The Humans Study Guide

The Humans by Stephen Karam

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The following version of this play was used to create this study guide: Karam, Stephen. The Humans. Theatre Communications Group, Inc.. New York, NY. 2016.

The play "…takes place in one real-time scene – on a two-level, four-room set – with no blackouts. Life continues in all spaces at all times. While this is difficult to render on the page, the noting of 'upstairs' v. 'downstairs' is a reminder of the exposed 'dollhouse' view the audience has at all times. Throughout the journey, the audience's focus may wander into whichever room it chooses" (Introductory Notes). There are several points in the narrative at which silent reactions are described in detail: these moments are indicated by square brackets []. The action of the play is continuous, and takes place in real time: there are no scene breaks, and no intermission.

The play begins just after the arrival of the elder members of the Blake family (father Erik, mother Deirdre, Erik's mother Momo) at the two-story home of younger daughter Brigid, which she shares with her boyfriend Richard. Also present is elder daughter Aimee, who has just suffered the break-up of a long-term lesbian relationship. As the family gets settled, they all struggle to cope with sudden, unexpected noises from upstairs; with tricky cell phone reception; and the unpredictable, dementia-triggered outbursts of Momo, who is in a wheelchair.

Conversation hints frequently at something uncomfortable that Deirdre and Erik have to share with the younger generation; at Aimee's lingering unhappiness after the breakup; and at Deirdre's unhappiness with the fact that Brigid and Richard are not married. Meanwhile, Richard puts the finishing touches on the meal; everyone consumes alcoholic beverages; and Erik becomes increasingly attentive to what he seems to see as suspicious activity outside the flat.

Over the course of the evening, and as more food and alcohol are consumed, tensions begin to deepen even as years-old family rituals around Thanksgiving are enacted. There are barbed exchanges of challenge and confrontation between Deirdre and Brigid over Deirdre's eating habits and religious faith; similarly barbed exchanges between hard-working Erik and trust-fund baby Richard; increasingly violent (and metaphoric) eruptions of verbal jumble from Momo; and repeated attempts by Aimee to contact her ex-girlfriend. There are also conversations in which both Erik and Richard reveal dreams that have been troubling them recently. Throughout all this, and one by one, the lights in the apartment go out – first the light in the upstairs part of the house, then the light over the staircase linking the two levels. There are also increasingly invasive, and increasingly unpleasant, sounds from outside the apartment.

Eventually, in the aftermath of the main course of dinner being finished, Erik reveals the secret that he and Deirdre have been keeping: he has recently been fired from his job at a Catholic school because of an affair he had with another member of the staff. As Brigid and Aimee fret about what is going to happen to Erik and Deirdre, Erik tries to reassure them that everything will be fine. Meanwhile, Momo becomes increasingly

agitated, Deirdre becomes increasingly tearful, and Richard becomes increasingly withdrawn.

As the play concludes, the family prepares to leave. Erik is left alone in the apartment and is startled by yet more loud noises. He manages to find his way out, however, leaving the darkness and exiting into a hallway filled with light.

Introduction

Summary

The introduction is written by Samuel G. Freedman, “a columnist for the New York Times, a journalism professor at Columbia University, and the author of eight books” (Introduction, ix). He writes of how the play captured the mood and issues of the country in the midst of the 2016 presidential election campaign, particularly issues related to income inequality, downsizing of businesses, and the creeping, deepening fear on both sides of the political equation.

Freedman then describes how the background of playwright Stephen Karam (growing up in blue-collar Scranton, Pennsylvania) prepared him for the work of writing his plays. Freedman also says that all that preparation has culminated in Karam’s work on “The Humans” which, Freedman says, follows in the tradition of other great American plays (“Long Day’s Journey into Night,” “Death of a Salesman,” “The Glass Menagerie,” “A Lie of the Mind,” “Fences”): stories about families that become about something much more – issues that have social, cultural, or psychological qualities. “For the deeper subject that Karam means to plumb concerns the Blakes not only as amusingly fallible individuals but as people being acted upon by larger forces” (Introduction, viii).

Finally, as he sums up some of the play’s key moments, its pointed dialogue, and its humanist visioning, Freedman claims that “with his great heart and expansive social vision, Karam understands, and makes an audience understand, that while anyone can commit [a] mistake, people from the nation’s many Scrantons don’t have the security to survive it whole” (Introduction, ix).

Analysis

Key points to note about the introduction include its references to the play’s timeliness and its setting, both of which suggest that audiences and readers are likely able to perceive a significant degree of realism in the piece. To look at it another way, there is a sense that audiences may be able to gain an insight into the lives of a layer of society that they might not have immediate connection to: theatre audiences tend to have more disposable income, more education, and more job security than the parents in the Blake family, blue-collar workers whose children have risen above the economic and social status of their parents. In other words, the audience has similar perspectives to those of the children in the family: the play can be seen as a reminder of the backgrounds from which those children and audiences have quite possibly emerged.

There is another point to note here, one particularly relevant in the analytical aftermath of the 2016 Presidential election. Analysis of the election’s voting patterns suggests that a large percentage of those who voted for Donald Trump are of a similar mentality to that associated with the elder Blakes – mature, feeling the loss of income and status,

feeling uncared for by “elites” with more “leftist” perspectives. The point is not made to suggest that the play is written about a pair of so-called “Trump Voters”: there is too much going on in the lives and experiences of these categories for them to be narrowly defined in ANY way. However, there are undeniable resonances here, an aspect of the play that, intended or not, has the potential to set up an interesting audience / narrative dynamic.

Another key point is the introduction’s spoiler-free reference to outside influences and their effect on the members of the Blake family. The nature and qualities of those influences are given effective metaphorical and dramatic value in the narrative, and start to affect the action and the characters virtually as soon as the play begins.

In the introduction’s final paragraphs, there is a clear sense that for the introduction’s author, playwright Stephen Karam has, on one level, started from a place that many (most?) writers are urged to start from: writing what they know. Karam, it seems, is writing about people, situations, and experiences that he knows something about – again, an example of ways in which the action of the play and its characters can feel realistic, and true.

Finally, in his closing opinion about the people of Scranton, the comment made by the introduction’s author about security can be seen, on one level, as referring to financial or economic security. On another, deeper level, the comment about security resonates with comments made in the introduction’s first paragraph – specifically, on the level of economic, political, and socio-cultural security which, the author suggests, has been damaged as a result of the events and circumstances of the 2016 Presidential campaign.

Discussion Question 1

In his introduction, journalist and writer Samuel Freedman refers to the 2016 Presidential election campaign, and how the play captures the mood of America during that campaign. What would you say that mood was? How would you describe the campaign?

Discussion Question 2

What kind of "larger forces," outside the boundaries and parameters of family life, are acting on families in contemporary society?

Discussion Question 3

What does the term "blue collar" mean? What kind of circumstances, family life, or community life does the term suggest?

Vocabulary

epigraph, homage, prosaic, precarious, indelible, oblivious, pedophiliac, copious, astringent, gibberish, fallible, affluence, abrade, victimization, expansive

Part 1, p. 9 – 33

Summary

The Blake family gathers for Thanksgiving dinner. Patriarch Erik is the first character seen by the audience, as he reacts nervously to loud noises coming from upstairs. As the evening progresses, these noises continue. Erik is the only one who reacts, with Brigid reassuring him that there is nothing to worry about, saying they are caused by the Chinese woman who lives in the flat upstairs.

Meanwhile, conversation and action reveal that Erik has not been sleeping; that Deirdre (Erik's wife) takes care of Erik's mother, Momo, who is suffering from dementia; that younger daughter, Aimee, has just broken up with her girlfriend, Carol; and that older daughter Brigid and her boyfriend Richard have just moved into a two-story apartment, which is where the family meal is being held. Throughout these conversations, Momo mutters incoherently in her wheelchair, her words underscoring comments from Brigid about how she wants this home to feel different from the home that she grew up in, in Scranton.

As Brigid shows her family through the apartment, Deirdre and Erik discuss how happy they are to see her so excited. At one point, they move into a corner and have a private conversation, mostly unheard by the audience and by the other characters. Their conversation ends with Erik reassuring Deirdre that he will do something she has been urging him to do.

After Erik notes a passer-by (an elderly woman, whom Brigid says is probably the wife of the superintendent), there is banter about the apartment's lack of light (Deirdre comments that "there's no sunlight in here – it's like a cave") (21); about the apartment's lack of safety (with Erik worrying about how close the apartment is to "where two towers got blown up" (26); and about how Brigid and Aimee both hated living in Scranton. Erik comments on how Momo moved away from exactly the kind of neighborhood that Brigid is now living in, "and now her granddaughter moves right back to the place she struggled to escape" (27).

Richard brings up champagne and glasses and prepares a toast as Erik "wanders into the adjoining room to grab a private moment for himself" (28). After a brief conversation between Brigid and Deirdre about how / whether Erik has been sleeping, the family sings Momo's favorite song, in anticipation that she will respond to the music. As the song continues, Aimee becomes reflective and sad. As Erik tries to cheer her up, Momo remains silent until the end, at which time she starts speaking gibberish. Conversation then reveals that Brigid, who used to sing professionally, is now tending bar to pay off student loans. "You guys don't even know how much student debt I'm stuck with," she says. Erik comments that he does know "who refused to go to a state school," which triggers a bit of tension. Richard invites everyone down into the basement for

appetizers, a move interrupted by another THUD from above. Again, Erik is the only one to react, becoming preoccupied with it to the point where he delays going downstairs.

Analysis

This opening section introduces several of the play's most important elements. In addition to the characters and relationships (the members of the Blake family), and the essential context (the gathering of the family for Thanksgiving dinner), there is the simultaneous introduction of a key aspect of mood and of theme. These elements meet in the thump from upstairs, and in Erik's reaction. This can be seen as the first of several times in this section in which the thumping is heard, a foreshadowing of the several times later in the narrative that the thumping, and other sounds from outside the apartment, upset the family. There is a strong sense that all these sounds are intended, by the author, to be perceived as metaphorically representing the "outside influences" referred to in the introduction, as triggers for the play's central thematic exploration of fear, and as triggers for the play's sense of slow-burning suspense.

This section also introduces the narrative's important secondary themes – its consideration of the idea of food and meals as celebrating possibility (in this case, the particularly festive and significant Thanksgiving meal), and the randomness of life, represented and developed by the seemingly random noises coming from outside the flat.

Meanwhile, there are several other key foreshadowings in this first section of the play. Momo's seemingly incoherent ramblings, the reference to something that Erik and Deirdre have to say to their children, and the references to Erik's difficulty sleeping all foreshadow important elements later in the play. Here it is important to note that all these elements, as well as the above-referenced sounds from outside the flat, contribute to an engaging, powerful sense of mystery and suspense that build throughout the play.

Additionally, there are three other important pieces of foreshadowing that are less connected to the play's overall sense of suspense but that are still quite significant: the references to Aimee's ex-girlfriend (with Aimee's attempts to contact her playing a key role in later developments of her relationship with her father); the references to light and dark (a key metaphor that deepens and explores variations all the way through the play until the narrative's very final moments); and the reference to the destruction of the "twin towers." This is a reference to the events of September 11, 2001, the day on which two hijacked plans were crashed into the two towers of the World Trade Centre (which were, in turn, half of a larger scale terrorist attack). The reference foreshadows revelations later in the play of what exactly Erik's experience that day was, and to how that experience has shaped him.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways do the events and circumstances of this section (Part 1, p. 9 – 33) develop the play's central thematic interest in fear and hope?

Discussion Question 2

Research and discuss the events of September 11, 2001. In what ways does the inclusion of a reference to these events reflect, or develop, one or more of the play's themes?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the significance of Erik wanting to go off for some private time to himself? What other incidents, or circumstances, in this early part of the play might this action relate to?

Vocabulary

tenement, render, monotone, adhere, renovation, autonomous, recliner, duplex, uncanny, passive, psychiatrist, caulk, audible, indecipherable, potential, elicit, leisure, beguile

Part 2, p. 33 – 53

Summary

As the family prepares to move downstairs for the meal, conversation reveals that there is an elevator in the hall outside the apartment going from the upper to the lower floor of the building. As Aimee wheels Momo out to take the elevator down to the floor below (there is only a staircase in the flat), Brigid comments that she forgot about Momo's wheelchair. Deirdre comments drily that she knows, and then goes into the bathroom. Later, when Deirdre eventually comes out, she collects two presents from her purse, and then goes downstairs, stopping and listening to the conversation between Erik and Richard.

As Richard prepares food, he and Erik discuss Erik's plans for building a lake-side property, the design and construction of which are on hold for a while. Conversation also refers to how much Brigid (who has come downstairs briefly) both will and will not miss parts of the family home in Scranton. Then, when Brigid has gone upstairs to use the bathroom, conversation turns to how long Erik has been at the same job: 28 years, as something like a janitorial assistant, a job that has enabled his daughters to receive free tuition at the school. Conversation then turns to how Richard has also either not been sleeping or having weird dreams. Erik begins to discuss his own dreams ("you know, the ones where you need just a minute to – figure out it isn't actually real") (41). At that moment, he is startled by a knock on the door to the flat: Richard opens it, and Aimee wheels in Momo, who is muttering "where do we go" (42).

As Richard pours wine for Aimee, conversation turns to her health (she suffers from ulcerative colitis) and her work situation, conversation revealing that she has been taken off the track for a partnership because of her frequent illness-related absences. It basically means, she says, that she has to start looking for another job. Deirdre and Erik express their worry, and she becomes increasingly agitated. To distract attention, Richard calls for a toast. As Erik begins the toast with a list of things that cannot and will not affect the family, Brigid refers to Momo's dementia. This sets everyone on edge a bit and leads Erik to comment suddenly, and at somewhat unusual length, on how no matter what, everything simply goes away. After an awkward moment, he says that all he meant was that he loves his family, and he thanks Richard for making the dinner.

As Richard prepares to dish up more appetizers, conversation refers to the number of texts and forwarded emails Deirdre sends, with Deirdre protesting that she only sends what is important, as she does not want to over-fill her family's inboxes. Conversation then reveals that Deirdre is an office manager, has worked with the same company for decades, and is frustrated with making less than half the salary of people less than half her age. Conversation also refers to how much she helps other people with various physical ailments (with Brigid reminding her to not talk with her mouth full) and to how she is volunteering to help refugees. Brigid refers to her as "Saint Deirdre," and asks her to talk about herself, not the refugees. Deirdre defends herself before telling Brigid to

open the presents she (Deirdre) has brought. Meanwhile, Aimee's illness sends her upstairs to use the bathroom.

Analysis

As the action of the play continues, deepening the development of its characters, relationships, and themes, virtually every line starts to take on additional layers of significance and meaning. For example, even Deirdre's in-passing comment that she realizes Brigid forgot about Momo's wheelchair, and Brigid's in-passing reference to her mother as "Saint Deirdre" take on layers of implied mother-daughter tension, their barely concealed pointedness suggesting (revealing?) conflicts between mother and daughter that intensify and become more overt over the course of the play.

The same is also true of the evasiveness of many of Erik's responses to Richard about the second property that Erik and Deirdre are planning to build, about his job, and about his dreams. While the evasiveness is not necessarily sinister, there is, nevertheless, the sense that there is something else going on, some implied meaning. Perhaps the most significant of these is the reference Erik makes in his toast to things that will not affect his family, and his later comment that "everything goes away." Again, there is a sense here that he is referring to something specific, but there are no indications as to what. An engaged reader, or audience member, may well wonder if there is a connection between Erik's clearly deliberate elusiveness and the mysterious conversations he has with Deirdre. Ultimately, though, the full meaning of all these comments, and other similarly enigmatic comments to come, is eventually revealed at the narrative's climax.

Several key elements of this section add important layers of insight into the individual lives and relationships of the characters. The reference to Aimee's illness, for example, simultaneously provides important information about the personal issues affecting her interactions with her family, and also foreshadows later references to ways that she believes that illness has affected, or might affect, other aspects of her life, in addition to what she reveals here about losing her job. Meanwhile, Deirdre's comment about her work situation can be seen as an echo of comments made in the Introduction about outside forces (i.e. employment / income stress) on the lives of the Blakes and other blue-collar families. Finally, there are the references to Deirdre's compassionate support for those less fortunate which, in spite of Brigid's pointed comments, suggest that Deirdre is a genuinely giving person, an important aspect of her character and identity to keep in mind as the narrative eventually reveals just what kind of pressures she has been under.

Discussion Question 1

One of the play's central motifs relates to the randomness of life and its events. How does that theme manifest in Part 2?

Discussion Question 2

Several times throughout the narrative, Momo's seemingly random comments can be seen as reflecting, or commenting on, things that are actually happening. In Part 2, she mutters "Where do we go?" (42). What situations or events, taking place or discussed in this section (Part 2, p. 33 – 53), might this comment be referring to?

Discussion Question 3

To this point in the narrative, the play has made several references to the employment status of various characters. What point do you think the script is trying to make with all these references?

Vocabulary

contraption

Part 3, p. 53 – 75

Summary

Brigid opens her presents. The first is a peppermint pig, conversation revealing that smashing the pig is a family Thanksgiving tradition. The second present is a statuette of the Virgin Mary, with Deirdre saying that that she wants Brigid to keep the statuette close, even if it is in a drawer.

Momo mutters again, with words that begin with, "Why'm I hereson" and then taper off into confusion. Deirdre walks with her in the wheelchair as Erik explains that this will probably be her last trip. Richard then returns the conversation to Erik's dream, with Deirdre commenting on how Erik will talk about his dreams (which, she suggests, are intense and frightening) with someone else, but not with her. This leads to conversation about a TV movie that Deirdre got Erik to watch which Deirdre says was terrifying, but then makes a joke about. Brigid says that Deirdre can have no more to drink. Richard tells her to be nicer to her mom. Brigid goes into the kitchen, and Richard follows, where they have a muttered, indecipherable conversation. Meanwhile, conversation between Deirdre and Erik suggests that they each think Brigid is like the other, and that Deirdre wants Erik to say what he has to say sooner rather than later.

Brigid goes upstairs to check on Aimee. Conversation between Deirdre, Erik, and Richard reveals that Deirdre and Erik go on cruises for their vacations, which they enjoy because there is so much to do. Brigid listens from upstairs as Richard talks about how he and Brigid like more random, spontaneous vacations. Brigid finally heads downstairs as Erik comes upstairs to check on the score of a football game he is following. Downstairs Deidre, Richard, and Brigid get Momo a nutrition shake, which she spills and they clean up. Upstairs, Erik is startled by ashes falling from the sky and by what seems to be a passing shadowy figure. Meanwhile, Aimee comes out of the bathroom and makes a phone call to her ex-girlfriend, unaware that Erik can hear her. As the cleanup and settling of Momo continues, Aimee's phone conversation suggests that her ex- does not really want to talk to her. Eventually the conversation finishes and Aimee breaks down in tears, being comforted by Erik. Meanwhile, Brigid and Richard have a playfully sexual moment in the kitchen, which Deirdre sees and to which she reacts, a bit sadly perhaps. Meanwhile, Momo has gone to sleep.

As Aimee returns to the bathroom and Erik stretches his sore lower back, Deirdre tells Richard a story of how feisty and independent Momo used to be. This leads to a conversation about whether Erik and Deirdre are going to put Momo in a nursing home; to Richard's gladness that Deirdre and Erik both call Momo "Mom"; and to Deirdre commenting on how "real" marriage means that kind of thing, which Brigid takes as a comment on the fact that she and Richard are not married.

Meanwhile, Aimee emerges from the bathroom again, and Erik again tries to reassure her (i.e. that she will find someone new), but Aimee contradicts him. As Erik talks about

how supportive Momo always was for him, Deirdre and Brigid settle Momo onto the couch for a nap. Aimee returns to the bathroom and Erik returns downstairs, with the bantering conversation turning a bit more edgy as Deirdre talks about how Brigid finds everyone's sense of humor terrible except for her own, and how much both she and Brigid hates horror and monster films. Deirdre then compares Momo's tantrums to horror films, saying that she cannot understand how people can watch that kind of thing when "there's enough going on in the real world to give me the creeps" (72). This leads Richard to discuss a comic book he saw once in which the monsters on another planet told each other horror stories about humans. As tensions grow between Deirdre and Richard, Erik tries to intervene, but Deirdre pointedly comments on how scared he was waking up from his bad dream the night before, insisting that he tell her what the dream was. Eventually, pressure from Deirdre and the others leads Erik to confess that his dream was, in fact, about a woman with skin stretched over her facial features. His description is interrupted by another THUMP from upstairs.

Analysis

This section introduces several important symbols, two of which are Deirdre's presents to Brigid and Richard. The first of these is the peppermint pig, which represents tradition and gratitude (i.e. aspects of the past) and plays a key role, literal and symbolic, in later action. The second symbol is the statuette of the Virgin Mary, which represents faith and hope (i.e. aspects of the future), and plays a more subtly developed, but still significant role also later in the story. Another important symbol is the ashes, which can be seen as representing the destruction of various elements of the lives of various family members, as well as the destruction of the twin towers on 9/11, which resulted in harrowing drifts of ashes filling the sky and falling to the ground (ashes of, among other things, people who were cremated in the fires that consumed much of the towers). This last is particularly significant, in that the evocation of this aspect of the ashes foreshadows later revelations of the relationship between the events of that day and Erik's overriding, powerful fears. This last revelation is also foreshadowed in Erik's connection with Aimee (whose experiences on 9/11 play a defining role in Erik's experiences that day, as the narrative later reveals), and Erik's description of the woman in his dreams. This frightening image deepens and intensifies the feeling of suspense that has been steadily developing - and will continue to develop - as the narrative unfolds.

Meanwhile, layers of meaning, both implied and overt, continue to be laid down in this section. These range from the possible meaning in Momo's apparent gibberish ("why'm I hereson" can be translated into "Why am I here, son?") to the reference to how Erik and Deirdre like to go on cruises, the true value and implications of which are not revealed until the point at which Erik finally has the conversation with his daughters that Deirdre again urges him to have here. Deirdre's references to how things in the real world give her the creeps can be seen as another reference to comments made in the Introduction about how the play dramatizes the external forces acting on the Blake family and other American families like them, a situation further dramatized, here and elsewhere in the play, by still more thumping noises.

Another layer of meaning, both thematic and metaphoric, develops in relation to Momo's spilling of her nutritional shake. On a thematic level, there is ironic resonance here with the idea of food and meals as a celebration of possibility, a theme primarily embodied by the setting of the play on Thanksgiving but ironically, and darkly, echoed here with Momo's "meal" being ruined. This, in turn, is a piece of foreshadowing of the Thanksgiving dinner proper being ruined by painful revelations. Metaphorically, the spilling of the shake can be seen as echoing the "spilling," or the messy end, of Aimee's relationship with her girlfriend, a situation that, in its turn, similarly foreshadows the "messy end" of the family's beliefs about itself and each other that takes place at the narrative's conclusion.

Discussion Question 1

What elements in this part of the play develop its thematic exploration of the importance of religious faith?

Discussion Question 2

What kind of parallels are there between what happens with Momo's shake and Aimee's conversation with her ex-girlfriend?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways might Richard's comments about humans, in the context of the conversation about horror movies and monsters, be connected to the play's title?

Vocabulary

n/a

Part 4, p. 75 – 98

Summary

In the aftermath of the thump, Brigid and Richard debate whether to go upstairs and talk to the neighbor (a Chinese woman) they think is making the noise. Stage directions comment that everyone has had just enough to drink to make things funnier than they should be. Brigid and Aimee then go up to the second floor of the flat to illustrate how easily sound travels through the building's floors, jumping up and down in a way that, stage directions comment, becomes about releasing tension.

Meanwhile, Deirdre and Richard joke about Erik's dream, and Erik becomes hurt, retreating into a corner of the downstairs area. Deirdre and Richard go into the kitchen to work on dinner as the conversation between Brigid and Aimee turns first to their shared concern about the increasing difficulties their parents are having (Erik overhears this part of the conversation), then to Brigid's uneasiness about Deirdre hinting that Brigid and Richard should get married. Finally, conversation turns to Aimiee's impending surgery to address her colitis. That surgery, Aimee says, will result in her having to pass solid waste through a hole in her abdomen, which will, she adds, ensure that she never finds another girlfriend. As Brigid tries to reassure her, Erik tries to get up the nerve to talk to them, but eventually chooses not to, telling Deirdre he will talk to them later.

Suddenly, the light fixture in the upstairs ceiling burns out, leaving the upper floor in the dark. Deirdre goes upstairs with a lantern from the "care package" she brought and sets it up. Meanwhile, Erik talks about how necessary it is to be prepared, while Richard comments that he does not blame Erik and Deirdre for wanting to take care of them "especially after – Brigid told me about – you and Aimee" (85). As Deirdre continues setting up the lantern, Erik tells Richard about the time that Erik lost track of Aimee in the city. At that moment Deirdre screams, in reaction to what she believed was a rat running over her foot. Everyone fusses and freaks out a bit. Meanwhile, Momo gets up from the couch and goes into the kitchen. When the rest of the family comes downstairs, they cannot find her until she knocks over some pans with a loud noise. The family rushes to collect her and take her back to the couch as she mumbles and mutters, Erik being particularly worried because he had lost track of her, and because she almost burned herself on the stove. As he and Deirdre help Momo settle, Erik frets about how important it is for his children (and Richard) to be prepared and careful, conversation hinting that the day he lost track of Aimee was 9/11.

An argument between Deirdre and Brigid over the care of Momo threatens to break out. The argument is diverted by Richard bringing the turkey to the table, but resurfaces as Brigid makes pointed comments about Deirdre's eating habits and weight. The family gathers around the table and says grace, Momo joining in, so much to everybody's surprise and pleasure that Erik leads a repetition of the grace, with Momo again joining in.

Food is passed, people start eating, compliments are also passed, and Momo interjects seemingly random comments. This leads Aimee to recall the incident where, one year, she found a double entendre in Momo's Christmas toast about the Virgin Mary: "May the Virgin and her Child lift your latch on Christmas night" (96). As the women bicker playfully about the implications of the toast, Erik explains its true meaning – an evocation of hope and welcome for the Virgin "on her way to Bethlehem" (97). Aimee makes a revised version of the toast and everyone responds playfully – everyone except Erik, who disapproves and notices that Momo is uncomfortable. He takes her into the living room and gets her settled there.

Analysis

There are several key developments in this section of the play. Among them: the actual beginning of Thanksgiving dinner and the discussion of Momo's toast, both of which seem to evoke the normality of the family and of their ritualized experiences in the face of the increasingly intense situation in which they find themselves. In that context, the most significant element is the incident of the lights going out, a clear (if metaphorical) evocation of ways in which things actually are NOT normal. This idea is reinforced by the timing of the lights: just after Erik tells Deirdre that he is going to keep his secret a little while longer. On another level, the lights going out, like the offstage thumping, can be seen as a similarly metaphoric evocation of what the Introduction refers to as the outside forces that are working on, and disrupting, the family.

Another key development is the evocation of the book's thematic exploration of the power of religious faith. There are two examples of this, one more literal than the other. The more literal example can be seen in the glimpse of lucidity in Momo while the family is saying grace: the fact that Momo rejoins "the real world" for even a few moments, and the fact that those moments are associated with prayer (at least of a sort) makes a clear suggestion about the power of faith. The more symbolic way in which this theme is developed has to do with Deirdre's lamp. This is because she is clearly the most traditionally "religious" character in the play, and because traditionally religion (particularly the Christian religion) has been associated with the concept of faith providing light in the darkness.

There are also glimpsed, but still important, developments in several of the play's relationships: the warmth and connection between Aimee and Erik (at this point, it is starting to become clear that Aimee is his favorite daughter); the tension between Deirdre and Brigid; and Deirdre's seemingly casual needling of her husband. This latter is particularly important to note, given that it appears to be simply the slightly edgy banter associated with long-standing marriages, like that of Erik and Deirdre, but which, as the narrative eventually reveals, comes from an even deeper, darker, edgier source.

But perhaps the most significant development in this section is the new piece of information related to the Erik – Aimee relationship: specifically, the reference to how they lost track of each other on what appears to have been 9/11 (again the date and circumstances are referred to only obliquely). Because awareness of the events and

circumstances of that day are so widely known, the hints that Erik communicates are likely enough to evoke strong feeling not only in Richard, but also the audience / readers. Even more significantly, the (implied) revelation feels, at this point, as though it is a kind of conclusion, or ending, to the story of where Erik's fears come from: ultimately, though, there is more to come, as more detailed revelations of the relationship between Erik's fears and the events of that day appear later in the text.

Discussion Question 1

How do the events, circumstances, and conversations in this scene (Part 4, p. 75 – 98) evoke the play's thematic exploration of fear and hope?

Discussion Question 2

How does the fact that Momo joins in with the saying of grace reflect the play's thematic exploration of the power of faith?

Discussion Question 3

Stage directions make a point about suggesting that Aimee and Brigid jumping up and down on the floor becomes a release of tension. What kind of tensions need to be released? Why is it important for them to release their tensions?

Vocabulary

adjoining, prominent, endearing, dysplasia, paralegal, spontaneous, chard, nutrients

Part 5, p. 98 - 117

Summary

As Erik gets Momo settled, Deirdre asks Richard about his family, conversation revealing that his father is in Los Angeles and his mother is in Massachusetts. As Brigid interjects pointed comments towards her mother, and as Aimee tries to get her to stop, conversation leads Deirdre to comment on her volunteer work, and how poor the people are that she works with. Erik returns, conversation turning to how Richard is paying off his education. Brigid reveals that Richard's grandmother set up a trust fund for him that he can access when he turns 40. This leads Deirdre to an emotional comment about how poverty can be a blessing, and Erik to a comment about how too much money can be as bad for a good life as too little. Richard tries to defend himself, and Brigid and Aimee try to get Erik to calm down, but he continues, asking how they all think it feels to someone of his age hear someone of Richard's age talk about getting a lot of money.

Efforts are made to change the subject of the conversation, but Erik returns to the subject of Richard's money and education, Richard eventually admitting that he is still in school at his age because he went through a phase of depression when he was younger. Erik comments that there is no depression in his family, but Aimee says that what the family experiences is, in fact, "stoic sadness" (105). After a moment of silence, Erik wonders whether faith of the sort he and his family practiced when he was younger is a kind of anti-depressant. Aimee tries to derail the subject of religion; Deirdre says she is keeping her mouth shut on the subject; and Brigid comments that Deirdre "brought a statue of the Virgin Mary into our house – how is your mouth shut?" (105).

As Erik continues to push his point about religion and faith, Brigid reveals that she is in therapy because finding work in her field (as a composer) is so frustrating. Richard comes to her defense, eventually urging her to read out a letter of reference, written by a prof, that Brigid feels is actually undermining her job seeking. As Aimee tries to comfort Brigid and Deirdre tries to calm Erik, Erik tells Brigid that she needs to work harder to get over this setback, or find something else to do with her life.

Suddenly another lightbulb burns out – the one over the staircase. As Brigid goes in search of another lightbulb, Erik tries to comfort her, and Deirdre makes jokes about how the woman in Erik's dream ("She-With-No-Face") is burning out the lights to get them to pay attention to her, going upstairs to use the bathroom and making spooky sounds. Meanwhile, as Brigid clears the table, Erik comforts her, eventually making her laugh. Aimee goes into the kitchen to help her, and the two sisters share a conversation as Richard and Erik continue their conversation about dreams. Brigid and Aimee laugh about something they are talking about (the audience does not hear the specifics) as Erik confesses part of his dream that he has not told his wife or daughters: that the woman in the dream is trying to get him into a tunnel. Richard suggests that sometimes, tunnels can mean a positive transition, and urges Erik to go into the tunnel. Meanwhile,

there is a rumble of sound from outside the apartment: a trash compactor and a clank of pipes, the latter sound concealing the sound of Deirdre coming out of the bathroom.

Brigid and Aimee return, laughingly sharing the content of Deirdre's most recent forwarded email. Deirdre listens from the top of the stairs as her daughters joke about the article Deirdre sent out that suggested "nothing's solid: when you're touching a table, you're really feeling its molecules bouncing against – we're not even solid … it also had vague religious overtones … Happy Tuesday, oh and just FYI: at the subatomic level, everything is chaotic and unstable – love Mom" (116).

Deirdre closes the bathroom door to keep them all from thinking she might have been listening.

Analysis

The economic subtext of the play – that is, its implied suggestion that the financial struggles of the blue-collar Blakes are a metaphoric microcosm of the struggles of much of America – come to the forefront in the exchange between Erik and Richard about the latter's trust fund. In the same way as Erik clearly resents the easy financial path that Richard has ahead of him, contemporary working class America seems to have grown into a deep and politically active resentment against those who appear to have an easy a path ahead as Richard.

A related point has to do with Deirdre's comment that poverty might be considered a blessing. First, and again because Deirdre is so clearly religious, there is an evocation of the Biblical teaching that the poor are, in fact, the truly blessed of the world. On another, and deeper level, there is a sense even here that Deirdre is trying to convince herself of the value of her own life. This sense deepens later in the play when the exact nature of the secret being kept by Erik and Deirdre becomes clear.

Action, conversation, and circumstances in this section develop and deepen several other previously introduced elements as well. These include the references to Erik's dreams (with the growing, thematically significant sense of just how traumatizing and frightening they are for him), and the references to loud sounds coming from outside. In both these cases, however, the deepening emerges as a result of new facets of the elements involved. For example, the reference to tunnels introduces one of the play's key images, here clearly evoked as something frightening (which is, in turn, a manifestation of the play's primary theme) but which, at the play's climax, becomes an evocation of fear's opposite – hope and possibility. In other words, the reference to tunnels here is an important piece of foreshadowing. Then there is the reference to the sounds coming from outside, which on one level perform the same sort of function as the noises from upstairs (a symbolic representation of forces destructively attacking the Blakes and their values from the outside), but which, on another level, become more intense, lasting longer and featuring a very dark sort of grinding sound. The implication here is that the Blakes, and those like them, are being ground down, or compacted like the trash.

One last point to note about this section of the play is its introduction of a new thematic element: Brigid's reference to her struggles to have and maintain a career, and to the story of the under-enthusiastic letter of reference, both of which define an evocation of the play's thematic interest in the development of individual identity. While the overt development of this theme takes place primarily in this section, it can also be seen as, in hindsight, defining layers of depth and meaning in the comments and experiences of other characters – Aimee's struggles for her own career, Erik's earlier references to his mother's determination to live her own, independent life away from New York, and even Erik's resentments of Richard's trust fund. This, in turn, can be seen as a metaphoric representation of how financial identity is defined as a result of the influence of others, rather than the hard work, courage, vision, and commitment of individuals, establishing and defining their own selves, lives, and identities. All this, in turn, can be seen as thematically significant foreshadowing of the play's final moments.

Discussion Question 1

How do situations, events, and conversations in this section of the play develop its thematic exploration of the nature and value of religious faith?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the metaphoric significance associated with the loss of another source of light - particularly the light over the staircase - at this particular moment in the play?

Discussion Question 3

What are the metaphoric implications of the email that Deirdre sent around, and that her daughters laughed at? Specifically, what are the implications (for the play, its characters, stories and themes) about the idea that nothing is solid?

Vocabulary

stoic, criticize, approachable, specificity, urgency, orchestral, proficiency, verve, spelunk, sorceress, prophetic, chaotic, subatomic

Part 6, p. 117 – 133

Summary

As Deirdre comes back downstairs, Momo starts muttering (“You can’t go back, you can’t go back”). As Deirdre gets Momo re-settled, there are loud noises from the laundry room behind the door, noises that Brigid says are normal. The slightly drunk Erik initiates the family ritual of the peppermint pig, with everyone explaining to Richard how the ritual works: everyone says what they are thankful for, one at a time, and then starts smashing the pig, eventually eating a piece of it afterwards. Richard starts, saying how grateful he is that he and Brigid are together and that he has a new family. Erik says he is grateful for his family’s unconditional love, adding that he hopes “there’s nothing any of us could ever do to – change that” (120). Deirdre says she is thankful for her daughters. Brigid says she is still - and always - thankful that “the observation deck didn’t open until 9:30” (121). Deirdre also adds that she is grateful for Momo still being alive and that her father reminded her about the importance of pursuing her passion. Dierdre concludes by saying that after she dies, she wants to be cremated. “I’ve been trying to find a way to bring it up that isn’t morbid or weird” (122). The family teases her about having failed at that. Finally, Aimee says that in a year that has been really bad for her, she is very grateful for what is good.

The family then reads an email sent by Momo a few years before her dementia really took hold. Erik finds it on his phone, passing it to Deirdre to read. In the letter, Momo speaks of feeling relief that the disease is helping her forget the bad parts of her life; urges the girls to worry about less; and also urges the girls to have more fun. As the letter finishes, the family starts eating the pieces of the peppermint pig.

Richard clears the table. Erik goes for another beer. Conversation about how much he has been drinking results in Aimee going upstairs to call for a car to be put on her work account. Meanwhile, Erik watches a tender moment of intimacy between Brigid and Richard, and then goes up to take over ordering the car from Aimee. While all this is going on, Deirdre stays at the table, weeping.

Richard and Brigid bring in dessert. Deirdre makes pointed comments to Erik about him being too drunk to thank Aimee. Suddenly Momo starts talking again, and Deirdre starts taking her up to the bathroom. Erik asks Richard to help her, forestalling Brigid, who had volunteered to help. Erik says he wants to talk to Aimee and Brigid about how he and Deirdre might be moving. Richard goes upstairs to help Deirdre and Momo into the bathroom, leaving Erik with Brigid and Aimee.

Through a series of questioning interruptions from his daughters, Erik reveals that he lost his job, and his pension, because of his having had an affair with a teacher at the school where he used to work. He says that he and Deirdre have been working through the situation with the help of a priest; that they are selling both their proposed beach-front home and their house; and that they are planning to move into an apartment. He

also talks about how expensive and difficult taking care of Momo is turning out to be. Aimee offers to help financially, and Erik says she has got enough problems to worry about.

Meanwhile, Deirdre and Momo arrive upstairs, where Richard waits. Deirdre hears the downstairs conversation and stops to listen. Richard waits with Momo outside the bathroom door as the argument downstairs continues.

Analysis

As this section of the play moves towards the play's climax in the following section, and while noting the several key elements that appear or develop here, it is important to remember the visual context in which things are happening. Upstairs (where the bathroom is) is dark, lit only by Deirdre's lantern. The staircase itself is also dark. The only part of the set that is fully lit is the section with the living room, dining room, and kitchen: the metaphorical sense here is that the family is struggling to hold on to the light in their lives in the face of the encroaching darkness. The fear associated with that darkness is reiterated in the new, strange, frightening sounds coming from the laundry room, a variation on the motif of unknown (perhaps somewhat distorted) noises coming from outside that tend, as previously discussed, to reinforce the metaphorical idea that the outside world is full of danger that is having a deep, profound impact on the inner and outer lives of the characters.

Meanwhile, there are several important events that occur within that light-and-dark context. The first is the family's ritual involving expressing thanks and the smashing of the peppermint pig. The former is often a part of Thanksgiving celebrations. The latter is a somewhat ironic act of destruction, given the warmth and sense of vulnerability in the expression of thanks that comes immediately before the acts of destruction. The second important event is Brigid's reference to the observation deck, another oblique (i.e. indirect) reference to the events of 9/11: the term "observation deck" refers to the deck on one of the towers that was closed to tourists at the time of the attack, meaning that there were potentially fewer victims of the attack (including Aimee) in the towers at the time. The reference is also one of the few references in the play to the sense of connection and affection in the Brigid / Aimee relationship. Another point to note in relation to the ritual of expressing thanks has to do with Brigid's poorly timed reference to being cremated, an evocation of the recurring motif of ashes, previously referred to in stage directions (i.e. in Erik's perception of ashes falling from the sky) and, by implication, in previous reverences to 9/11, encounters with ashes being a significant component of many recalled experiences of that day. With that in mind, there is also the sense that her request is not only poorly timed, but tactless, given what the narrative has clearly revealed about Erik's 9/11-related experiences with Aimee.

One last point to note in relation to the ritual around the peppermint pig has to do with the fact that pieces of the pig are eaten. Given the fact that there are so many references to the Christian faith throughout the narrative, there is an unmistakable echo here of the Christian ritual of Holy Communion, in which participants in the service

consume symbolic representations of the body of Christ, as a commemoration of his sacrifice on the Cross. Communion is a ritualized act of connecting with the compassion, transcendence, and spirit of Christ: it seems that the consumption of the peppermint pig is, for the Blakes, a ritualized act of connecting with the gratitude, prosperity, and nourishment associated with the spirit of Thanksgiving. With that in mind, it is interesting to note that the peppermint pig is consumed AFTER the reading of Momo's email, suggesting that the family is also grateful for the words and lessons of that email.

Ultimately, though, the most significant event in this section of the play is the long-awaited revelation of what it is that Erik and Deirdre have to tell their daughters, the long-kept secret of Erik's affair and job. Here it is important to keep in mind that Erik and Deirdre have been keeping this secret for quite some time before the action of the play begins. They have been carrying the emotional and circumstantial weight of everything that has happened with them arguably for months, a circumstance that might be seen as being connected to the increasing, deepening darkness that surrounds them and their family.

At this point in the play, it becomes possible, and important, to look back at what has gone before and see how this revelation forms the unspoken, emotional subtext to many conversations and references: for example, to the earlier conversation between Erik and Richard about the plans for the beach house (which can now be seen as full of lies from Erik) and, more recently, the comment in Erik's confession of gratitude around the peppermint pig when he talks about being grateful for his family's unconditional love and his hope that nothing would ever change that. Now, with the revelation of his infidelity and his/Deirdre's financial situation, the audience / reader, along with the rest of the family, understands exactly what he was getting at. The point could also be made about several other aspects of Erik's personal story throughout the play.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways is the book's thematic interest in the importance of pursuing individual identity?

Discussion Question 2

Momo's words, both from within her dementia and prior to her dementia, play a significant literal and metaphoric role in this stage of the narrative. How does what she says reflect, or interact with, the action of both this section (Part 6, p. 117 – 133) and the play as a whole?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Deirdre weeps in this scene (Part 6, p. 117 – 133)?

Vocabulary

haggard, cremate, morbid, rugelach

Part 7, p. 133 – 149

Summary

Aimee continues to refer to her parents being in “a deep hole” (134), becoming increasingly emotional as she learns that her parents have no savings, erupting in anger at Brigid for not taking more responsibility for her life. Erik tries to defend Brigid as Deirdre starts to come downstairs. Brigid, meanwhile, speaks of worrying about her parents. “You’re not sleeping,” she says to Erik, “and mom’s still eating her feelings” (135). Aimee sees Deirdre and warns Brigid, who tries to apologize. Deirdre tells Brigid to talk to Erik, Brigid shouts that she thinks there’s something wrong with everyone in the family, Aimee tries to get Brigid to calm down, Erik tries to get everyone to come talk to him, Momo mutters (“nevery blacken where you come back …”) (136) and suddenly there are thuds from upstairs. Brigid runs out, saying she’s going to “ask that woman to stop banging her fucking feet” (137).

Momo continues to mutter, becoming more and more agitated. Richard goes after Brigid, Deirdre goes into the kitchen, Erik tells Aimee to go with Deirdre, and Momo starts directing her irritation to Erik, who takes care of her as she descends into a full on fit. Deirdre has a brief moment of connection with Aimee, then goes upstairs to use the bathroom. Erik reaches for her, but she takes Momo into the bathroom.

Aimee gets ready to go for a walk. Erik, to try to keep her there, tells her about something that happened on 9/11, when he thought he had lost her: how he saw a fireman “holding a body with your same suit on … but with a coat of ash melted onto her? Like she got turned into a statue like … there was gray in her eyes and mouth even, it was … like her whole” (141) and then he realizes he is referring to the woman in his dream. Aimee, who has not been paying attention, tells him to be ready for the arrival of the car, and then goes. He places his phone on the windowsill, where it will pick up the signal from the car company when they call to say that the car has arrived.

Erik is alone for a moment, then gets ready to leave. He catches a glimpse of something in the alley and tries to get a better look, but is unable to see clearly. Down in the kitchen, some pans suddenly fall to the floor. Erik goes downstairs to investigate, and start clearing up.

Deirdre and Momo come out of the bathroom. Aimee returns, saying the car is ready to take them home and adding that Brigid is with Richard, embarrassed. Aimee takes Momo out. Before she goes, Deirdre calls down to Erik for him to bring a couple of things that they had brought. Before she goes, she puts the statue of the Virgin Mary on the window sill.

Erik collects the things Deirdre had asked him to find, and is about to leave when all the lights suddenly go out. Erik searches for the lantern as his phone upstairs starts to ring. It keeps ringing as Erik searches for the fuse box and tries to get the power back, with

no result. He then manages to get to the phone just as the trash compactor rumbles into life, triggering a panic attack in Erik that leads him to try to get as much light as possible into the space (at one point, he props a door open with a chair, letting in light from the downstairs laundry area). His panic attack is compounded once the trash compactor finishes its cycle, by a mysterious sound that turns out to be the Chinese woman from upstairs coming down to do her laundry. She is visible through the propped open door.

In the silence that follows her disappearance, Erik calms himself. “Rattled, the event’s released something for him – a strange weight’s been lifted off his chest” (147).

Brigid returns, calling for Erik and searching for something else to say. Erik gets himself and his things together. Brigid leaves. Erik is alone in the apartment, dark except for “the shaft of fluorescent hallway light pouring through the propped-open door. It has a tunnel like quality” (148). Eric steps into the light, walks down the hallway, and disappears. “The propped-open door begins to slowly close entirely on its own: the weight of the chair can no longer hold it open. The door clicks shut, rendering the space a deep, true black” (149).

Analysis

This section begins with the play’s emotional climax – specifically, the multi-topic confrontations at the beginning of this section which, it must be remembered, follow immediately upon the revelation of Erik’s affair (it must also be remembered that there are no formal, or official, divisions of scenes in the play). The intensity and high stakes of these confrontations are indicated by, among other things, Brigid’s use of a curse word, which is the first time such a word has been used in the play.

Here it is important to note that there are several different sorts of climaxes in this play, and in this section. First, there is the above referenced emotional climax. Second, there is the individual climax of Erik’s personal narrative / journey - the details of his 9/11 experience (including a reference to the play-pervasive motif of ashes), and his subsequent realization of the meaning of his dream. Third, there is what might be called the suspense climax. This is the moment that all the suspense-triggered “scares” of the narrative (including one last clatter of mysteriously knocked-over pans, and one last threatening rumble of the trash compactor) combine in a climax in a thematically significant high-point of fear, which in turn leads to the final type of climax in this section. This is the thematic and metaphoric climax, the moment at the end of the play at which Erik makes his way out of the fear-defined darkness that has filled him emotionally and spiritually and surrounded him physically and visually. What is particularly important to note about this climax is that he leaves behind the statuette of the Virgin Mary, the play’s most potent symbol of religious hope and faith. Even though Deirdre and other characters have maintained that faith is the only way to find spiritual sustenance and hope in times of difficulty, Erik manages to get through both his self-revelations and the dangers around him not by faith, but by self-awareness, self-honesty, and courage. The implication here, therefore, is that in contrast to what motivates and defines Erik’s

escape to freedom, the faith represented by the Virgin Mary is self-deluding, self-deceiving, and defined by fear.

It is significant that Erik is left alone in the play's final moments. The rest of the family has left the apartment, and even Brigid's brief return does not change the fact that Erik is alone with both his fears and the possibility of overcoming those fears. This is perhaps the key moment in the play's overall story of encountering and facing fear. Even though a person, like Erik, may be surrounded by love; and even though there may be times (i.e. Thanksgiving) when experiences of familial and cultural community (i.e. the community of patriotic Americans celebrating Thanksgiving) provide support and context, the play seems to be saying that for a person to face down fear, whether it comes from inside or outside, that person has to rely on individual resources, honesty, and courage. With that in mind, therefore, it could be argued that "The Humans" is, at its core and in spite of a degree of cynicism about what it means to be a working American, a play celebrating the core values of the so-called American Dream, which historically and ideally celebrates the strength, value, transcendent power, and right to hope of every individual life. In other words, this final moment represents the climax of the development of the play's thematic emphasis on the power of, and need for, living an individual life.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways do actions, events, and conversations in this section (Part 7, p. 133 – 149) evoke the play's thematic interest in the power of religious faith?

Discussion Question 2

Given what the thumps and other noises from outside have represented throughout the play, what is the metaphoric and/or emotional significance of the series of thumps that interrupts the action at the climactic point of confrontation within the family?

Discussion Question 3

Why is it significant that both Deirdre's statuette of the Virgin Mary and Erik's cell phone are placed on the windowsill, next to each other? Why is it significant that Erik takes his cell phone, but the statuette is left behind?

Vocabulary

n/a

Characters

Erik Blake

Sixty-year-old Erik Blake is the play's central character and protagonist: the play begins with him and ends with him, and the action between is in many ways primarily defined by his actions and reactions. The key point to note about this character is that the most defining aspect of his life and identity, as the play begins and throughout the narrative, is not revealed until close to the play's climax: he has recently lost his job as a result of having had an affair with a co-worker. He has found a new job, and he says that he and Deirdre have met with a priest for some counseling, but his new situation (and the consequences of his choices) are clearly troubling him right from the play's beginning.

Throughout the play, and leading up to the eventual, ultimate revelation of his truth, everything that Erik does and says is defined by his subtext – that is, by what is going on for and with him that lives underneath his words, by the secret he is keeping. The uncertainty, guilt, regret, and pain that he has brought on both himself and his wife as the result of what he has done are very much on his mind, fueling and motivating several telling comments before, during, and after the Thanksgiving Day gathering that is the centerpiece of the plot (note the irony of this particular aspect of the play's setting).

All that said, there is another – and deeper – layer to what motivates and defines this character. This is his experience, referred to several times in the narrative, on September 11, 2001 – the day that the World Trade Center in New York was attacked and destroyed. The narrative portrays Erik as traumatized by that event – more specifically, by his experience of having briefly lost track of his elder daughter, Aimee in the immediate aftermath of the attack. It was, for him, a profound experience of fear that seems to have scarred and/or defined much of his subsequent perspectives and actions. As such, Erik is the primary embodiment, in the play, of its central thematic focus on experiences of fear.

Deirdre Blake

Deirdre is Erik's wife, described in stage directions as being 61 years old. She is religious, motherly, and patient, and seems determined to be perceived as a good person: for example, she repeatedly references the time she spends volunteering to help new refugee arrivals in America. She, like Erik spends much of the play carrying a secret: the same secret, in fact, that Erik carries, only in a slightly different way. While Erik carries the burden of having made a mistake and of creating difficulty for both himself and Deirdre, Deirdre carries the burden of having been made to suffer as a result of Erik's mistake. This means that in the same way as much of what Erik says carries the sub-textual weight of what he did, much of what Deirdre says carries the sub-textual weight of the pain, or perhaps resentment, she feels as a result. This is

particularly true of her comments in relation to the need to have religious faith, and the gesture she makes of bringing a statuette of the Virgin Mary into her daughter's home. As such, Deirdre is the main source of the play's thematic exploration of the importance of faith.

A key point to note about the character relates to her name. "Deirdre" is the name of a famous character in the literature and mythology of Ireland, more commonly referred to as "Deirdre of the Sorrows." In the stories about her, she is described / portrayed as being so beautiful that wars would be fought over her, a prophecy offered at her birth that actually came true. Eventually, Deirdre killed herself rather than be forced to marry a man she did not love. While Deirdre in "The Humans" does not literally kill herself, there is a sense that on some level, she is dying emotionally as a result of everything she sees happening to her as the result of the actions of her husband, the rejection and resentment of her younger daughter, her inability to be much help to her older daughter, and the deterioration of her mother-in-law.

Aimee Blake

Aimee is the oldest daughter of Erik and Deirdre Blake. Aimee is a lesbian, and as the play begins, has recently ended a relationship with a woman named Carol. Throughout the play, Aimee continually tries to get hold of Carol, which indicates that she (Aimee) is having a great deal of difficulty letting go of the relationship. Aimee is also suffering from a form of colitis, a digestive disorder that, among other things, causes a frequent need to use the bathroom. Both these aspects of Aimee's experience lead her to believe, as she references in the play, that she is ultimately unlovable, particularly as she is facing an impending surgery to ease her condition that will result in her having to expel her body's solid waste into a bag attached to her body.

Aimee has also recently learned that she is not being put on the track to partnership in the law firm where she works, which essentially amounts to her being fired. There is a sense that this is a result of a combination of the two above referenced circumstances, which have in turn led her to be frequently absent from work. As such, both she and Brigid, Erik and Deirdre's younger daughter, are somewhat lost as the play begins, both struggling to find their way into careers and/or employment circumstances that can, and will, sustain them.

Brigid Blake

Brigid is the younger daughter of Erik and Deirdre, and the younger sister of Aimee. She is a musical artist and composer, frustrated by her lack of success as a musician and by the fact that she has to spend too much time making a living at bartending jobs to develop her art. In the same way as her parents are troubled by a long-held, painful secret, Brigid has one as well: the discovery of a not-terribly-favorable employment reference, written by a professor she believed she could trust but who was reluctantly praising of her and her work. In the same way as Aimee's physical ailment (colitis) is

proving professionally debilitating, Brigid seems to be finding herself similarly debilitated by the self-doubt that has resulted from her having learned of the reference.

Where Brigid differs from Aimee is in the resentful and confrontational relationship Brigid has with Deirdre. Where Aimee is tolerant of, and compassionate towards, Deirdre's foibles, Brigid is sharp-tongued and judgmental. A committed atheist, Brigid resents any efforts by her mother to bring faith into her life or into conversation; a committed free-spirit, Brigid resents any efforts by her mother to get her to marry her live-in boyfriend; and a committed health foodie (at least to some degree), Brigid is judgmental of what she sees as her mother's poor dietary choices. What is interesting to note here is that for her part, Deirdre tends to respond in kind, at least to some degree: she tends to be more restrained, but nevertheless frequently makes comments about the very things that Brigid resents her referring to. In other words, the two women seem unable to avoid goading and triggering each other.

Richard Saad

Richard is Brigid's boyfriend, and is ten years older than she is, a fact that is referred to only glancingly, but pointedly, on a couple of occasions. Throughout much of the play, he is portrayed as being the more domestically oriented member of the couple: he takes the leading role in preparing and presenting Thanksgiving dinner, and he seems to know more about how things around the apartment are meant to happen (i.e. the sounds from offstage, the places where light bulbs are kept). He and Brigid are quite loving to each other, although there are points at which a lack of impatience with Brigid's various struggles, and her attitude towards her parents, seems to bring a hint of edge into how Richard speaks to her. Meanwhile, he tends to have good relationships with Deirdre and Aimee, and compassionately helps to take care of Momo. He also seems to have a particularly good relationship with Erik, drawing him out of his shell and bonding with him over their shared experiences of bad dreams.

There is, on the other hand, a notable source of tension between Richard and the Blakes, particularly Erik and Deirdre. This is the fact that Richard is what is referred to as a "trust fund baby" - that is, he comes from a background of wealth and affluence, and is on track to receive a substantial trust fund when he turns 40 (in a couple of years). On the one hand, this gives him and Brigid a sense of impending security: on the other hand, this gives Erik (and perhaps also Deirdre) a reason to resent him, in that they are in financial straits and do not have a terribly positive financial future to look forward to. Richard does his best to downplay the significance of his trust fund, but he does seem to have a sense of guilt about it, particularly given that his tendency is towards leftist politics and social attitudes.

"Momo" Blake

Momo is Erik's elderly mother. As the play begins, she is in the late stages of Alzheimer-related dementia, and requires constant supervision and care. She is mostly silent, but

several times throughout the play, and often at narratively significant points, she erupts into a spewing of words and sentence fragments that, at first glance, seem to make little literal sense, but which in actual fact contain ideas that echo, or foreshadow, or evoke, important aspects of story, character, and relationship.

For example, at times she makes references to holes, and to being in holes. This foreshadows, and represents, the emotional and financial "hole" in which Erik and Deirdre find themselves as a result of Erik's job loss. It also foreshadows and represents, less literally, the emotional holes in which Aimee and Brigid find themselves; the "hole" in her abdomen through which Aimee, as a result of her illness, is going to have to pass her solid waste; and the "hole", or tunnel, that haunts Erik's dreams. All this means that Momo, in addition to providing an important physical obstacle for the characters to overcome as they try to have a "normal" Thanksgiving dinner, is a significantly metaphoric character, adding layers of symbolism and meaning to what is otherwise an extremely literal set of characters and plot elements.

Carol

Carol is Aimee's ex-girlfriend. She is never seen in the play, but is referred to and heard from, via Aimee's one-sided cell phone conversations. Carol is portrayed, as a result of those conversations, as wanting little (if anything) to do with Aimee any more. There is little direct indication in the play as to why this is, but there is a sense, in how Aimee is portrayed, that she (Aimee) is neurotic and needy, perhaps too much so for Carol's comfort. This idea is reinforced by the content of their telephone conversation, in which Aimee repeatedly suggests that their connection continue, while her responses to Carol's comments (the responses being all the audience hears of the conversation) suggest that Carol is setting a very clear, very firm boundary around just how much contact they actually have.

The Woman in Erik's Dream

For much of the play, Erik refers to a bad dream that keeps troubling him, but is reluctant to speak of it, particularly to Deirdre. Eventually, however, he reveals that an important part of the dream is the figure of a woman whose face (mouth, eyes, ears, nose) is entirely covered over with skin. Later, he reveals the true source of his anxiety around Aimee's apparent "disappearance" on 9/11 (that is: he lost track of her in the confusion immediately following the terrorist attacks that day) and draws a connection between that woman and the woman in his dream. This connection, in turn, suggests that the woman in the dream is a metaphoric representation of Erik's deepest fears and, as such, is a similarly metaphoric representation of the play's overall thematic interest in fear.

The Woman from 9/11

Late in the narrative, when he is becoming his most fearful and vulnerable, Erik reveals the source and trigger of his fear for Aimee on 9/11: his coming upon a woman, dressed in a similar way as Aimee was that day, covered in ash and with her face unrecognizable. Erik says that seeing this woman led him to fear that Aimee was dead, a fear that did not entirely go away when he discovered that she was not. Telling this story leads Erik to realize that the faceless woman in his dreams is probably a representation of the faceless woman from 9/11, which in turn leads him to realize that what he had in fact been dreaming about was fear, which in its turn leads him to realize that the only way to move forward in his life is to take steps to get past that fear - which, at the end of the play, he ultimately does.

The Chinese Woman Upstairs

At the beginning of the play, and in response to Erik's nervous reaction to the thumping coming from the upstairs part of the building in which Brigid and Richard have their two-floor apartment, Brigid explains that the noise is caused by the Chinese woman who lives above them. Brigid is not clear on how, exactly, the noises are made, but she does identify the Chinese woman as a source. Throughout the narrative, the thumping continues, and is repeatedly described as being caused by the Chinese woman, in spite of the strange and intense nature of the noise. Much later in the narrative, as it reaches its climax - that is, with Erik alone in the dark of the apartment with only the light from the outside hallway to illuminate his way - he hears a strange creaking. As he becomes increasingly nervous, it is revealed that the creaking comes from the wheels of a laundry cart, and that the cart is being propelled by a woman that stage directions suggest is the Chinese woman from upstairs. All these references combine to make the metaphoric suggestion that the noises, the creaking, and the Chinese woman herself are intended to be seen as representations of perceived dangers of the outside world that can, and perhaps inevitably will, affect the inner life and peace. In the climax, and in Erik's reactions following the climax, the narrative suggests that these outside strangeness-es are, ultimately, nothing to be deeply feared; they must, instead, be seen for what they are in the light of truth, and while fear might be a valid response, it must not govern how an individual ultimately lives his or her life.

Symbols and Symbolism

Thanksgiving Dinner

In setting the play on Thanksgiving, and in using Thanksgiving dinner as the centerpiece of its action, the play is using all of the implied meanings and associations with the holiday to make an ironic, metaphoric point about how the things being celebrated are, in fact, masks for / diversions from a deep sense of fear, pervasive in American culture as a whole as well as in the lives of the Blake family.

In America, Thanksgiving is almost as significant a holiday as Christmas. Both holidays are times of connection with family; both holidays, in drama at least, are times when such connections are often threaded with secrets, recriminations, and confrontation; and both holidays are associated with conspicuous consumption of food and consumer goods. Thanksgiving differs from Christmas, however, because of its significant patriotic sensibility: Thanksgiving is tied to an early historical event, the arrival of the Pilgrims, whose moral and political and cultural values formed the foundation of America. Thus, in celebrating Thanksgiving, Americans celebrate America in a way that Christmas does not.

Dementia

Dementia, as portrayed in the play, can be seen as representing a perception of reality that is both unpredictable and penetrating, an experience of truth that is violent and uncensored. In her dementia, the muttering Momo frequently gives voice to the sub-textual, unspoken fears of the family around her.

Bad Dreams

In the same way as Momo's dementia gives voice to fears that the characters tend to keep inside, the bad dreams experienced by Erik (and Richard, to a lesser extent) give presence and / or emotional weight to those same fears. Erik, in particular, is quite literally haunted, in his dreams, by the spirit and implications of the dead woman he thought was his daughter, with said implications expanding into, and infiltrating, his perceptions of life in general.

The Sounds from Outside

Aside from the outside noises' literal evocations of startling noise, they can also be seen as metaphorically representing the outside forces that blue-collar Americans like the Blakes, and Americans in general, seem to feel are having a dangerous, lifestyle-destructive effect on their lives.

Several times throughout the play, sounds from outside make their way into the relative peace of the family gathering. The most common of these is the sequence of loud thumps that come from the flat upstairs, but there are also the sounds of the apartment building's trash compactor and, late in the play, the ominous creaking of a laundry cart.

The Peppermint Pig

When the peppermint pig is broken during the family's ritual recitation of things they are thankful for, and then eventually consumed, there is a very clear, and vivid, reference here to the experience of Holy Communion, in which some form of bread is ritually, and symbolically, sanctified as representing the Body of Christ, its consumption symbolically representing the union of the faithful with the spirit of Jesus. In that context, the consumption of the peppermint pig represents the Blake family's "communion" with the best part of themselves, their lives, and their relationships - love, forgiveness, and connection.

The Statuette of the Virgin Mary

The statuette of the mother of Jesus is the main representation of the play's thematic interest in the power and necessity of religious faith, and its value in facing the various internal and external troubles encountered by the family - and, by extension, those in similar situations.

The Statuette of the Virgin Mary is the second gift brought into Brigid's home by Deirdre, and is not a part of the family's traditional Thanksgiving celebration. It is, however, a symbolic representation of the family's Roman Catholic faith - or, more specifically, the faith still practiced by Erik and Deirdre and essentially rejected by Brigid, and seemingly by Aimee (although the narrative is not entirely clear on this).

Light

Throughout the narrative, light represents hope, safety, and possibility. There is significant meaning associated with the fact that the lights in the apartment where the action is taking place go out, one by one: when light (and hope) disappear, darkness (and fear) advance. The fact that the play ends with the sudden appearance of a new source of light clearly makes the symbolic suggestion that even in the darkest of circumstances, there is still the possibility of positive transformation.

Deirdre's Lantern

The light of the lantern represents, as all the light in the play does, the possibility of hope in the face of advancing despair. What is particularly interesting about the lantern is that there is a second layer of meaning to the symbol. Because Deirdre has brought it; because Deirdre has also brought the statuette of the Virgin Mary; and because

Deirdre is the most overtly religious character in the play, there is a clear tie-in between the lantern and the play's thematic suggestion of the importance of religious faith.

Darkness

In the same way that light represents hope, darkness represents increasing despair and fear. As the lights go out one by one, the characters experience deeper, and more crippling, fear, until the moment, at the play's climax, when the terrified Erik is trapped in complete darkness (i.e. fear) and is able to leave both the apartment and his fear when the darkness is broken by the appearance of light from the hallway (tunnel) outside the apartment.

Tunnels

Tunnels are an ambivalent image throughout the narrative - that is, an image that has two contrasting, if not contradictory, sides. On the one hand, they are a dark and frightening representation of the unknown in Erik's dreams: on the other hand, and as the play concludes, a tunnel is a bright and hope-triggering image of possibility, a light in the emotional / spiritual darkness that has descended onto Erik as the result of his mistakes, and the parallel physical darkness that has descended onto him as the lights have gone out, one by one, on him and his family during this Thanksgiving dinner.

Holes

Holes are spoken of as dark, mysterious, dangerous, and ultimately destructive: the holes of debt, the holes of emotional emptiness, the holes of fear. The most powerful and mysterious evocations of holes emerge in Momo's strange, at times even mysteriously poetic, dementia-triggered eruptions of gibberish, which seem to emerge from what might be described as its own dark hole of dissociation from reality on the one hand, and deeper connection with secret truths on the other.

9/11

The 9/11 terrorist attack is, arguably, the ultimate example of the sort of externally defined, fear-triggering action evoked by the various external noises in the play.

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 are a central element in the play's thematic consideration of fear, even though they are never actually identified by name. The background and scope of the attacks is too broad a subject for full consideration in this analysis: suffice it to say that the fear of those who lived in New York, those who lived in America, and arguably those who lived anywhere in the world and who witnessed those attacks lingers in contemporary society even now, on both the individual and cultural level.

Ashes

Ashes in general are a symbol of cremation (i.e. the burning of a dead body) and are also an important symbol in the Catholic faith practiced by the senior members of the Blake family - specifically, they are a symbol of sacrifice and suffering, associated with that of Jesus Christ in the days and weeks before his crucifixion.

At one point in the narrative, Erik seems to become unnerved by what he sees as ashes falling from the sky. At another point in the narrative, he tells a story that seems to explain why and how he became unnerved: specifically, he describes seeing a woman, on 9/11, whose facial identity was obscured by ashes, and whom he thought was actually Aimee.

Settings

America

The United States of America, with its recent history of a complicated, confrontational election campaign and deepening rifts (between rich and poor; between white and non-white; between conservative and liberal), is the overall, broad-strokes setting for this play. The particular experience of American blue-collar workers, caught in the middle of an economic reconfiguration of a scope broader than that which can be effectively discussed here, is the particular circumstance of the Blake family, the members of which are the play's central characters.

New York City

New York, one of the most populous, well-known, and idealized cities in America, is the primary community setting for the play. There are several aspects of its identity that play particularly important roles: its reputation as a center of opportunity, and its being the site of the deadliest terrorist attack on American soil (9/11) are the most significant.

The Apartment

The action of the play takes place entirely within the boundaries of a two-story apartment building in New York City. The floors are connected by a spiral staircase within the flat, while an elevator in the two hallways outside the flat also provides a means of transportation between the two floors. Over the course of the narrative, the lights go out first on the top floor and then on the staircase linking the two floors, creating a sense of approaching darkness that is pushing the inhabitants of the apartment into an ever-smaller area of light that, in turn, will eventually be extinguished by the approaching dark. At the play's conclusion, however, after all the light from the apartment has in fact been lost, a door to the hallway outside opens, and reveals a lit way out.

The Present

The action of the play is set at a very specific time - that is, on the Thanksgiving Day of 2016, following the election campaigns of Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Hillary Clinton. References to the campaign and to the former candidate place the action very clearly in relation to that particular sequence of events, and to the growth and eruptions of conflict that emerged throughout. It is important to note that the actual results of the election are not referred to, but the point must be made that the comments made about the campaign, and the resultant effect of the campaign's rhetoric on the American state of mind, hold true for the Trump Presidency as much as they do for the Trump campaign.

Thanksgiving Day

The action of the play takes place entirely on American Thanksgiving Day, one of the most important holidays in American culture and society. It commemorates the gratitude of the pilgrims (refugees / immigrants) for their safe and free arrival in a new land, in a new life. There are several deep layers of irony associated with this setting, the most obvious of which has to do with the fact that most of the characters in the play have arrived in a new life for which they are not grateful at all (but are struggling to be).

Themes and Motifs

Fear and Hope

Throughout the play, its action and the choices of the characters reflect, to varying degrees, the play's thematic suggestion that the only way to combat fear is by hanging on to, and acting on, hope. From its first moment (i.e. the reaction of protagonist Erik to a loud, offstage thump), the action of the play and the stories of its characters are defined by experiences of fear. At the play's conclusion, its central character (Erik) makes a decision that, literally and visually, is a step away from fear and into hope and possibility: he makes his way out of the darkened apartment where he and his family have been celebrating Thanksgiving and into a lighted hallway. In these ways, the two sides of the same coin (fear and hope) form the foundation of the play's narrative and thematic progressions.

Some of the characters are more overtly afraid than others. Erik is arguably the most apparently fearful of all of them, with Aimee a close second and Brigid a distant third. It is also arguable that Momo's mostly inarticulate spoutings of seemingly random language come from a place of pure, instinctive fear – that is, the sort of fear that emerges from deep inside someone when they are faced with an approaching, unfathomable unknown of the sort that dementia seems to be. The other characters (Richard and Deirdre) are less overtly fearful, their actions instead coming across as more hopeful and more positive, as more actively fighting against fear rather than becoming increasingly overwhelmed by it, as the other characters are. In Richard's case, the hope-triggered-ness of his actions is less immediately apparent, until one considers that simply providing food for the fearful (the needy?) can be considered an act of bringing light, sustenance, and joy into the dark experience of fear and doubt. In Deirdre's case, that fight against fear manifests in, among other things, her comments about faith and in her bringing a statuette of the Virgin Mary into her daughter's home.

The Nature and Importance of Religious Faith

Through the attitudes and actions of the character of Deirdre, the play presents the argument that one way to face down and/or overcome experiences of fear is through maintaining religious faith. The most obvious manifestation of this thematic contention is the statuette of the Virgin Mary which Deirdre brings into the home of her daughter as a combination housewarming present and protective talisman: it is quite significant that, as she leaves and in spite of her daughter's protestations, Deirdre leaves the statuette on the windowsill of the darkened apartment as the play draws closer to its conclusion. It is simultaneously ironic that Erik places his cellphone in the same place, with the two objects close to each other during the darkest moments of the play's climax. The reader, and audience member, would be quite justified in wondering whether the author, in including this specific stage direction, is making a comment about how contemporary

society reveres cell phones in the same way as people revere God, or manifestations of God.

In any case, the statuette is not the only representation of this thematic element of the play. Another representation comes in Deirdre's repeated reference to the importance of marriage in sustaining a relationship. The point must be made that she makes no clear, explicit reference to the religious nature of marriage, but given her clear and strong religious faith, the implication is clear: she is speaking of ritual, church-based marriage, rather than legal or common-law marriage. To Deirdre, church-based marriage is an act of religious faith in the same way that keeping a representation of the Virgin nearby is, with both seeming to be a means of fighting back both the generalized oppressions and dangers of the world and the more specific threats to individual and marital security posed by infidelities of the sort recently entered into by her husband. Here it is important to note that it is not only Deirdre who espouses this belief: her philosophies and perspectives are shared by her husband, although it is also important to note that he is nowhere near as sure of himself, or of his faith, as she is. Erik, as noted above, has a far more intimate relationship with fear than he has with faith, fear that manifests in his life (and therefore in the play) in the next thematically central element.

The Randomness of Life

Erik's fear, triggered at the beginning of the play by the (seemingly random) noise from upstairs, is grounded in his long-standing reaction to an event that to him, and arguably to millions of others, was the ultimate experience of the randomness of life in recent memory: the terrorist attacks on New York City on September 11th, 2001. Several times in the play, and never directly (i.e. he never actually uses the phrase "9/11"), Erik refers to his abject terror on the day of the attacks, and his ability to immediately reconnect with Aimee, who was working in the vicinity of the attacks that morning. Here it must be noted that Erik is not the only person who refers to this event: Brigid directly refers to it in her recitation of what she is thankful for, and Richard refers to it in passing on his way into deepening his conversation, and therefore his relationship, with Erik. Deirdre never refers to it: Aimee refers to it, again in passing, in response to her father's fears. All that said, Erik's fear-defined memories and reactions to that particular event are, in part, related to its randomness and unexpectedness, which is arguably the reason why so many of the seemingly random events of the play (the offstage thumping, the power outages, the noises from the trash compactor) are so startling to him.

Other characters suffer as the result of encounters with randomness as well. Aimee essentially loses her job in the aftermath of a seemingly random surge of a debilitating illness, while Brigid essentially loses her sense of self-worth in the aftermath of the seemingly random discovery of the true nature of an important employer reference. Meanwhile, and throughout the play, all the characters are shaken up, to one degree or another, by two things: the random overhearing of significant conversations, and the seemingly random nature of Momo's tantrums, perhaps the most immediately apparent representation of this theme in the play. In each of these cases, randomness is associated with fear, with pain, and with a loss of a sense of self.

The Struggle for Individual Identity

Brigid's tearful reaction to the discovery of the lack of enthusiasm in a professional reference and Erik's insistent reaction to Brigid's vulnerability make the very clear thematic suggestion that claiming and relying on a sense of individual identity are key ways of combating the oppressive, debilitating power of fear. This chain of reactions clearly suggests that for both characters, the idea of Brigid seeing herself as a good composer is deeply significant: in Brigid's case, it is how she defines herself, while in Erik's case, it is evidence that Brigid IS defining herself, and not just muddling along in life. Here it is important to note that Erik's sense of self as a valued and hard-working member of the staff at the school where he works is similar in personal, and thematic, function to Brigid's sense of self as an artist. This similarity is made clear in how, late in the play, he reveals the uncertainty and fear associated with his experience of having just lost his job. For both Brigid and Erik, a clear sense of who they are is what helps them keep the fear of simply being a human being (one of "the humans") at bay.

The same experience, that of holding on to individual identity as a defense against fear, is also present in the lives and attitudes of the other characters. Deirdre desperately holds on to her self-image as religiously faithful and a good mother, even though she clearly fears that faith is no real defense against the world and that her daughters resent her. Aimee seems to be fighting a losing battle against fear that she is both a desirable potential partner and a good lawyer. Richard, for his part, seems determined to define himself not by the large amount of money to which he will soon have access but by his capacity for being a loving partner and a broad-minded, supportive therapist. All of these identity-defined aspects of character, and the struggles of each character to hold on to their identities, are vividly contrasted by the character of Momo who, in many ways, has had her individual identity stripped from her by mental illness, leaving behind a gibbering, angry, inarticulate mess that, in many ways, seems to be the sort of person that the other characters are desperately afraid of becoming.

Food and Meals as a Means of Celebrating Possibility

The fact that the action of the play takes place before, during, and after Thanksgiving dinner can be seen as representing the idea that gathering as a family, or as a community (in the manner of those who celebrated the first Thanksgiving), is an act of hope in the face of fear and worry.

Thanksgiving has its origins in the story of pilgrims, recently arrived in America and facing both hardship and the unknown, celebrating hope, freedom, and new life with a feast. Rituals of gratitude, such as those (idiosyncratically) practiced by the Blake family in the play, have become a key part of the event, playing an active role in turning the focus of the participants away from darkness, at least for a while, and towards the more positive values of togetherness and abundance. In that sense, the gathering of the Blake family at Thanksgiving, even though it results in some significant confrontations, can be seen as metaphorically representing the idea that in unity and in the communal

consumption of food, there is reason to think positively and optimistically in the face of the unknown and its dangers. This idea is further developed in the fact that in the play, and once dinner is complete, Erik manages to face down the many fears that he has been struggling with (including the fear of telling his daughters the truth about his situation) and move from the darkness associated with those fears into the light of possibility.

On the opposite side of this coin, however, is the experience of Momo, no longer able to eat solid food and no longer able to participate much more than peripherally in any of the life of her family, let alone Thanksgiving. Instead of sitting at the table, her capacity for both violence and fatigue leads her into being physically isolated from those she once loved; instead of taking in sustenance (in her case, in the form of a milkshake-like meal supplement), she spills it and takes no food. In both these circumstances, her outbursts (which represent both fear and the randomness of life) take her away from even the implication of hope and possibility, as suggested by the concept and practice of Thanksgiving, and into a place of representing that which, again, her family fears: isolation, hopelessness, and frustration.

Styles

Point of View

The first point to note about this book is that it is a play, which means that there is no single narrative point of view in the same way as there would be in a piece of prose (either fiction or non-fiction) or poetry. There is a central character, or protagonist: Erik, the father. The play begins with him and ends with him, and it is his actions and reactions that manifest many of the play's plot and thematic elements. But the story is not told entirely, or solely, from his perspectives: those of the other characters also play key roles in the development of the story and its themes.

In terms of the play's thematic point of view, the play's plot and relationships are essentially defined by a single emotional experience: fear, and the reactions of the characters to the fears that they share as a group, or experience as individuals. While this thematic perspective is focused tightly on the experiences of the Blake family to their various fears, there are several moments in the play that suggest that in many cases, the fears encountered by the Blakes are fears encountered by anyone striving for freedom of identity, income security, and day-to-day courage to face the uncertainty and dangers of life in Twenty-First Century America.

This, in turn, leads to consideration of the play's authorial point of view – that is, the perspective from which the playwright seems to be writing. Given what the introduction says about the playwright's blue-collar (working class) background, and what the play itself says about the experience of being of that background in contemporary America, there seems to be the sense that the playwright is coming from a place, a point of view, of understanding both fear and the need for hope, hope being the primary source of the courage necessary to move through, or past, the debilitations posed by being afraid.

Language and Meaning

The most important point to note about the use of language in this book is that because it is a play, its language is primarily dialogue based. That is, information about story, character, relationship, theme, and meaning is communicated almost entirely by what the characters say – the words they use, how those words are shaped into phrases and sentences, to whom they say what they do, and when they say it. For example, the reader / audience member infers the growing tension between Deirdre and Brigid by the words Brigid uses to refer to her mother, and vice versa. The same holds true for the story, situations, and relationships involving all the characters.

One particularly noteworthy aspect of this play's use of dialogue has to do with how the character of Momo is written. Late in the progression of Alzheimer's disease, Momo frequently erupts into words that initially seem like complete gibberish, or nonsense. Somewhat closer consideration, however, reveals that at least a few of the more

identifiable words, phrases, or sounds are similar to those spoken by the other characters. For example, there are several times early in the play where the word “hole,” in one form or another, appears in Momo’s dialogue. This foreshadows later references in the narrative to the “hole” of debt and despair in which Erik and Deirdre find themselves in the aftermath of Erik losing his job. There are other, similarly connected words and expressions that tend to reinforce the sense of eeriness and other-worldliness that develops throughout the play.

All that said, this script is notable for the importance of its non-dialogue stage directions – language that defines events that are taking place onstage but which are not spoken about. Early in the play, for example, stage directions clearly and vividly establish and define the sounds coming into the space from offstage, representing sounds from “the outside world,” for lack of a better phrase. These sounds play a key role in defining and shaping both the play’s gradually intensifying sense of suspense and fear, as well as its thematically significant sense that the characters are under pressure, at least in part, by unseen and unidentifiable circumstances outside of their own lives.

Structure

Unlike many (most?) plays, this play has no scenic or act structure: that is, the action plays out in a single, forward moving line without breaks or intermissions. In other words, it takes place in what might be described as “real time”: events occur entirely in the present, and entirely as the characters experience them. This gives the piece a clear and vivid sense of realism, and intensifies the feelings of fear and suspense triggered by the action and dialogue.

That said, the play also follows what might be described as traditional, linear structure. It has a beginning, or set-up, in which the characters, relationships, and situations are roughly laid out (and in which foreshadowings of important future revelations are also placed). It has a middle, in which characters, relationships, and situations develop and intensify (and in which mysteries about the meaning of those foreshadowings deepen). And it has a climax, a point of peak intensity at which action, relationship, and theme all reach a point of confrontation, breakdown, or release. In the case of “The Humans,” the climax comes very close to the end of the piece, as protagonist Erik Blake is left alone in the apartment where the action takes place and he is forced to confront both the internal (i.e. his worries and losses) and external (i.e. the sounds from outside the flat, the inside the flat darkness) triggers for his intense fear. Finally, there is the denouement, or falling action, the stage of the story during which questions are answered, change or transformation is revealed, and steps towards a new beginning life (or the re-affirmation of an old life) are taken. The denouement of this story sees Erik recovering from his fear-triggered panic attack, and leaving the darkness of the flat for the light of the world outside.

One last important point to note about structure is that in this play, like many plays, structure is defined by character need and intention. The events of the play, its rising action, its build to climax, are all defined by the actions that a character takes, the

choices a character makes, in order to realize a particular goal. In the case of this play, the action of the play is defined by Erik's goal to have as normal a Thanksgiving as possible, in the face of everything that has happened to him in both the recent and more distant past, and everything that is happening to him on the night of Thanksgiving dinner. The play's line of action, as referred to above, is shaped by Erik's choices in pursuit of that particular goal, with the actions and reactions of the other characters being defined, on a fundamental level, by their responses to those actions.

Quotes

You can never come back.
-- Momo (Part 1)

Importance: This line is one of several lines that, at first glance, can be seen as the nonsensical ramblings of Alzheimer's-afflicted Momo. On another level, however, and upon consideration of the line within the context of the play in general and the experiences of its characters, it can be seen as having particular meaning. In this case, the line evokes the experience of being unable to return to life as it was after a traumatic experience of the sort experienced by several characters in the play. The line evokes the experience of being forced to move forward into the future, no matter how safe and / or comfortable the experiences of the past might have seemed.

Erik: "I think if you moved to Pennsylvania your quality of life would shoot up." Brigid: "Uh, if I moved to Pennsylvania, YOUR quality of life would shoot up tremendously.
-- Erik / Brigid (Part 1)

Importance: This brief exchange of dialogue between protagonist Erik and his daughter Brigid gives a terse example of two key points: the testiness of their parent-child relationship that exists between the two of them; the recognition of Brigid that if she and her parents were living in the same community, she would end up taking care of them.

You don’t pick up after other people’s kids for twenty-eight years unless you really love your own, you know?
-- Erik (Part 2)

Importance: In this quote, Erik reveals his self-rationalizing perspective on his job as a school janitor, or maintenance worker. He also uses it as an indirect profession of love, offered to his often difficult children. The comment is ironic given that, at the play's climax, Erik reveals that he lost his job as a result of having an affair with a co-worker, a revelation that undermines this quote on both its initial, apparent layers of meaning.

I’d see what everyone else was doing; then I’d do that.
-- Deirdre, quoting Momo (Part 3)

Importance: With this quote, blue-collar homemaker Deirdre is speaking of the life of her mother-in-law which, to quote a cliche that has a grain of truth, seems to have been about "keeping up with the Joneses" - that is, engaging in a domestic lifestyle defined by competitiveness and comparisons. This particular perspective is at odds with the lives lived by Deirdre's daughters, who seem to be more interested in pursuing their own lives on their own terms. This, in turn, suggests that the quote is, in fact, an important contrast to the play's thematic interest in people living according to their individual identities.

… maybe loving someone long-term is more about – deciding whether to go through life unhappy alone – or unhappy with someone else.
-- Aimee (Part 4)

Importance: This quote is significant on several levels. First, it embodies the experience of the recently wounded, desperately lonely Aimee. Second, it can be seen as embodying a situation being experienced by Aimee's parents, Erik and Deirdre, even though the rest of the family does not know about that situation at the time Aimee says the line - specifically, the situation revealed by Erik at the end of the play (his having lost his job as the result of having an affair with a co-worker). On a third level, the quote can be seen as a cynical perspective on the nature and value of relationships. But then, on a fourth level, it can be seen as an evocation of the play's central thematic emphasis on the experience of living with fear - specifically, the fear of feeling, and being, alone even within a relationship situation which is supposed to make a person feel exactly the opposite.

May the Virgin and her Child lift your latch on Christmas night."
-- Aimee, quoting Momo (Part 4)

Importance: First, this quote is the trigger for a years-old family joke and/or ritual, one of several that appear over the course of the narrative and give the family (and the audience) a sense of history, affection, and familiarity. Second, the quote is another reference to the play's thematic interest in the nature and power of religious faith as a source of hope and positivity in the face of fear.

What makes a person powerful and influential and wealthy is not growing up with power and influence and wealth. That's what the e-mail said, anyway (caught off-guard by her emotions) – the gift of poverty is a – it's not a myth, it's a real thing, it can be a blessing … I'm just happy to be with my girls, sorry.
-- Deirdre (Part 5)

Importance: With this quote, the blue-collar Deirdre, who has admitted to being frustrated with her relative lack of income, indicates that on some level, she is trying to rationalize both her individual situation and the situation in which she has found herself as a result of Erik's losing his job. It is important to keep in mind that at the time she says this, the rest of her family (other than Erik) has no idea of her and Erik's financial situation. This, in turn, might be seen as an explanation for why her feelings overwhelm her: she is full of grief, loss, and fear triggered by circumstances she is keeping secret. On another level, the quote can be seen as evoking Deirdre's religious faith - or, more specifically, her Christian faith which, traditionally, has celebrated the value of humility and poverty.

Dee's bosses have more money than God and they're stingy with her on everything, bonuses, vacation days – Aimes gets fired 'cause she's sick – MY grandma almost lost her life in a fire 'cause her bosses locked the doors to her factory to keep 'em from taking breaks, couplea blocks from here, so – and this isn't some scientific notion or something – but yeah, I do notice that rich people are usually pretty messed up."

-- Erik (Part 5)

Importance: There is a clear tie-in between this quote and the previous one, in that both can be seen as evoking the tensions between wealth and relative poverty, a sentiment made even more poignant and intense for Erik as a result of his own impending poverty.

Your grandma grew up in a two-room cesspool and your tragedy is what – having to figure out how to get a new letter of recommendation? … you're lucky to have a passion to pursue, if you don't care about it enough to push through this setback you should quit and do something else …"
-- Erik (Part 5)

Importance: In this speech, made in response to Brigid's tearful revelation of an unenthusiastic job reference, Erik responds with a combination of tough love (for his daughter), anger (about what his mother had to live through), and bitterness. There are two layers to this last emotional element: that he is bitter about his own job loss (a circumstance that, at this point in the story, most of the family knows nothing about); and that he is bitter about never having found a passion of his own.

Doing life twice sounds like the only thing worse than doing it once."
-- Erik (Part 5)

Importance: Once again, the bitter and wounded Erik reveals the depth of his frustration and disappointment with how his life has turned out. Here again, it must be remembered that he makes this comment from a place of having recently lost virtually everything about his work life that he values, as a result of his own bad choices.

…I wish I could've known that most of the stuff I DID spend my life worrying about wasn't so bad. Maybe it's because this disease has me forgetting the worst stuff, but right now I'm feeling nothing about this life was getting so worked up about … Dance more than I did. Drink less than I did. Go to church. Be good to everyone you love."
-- Deirdre (reading Momo's letter) (Part 6)

Importance: On its most apparent level, the quote is a poignant evocation of a woman who lived a difficult life, who has regrets, and who is urging younger generations to live life with fewer regrets, if they can. This becomes even more poignant when it is remembered that these words were spoken by a woman who is now lost in dementia, which is arguably the "worst stuff" that people can live through, both those who suffer it and those who love those who suffer it. On a third level, it can be seen as a reminder to both Deirdre and her daughters to live life not according to what they fear, or worry about, but according to what brings them joy and fulfillment, even fleetingly.

With no remaining natural or electric light, the apartment's architecture seems to have famished – even the indirect moonlight from the upstairs window is gone – the only defined shape comes from the lighted doorway."
-- Stage Directions (Part 7)

Importance: As the play draws to its conclusion, and as protagonist Erik makes his literal way out of the literal dark surrounding him (at the same time as he is making his way out of the metaphorical darkness of fear metaphorically filling him), the play brings out an image of light, life, and hope. What is interesting to note about this particular image is that it evokes a tunnel of light, of positivity: in Erik's previously referenced dreams, tunnels had been a trigger of mystery, and of fear.