progresses, as truth and feeling comes more into the open, the actual light in the house increases.

Beverly's Note

Late in the play, it's revealed that Beverly left a note behind before he disappeared, a note Violet found and kept secret from the rest of the family. While its entire contents are never revealed (there is the sense that it contains information about where Beverly went), there is the sense that it may be a suicide note - or, at least, imply that Beverly was intending to kill himself. Violet's withholding of the note represents her intention to both control what the family knows and thinks about Beverly and her desire to "win" in their competition of strength and emotional / marital endurance.

Settings

The Plains

The wide open spaces, sense of desolation, and difficult terrain of the American Plains is the overall physical setting of the play. At the same time, the struggle to survive on the plains can be seen as the emotional context, and/or trigger, for much of the play's conflict: the family is struggling to survive in the midst of its emotional desolation in the same way as the pioneers struggled to survive in the midst of the physical and psychological desolation associated with the plains.

The Weston Home

The large home of the Weston family is the setting for the play's action. Its physical state (dark, hot, and rundown) is a reflection of the family's essential emotional, psychological, and/or spiritual state.

Beverly's Study

Within the Weston home, there are three rooms that are the settings for important scenes and also have important dramatic / thematic resonances. The first is Beverly's study, a place where, it seems, he feels safe from Violet while, at the same time, surrounded by manifestations / echoes of his unsuccessful past. Several key scenes take place here, including the prologue, Barbara's conversation with her sisters, and Violet's confrontation with Beverly's memory.

The Dining Room

The dining room is the second of the three most narratively and metaphorically significant rooms in the Weston house. It is the setting for much of the action in Act Two, the single-scene act that serves as the trigger for many of the play's most important revelations and confrontations.

Johnna's Room

This is the third of the three most significant rooms in the Weston home. It is the setting for two key scenes: Act 1, Scene 2 (in which Jean reveals the vulnerability caused by her difficult relationship with her family and which Johnna, in contrast, reveals the good relationship she has with hers); and the final moments of the play, in which Violet (after essentially being abandoned by her family) crawls to Johnna for comfort. In short, the room is the symbolically significant setting for key manifestations of the play's thematic interest in the need for connection.

Themes and Motifs

Mother / Daughter Relationships

This is the play's central theme, the defining element of much of its action and its primary characters. The development and evolution of the play's core relationship between Violet and her oldest daughter Barbara is the primary manifestation of this theme, functioning on several levels: confrontational, confessional, and comparative. This last is most significant, in that dialogue, action, and the reactions of other characters define Violet and Barbara as being quite similar to each other (i.e. like mother, like daughter). This aspect of the mother-daughter relationship becomes, for Barbara at least, the most unpleasant aspect of her relationship with her mother and the one that eventually triggers significant change in her (Barbara).

There are three other main ways in which this theme manifests. The first is in Violet's treatment of her other daughters, Ivy and Karen: she is manipulative and judgmental of the former and quite dismissive of the latter, showing herself to be virtually unable to show affection. This is not to say that she has no need of any of her daughters: as the end of the play suggests, she needs them more than she would let herself accept, or admit. It could be argued, in fact, that she does need them, but as victims. Hurt by those around her, Violet needs someone to vent that hurt onto, and her daughters are the most available victims, the most familiar: after all, Violet's mother hurt HER daughters, so the pattern of behavior is familiar, and repeatable.

This, in turn, is the next secondary manifestation of the theme: in the behavior of the mother of Violet and Mattie Fae, who behaved to them as Violet behaves to her daughters, in vicious, hurtful, and neglectful ways that are spoken about but never seen. This generational legacy of pain is, in its turn, passed on by Barbara to HER daughter, Jean – the last of the most significant manifestations of this particular theme. There is the sense that Barbara, at the play's end, has the potential to escape that legacy, a manifestation of another of the play's key themes: breaking free.

Breaking Free

Each of the central characters, in his or her own way, has an experience of feeling constricted or experiencing suffering. They are trapped, confined, and DE-fined by external circumstances, and in their own ways, make attempts to break free of those circumstances and transform their lives into something better. There is a range of circumstances here: a couple of bad marriages, one or two bad family experiences, too much parental control, situations of being on the receiving end of resentment and vicious behavior, and addictions. In almost every case, the characters trying to exist within these external constrictions are desperately struggling to survive within them and to get out. The tactics they employ to do so vary wildly: confrontation, avoidance, and extreme attempts at escape are among the most notable. Some of these tactics or

attempts are successful; some lead to further entrapment; and some are rejected / abandoned because they end up causing more pain than the initial circumstances that the characters are trying to escape.

There are two key points to note about how this theme manifests. One is that there is one character in the large cast who doesn't, on some level, seem either trapped or desperate to escape. This is Johnna who, in spite of being surrounded by dysfunction and rage, not to mention racism, maintains a sense of calm and purpose, acknowledging that she is in this situation by clearly motivated choice (i.e. she needs to earn a living) and seems to be making particular efforts to endure with a sense of self and personal integrity intact: she is one of the few characters in the play, if not the only character, who comes to the defense of another character (Jean) for no other reason than it's the right thing to do: every other character (Bill, Karen, Barbara) who comes to another character's defense does so for selfish, sometimes self-deluded reasons.

The second key point to note about this particular theme is that at the play's conclusion, only one character seems to be able, or prepared, to make a successful attempt at breaking free. This is Barbara, whose journey of transformation as protagonist is clearly defined, at its beginning, by her experience of being confined and punished by a variety of circumstances, but who, at the play's conclusion, makes the most self-aware, self-determined, and self-respectful attempt to break free of all the characters.

Family Secrets

Throughout the narrative, the motivations and actions of the characters are revealed as being triggered by having or knowing family secrets. Characters keep secrets, or try to keep them; characters are hurt and/or changed when those secrets are revealed; and characters deploy secrets as weapons in conflicts with each other, intending to humiliate, victimize, or wound other characters by attacking them with the truth. Many of the characters protest at various times that both the keeping and the unveiling of secrets is being done for the general good. Initially, these comments or claims appear to be self-justification of what also appears to be the deliberate causing of pain. When the truth is revealed (i.e. the truth about Barbara and Bill's relationship; the truth about Little Charles' parentage; the truth about Violet's actions around Beverly's disappearance; the truths about Violet's and Beverly's childhoods), the initial result is wounding to those that hear it. There is the clear sense, however, that ultimately the changes caused by these painful revelations are in the long run likely to lead to a healthier situation for the characters involved.

Here it's important to note that characters also keep secrets from themselves, living in denial about aspects of their character and their situation. The primary examples are Violet and Barbara, the former living in denial about her addiction and the sources and needs associated with her rage; the latter living in denial about how much she is like the mother that she hates. Both these characters come face to face with the secrets they've been hiding from themselves, but their reactions are very different: as previously noted, Violet ends up crippled by her confrontation with the truth, while Barbara seems to be

pushed into new experiences and choices of freedom. The truth, in her case, seems to be at least beginning to set her free.

Longing for Connection

Throughout the play, characters appear to be making efforts to reach out to one another and find some kind of honest, respectful, affectionate, positive connection with one another. These moments serve as vivid contrasts to the more frequent moments of confrontation and emotional violence that define the primary emotional context of this family: the general sense of resentment, anger, and bitterness. Characters reach for something other than this traditional, familiar way of being. Their longings for connection, in many ways, can be seen as efforts to break free from a way of living and relating that feels, to the more sensitive characters, as destructive.

The important point to note here is that in some cases, actions or words of anger and confrontation are, in fact, a reaching out, a longing to be heard and understood. The key example of this is the relationship between Barbara and Bill, in which both characters can be seen as struggling to have their feelings, needs, and circumstances recognized and respected; underneath their anger and recrimination, there is a clear need to be seen and valued, a need to have their respective vulnerabilities understood. In this valuing and understanding, it seems, there is connection, and possibly forgiveness. Barbara, as she eventually admits, still loves her husband. This love makes her pain worse, meaning that her need to have that pain recognized, for him to connect and/or empathize with it, is stronger. The need to connect is also apparent in the character of Bill, even though, it could be argued, his need for connection leads to his affair. It's important to note, however, that as he says (and the reader / audience is inclined to believe him) he was UN-able to connect with the bitter and angry Barbara, so sought (and found) connection with someone else. This does not justify or excuse his actions; it does, however, explain them, and because the audience/reader sees how vicious and wounding Barbara can be, there is at least the potential for some degree of empathy with Bill and his needs to connect with SOMEONE. Ultimately, this sense of layering, of need and vulnerability beneath anger is also true of the play's central relationship: that of Barbara with her mother.

The most vivid evocation of this theme comes in the play's final moments as Violet, who has broken her connections with virtually everyone in her family, reveals and acts on her need by reaching out to arguably the last person that everyone expects: Johnna, a woman whose relationship with Violet has been colored by the last of the play's main themes: racism.

Racism

While many of the play's other themes manifest in several relationships and circumstances, there is really only one clear manifestation of racism: Violet's negative, corrosively abusive attitude towards Johnna. While there are other components of this

attitude and Violet's resulting actions (resentment of being replaced; anger at Beverly; fear of her unknown future), her racism-defined epithets, insults, and disrespect seem to be defined primarily by the fact that Johnna is an Indian, and by Violet's apparent belief that Indians are worthy only of contempt. The attitudes of other characters might be interpreted as emerging from a similar attitude: Charlie's request that Johnna fetch him a beer, for example, is clearly primarily defined by his attitude that she is a servant, but while there may be an implied element of racism, it must be noted that Violet is the only character who uses the word "Indian" with an attitude of it being a curse word.

The reason this thematic element is so significant is that it shapes and adds meaning to the play's final moments: specifically, Violet's reaching out to Johnna in her (Violet's) vulnerability and loss. It speaks to how deep and desperate those experiences are that she reaches out to someone whom she has reviled so viciously and so thoughtlessly. Her actions make the thematically significant point that when it comes to the human need to connect race doesn't matter: humanity is humanity, and the comfort of being held and touched isn't defined by race.

One additional point: early in the narrative, Barbara makes a passing but vivid reference to the Plains, an area of land settled by whites at the expense of Indians who suffered enormously as the result of white colonization. There is a possible implied link between this comment and Violet's attitude: an older white woman with a sense that the land she has claimed (i.e. her home) has no room in it for those who in her mind, are inferiors. In other words, Violet behaves towards Johnna in a racism-defined way that echoes / reflects the attitudes of the whites who took control of land in which Native Americans made their home.

Styles

Point of View

Because this is a play, there is no particular narrative point of view – no first person, no third person, no present tense, no past tense. What there is, is a sense of focus: which character is protagonist, the character whose actions and/or journey of transformation drives and/or defines the narrative and its themes. Because the narrative puts so much attention on two characters, Barbara and Violet, there is a sense that either one could be protagonist.

There is one important criteria that defines Barbara as protagonist: if the question of protagonist-ship is defined, as it often is, by which character changes, or transforms, the most, then Barbara is the one. Violet at the end of the play, is essentially unchanged from who she was at its beginning. She ends up lonely and vulnerable, but there is the clear sense that she is that way at the play's beginning – she's just covering it up with pills and vicious anger. In other words, at the end of the play, she's revealing who she is: the armor is just stripped away. In Barbara's case, however, the play ends with Barbara clearly making a choice to be different. Over the course of the narrative, she realizes just how lonely she is; just how like her mother she is; and just how much she needs to be different in both ways. These realizations lead her to make a choice in the direction of positive change and growth, the kind of choice that Violet doesn't make. Therefore, Barbara is the play's protagonist, and ultimately, if the play does have a "point of view", it is focused on her, with Violet functioning as antagonist, or the character who plays the primary, defining role in moving her through the narrative and along her journey of transformation.

Language and Meaning

The first point to note about the use of language in this play is exactly that: that it's a play, meaning that meaning, story, action, character, and plot are almost entirely defined by dialogue. With the exception of a few stage directions which define the visual context of the story (i.e. its setting) and elements of its action (i.e. the physical confrontations between Barbara and Violet; the confrontations between Johnna and Steve), there is no prose: only what characters say to each other. From this dialogue, the audience / reader is meant to understand what is happening in the story, why it is happening, and how the action is unfolding. This means that characters are not just saying things to each other, they are DOING things with their words, taking action and working towards achieving their individual goals. The nature of those goals and the reasons characters have them, as well as the reasons why they do what they do to achieve them, are also revealed by what they say. Language (i.e. dialogue) is therefore used to indicate, to suggest, to reveal, and to evoke: it is not used to explain, as prose narration often is.

The second, and related point, to note about language is that it is the play's primary tool to develop themes, and to define relationships between characters. For example, one of the key ways the reader / audience is clued into the thematically significant similarities between Barbara and Violet is that they tend to speak in the same way: sharply, angrily, in sentences and paragraphs liberally punctuated with curse words. Language here manifests the theme of mother/daughter relationships, in the same way as Violet's derogatory language used in relationship to Johnna defines and manifests the theme of racism. On the other hand, there is clear contrast here between how Barbara and Violet talk with how Beverly talks; he speaks in lengthier, more complicated sentences with what might be described as a richer, cleaner vocabulary. Here the narrative draws a parallel between him and Bill, who speaks in a similar way. The result of both these manifestations of language usage is, again, an evocation of theme: Barbara and Violet are not only like each other as individuals, but they are also like each other in the marriages they have entered into.

Structure

The play's overall structure is essentially linear and straightforward. Including the prologue, the action starts at a particular point in time, moves through action and reaction, until it arrives at the climax and its aftermath. There are no diversions from that essential timeline, no flashbacks or flash-forwards, only movement through the present.

That said, there is a sense of time passage between scenes; there are several days (weeks?) between the prologue and the first scene, and several days between each of the scenes that follows. This concentrates the action and conflict around key moments in the story: revelations from the police about what happened to Beverly, the aftermath of his funeral, important discoveries / revelations of family secrets.

Also, because this is a play, there is a division of the action into acts. Each of the three acts in the play is defined by a particular, finite sub-movement within the story as a whole. Act One is defined by the actions of Beverly (i.e. his hiring of Johnna, his disappearance and death). Act Two is defined by the event of the post-funeral dinner and the conflicts that result. Act Three is defined by the aftermath of those conflicts, and the how the characters begin to move on with their lives (or, in Violet's case, don't move on). Here it's important to note that within the acts there are also scenes, each of which is defined by one or more specific unit of action within the sub-movement of the act. The scenes of Act One are defined by a sequence of arrivals and discoveries; the scenes of Act Three are defined by various revelations of truth and the reactions to those revelations. Act Two is defined by a single unit of action: the preparation, the beginning, and violent conclusion of the post-funeral family dinner.

Finally, each scene and/or act is constructed as a mini-play, with its own rising action and its own climax. Thus there is a sense of build throughout the play, of climbing a ladder through confrontation and revelation to each climax, each climax in turn building energy and momentum to the final confrontations, revelations, or decisions at the end of the play.

Quotes

A rambling country house outside Pawhuska, Oklahoma, sixty miles northwest of Tulsa. More than a century old, the house was probably built by a clan of successful Irish homesteaders. Additions, renovations, and repairs have essentially modernized the house until 1972 or so, when all structural care ceased.
-- Stage Directions (Prologue)

Importance: These stage directions sum up not only the geographical location of the house, but an attitude that has made the house appear the way it does in the play.

Violet. My wife. She takes pills, sometimes a great many. And they affect - among other things, her equilibrium. Fortunately, the pills she takes eliminate her need for equilibrium ... my wife takes pills and I drink. That's the bargain we struck - one of the bargains, just one paragraph of our marriage contract - cruel covenant ... I don't drink BECAUSE she takes pills. As to whether she takes pills because I drink - I learned long ago not to speak for my wife. The reasons why we partake are anymore inconsequential.
-- Beverly (Prologue)

Importance: This quote sums up the relationship between Beverly and Violet, and what he sees as the relationship they each have with their respective addictions.

Goddamn your father for putting me through this. For leaving me to handle this. You seen that office of his, all that paperwork, that mess? I can't make heads or tails of it. He hired this Indian a week ago to look after the place for some goddamn reason and now I have a stranger in my house. I don't know what to say to that girl.
-- Violet (Act 1, Scene 1)

Importance: Here Violet reveals a discomforting aspect of her situation, and her unease with Johnna's presence in the house.

This is not the Midwest. All right? MICHIGAN is the Midwest, God knows why. This is the Plains: a state of mind, right, some spiritual affliction, like the blues.
-- Barbara (Act 1, Scene 1)

Importance: In this quote, Barbara hints at her negative attitudes towards the flatness and open spaces of the Plains, the isolated, seemingly desolate environment in which she and her family life.

Oh. That man. What I first fell of with - fell in love with, you know, was his mystery. I thought it was sexy as hell. You knew he was the smartest one in the room, knew if he'd just say something - knock you out. But he'd just stand there, little smile on his face - not say a word. Sexy.
-- Violet (Act 1, Scene 2)

Importance: In this quote, the rambling Violet manages to explain to Barbara and Bill what it was about Beverly that first attracted her.

I think he's got some whiskey - a carton of cigarettes, couple of good spy novels - aaaaand I think I got out on the boat, steered it to a nice spot, somewhere in the shade, close to shore - and he's fishing, and reading, and drinking, and if the mood strikes him, maybe even writing a little. I think he's safe. And I think he'll walk through that door - anytime.
-- Barbara (Act 1, Scene 2)

Importance: Barbara attempts to convince Violet that Beverly is all right.

When a Cheyenne baby is born, their umbilical cord is dried and sewn into this pouch. Turtles for girls, lizards for boys. And we wear it for the rest of our lives ... because if we lose it, our souls belong nowhere and after we die our souls will walk the Earth looking for where we belong."
-- Johnna (Act 1, Scene 2)

Importance: Here Johnna explains to Jean the purpose for keeping her umbilical cord with her, a story that has several resonances with various thematic and narrative aspects of the play.

I was beautiful. Not anymore ... women are beautiful when they're young, and not after. Men can still preserve their sex appeal well into old age. I don't mean those men like you see with shorts and those little purses around their waists. Some men can maintain, if they embrace it - cragginess, weary masculinity. Women just get old and fat and wrinkly ... can we all just stop kidding ourselves? Wouldn't we be better off, all of us, if we stopped lying about these things and told the truth?
-- Violet (Act 2)

Importance: Here Violet speaks, only slightly high on pills, about how she feels about getting old.

Sweet girl, sweet Barbara, my heart breaks for every time you ever felt pain. I wish I coulda shielded you from it. But if you think for a solitary second you can fathom the pain that man endured in his natural life, you got another thing coming.
-- Violet (Act 2, Part 3)

Importance: In response to Barbara's comment that she knows Violet had "a rotten childhood", Violet erupts into a pointed, angry telling of how difficult Beverly's childhood was in comparison to Barbara's.

Secret crushes, secret schemes - province of teenage girls. I can't imagine anything more delicate, or bittersweet. Some part of you girls I just always identified with - no matter how old you get, a woman's hard-pressed to throw off that part of herself.
-- Violet (Act 3, Scene 1)

Importance: Here Violet, in conversation with her three daughters, reveals a vulnerable part of herself that still feels connected to / empathetic with them.

I'm white and over thirty. I don't get in trouble.
-- Steve (Act 3, Scene 2)

Importance: This comment sums up Steve's arrogance, awakens echoes of so-called white privilege and male privilege, and reveals how selfish he really is.

... it's not cut and dried, black and white, good and bad. It lives where everything lives: somewhere in the middle. Where everything lives, where all the rest of us live, EVERYONE BUT YOU.
-- Karen (Act 3, Scene 2)

Importance: As she tells Barbara that Jean might just have had some responsibility for what happened between her and Steve, an angry Karen tells Barbara that nothing is ever as simple as she (Barbara) seems to want to believe it is.

... there was something sad in his voice - or no, not sad, he always sounded sad - something more hopeless than that. As if ... whatever was disappearing had already disappeared. As if it was too late. As if it was already over. And no-one saw it go. This country, this experiment, America, this hubris: what a lament, if no one saw it go. Here today, gone tomorrow. Dissipation is actually much worse than cataclysm.
-- Barbara (Act 3, Scene 3)

Importance: In this quote, Barbara reveals an insight / feeling she got during the last conversation she had with her father, an insight that she thinks applies on several levels of her father's experiences - of America, of his home, of his marriage.

Think there's any way he would've done what he did if you were still here? No, just him and me, here in this house, in the dark, left to just ourselves, abandoned, wasted lifetimes devoted to your care and comfort. So stick that knife of judgment in me, go ahead, but make no mistake, his blood is just as much on your hands as it is on mine."
-- Violet (Act 3, Scene 5)

Importance: Here Violet viciously accuses Barbara of being, in her absence, a key figure in her father's death.