

Next to Normal Study Guide

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Contents

Next to Normal Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Act One, Part 1.....	5
Act 1, Part 2.....	7
Act 1, Part 3.....	9
Act 1, Part 4.....	11
Act 2, Part 1.....	13
Act 2, Part 2.....	15
Act 2, Part 3.....	17
Act 2, Part 4.....	19
Act 2, Part 5.....	21
Characters.....	23
Objects/Places.....	27
Themes.....	29
Style.....	31
Quotes.....	34
Topics for Discussion.....	36



Plot Summary

This acclaimed musical, winner of several of Broadway's prestigious Tony Awards as well as the Pulitzer Prize, is the story of a family traumatized by death and struggling with issues related to the mental illness of one of its members. As it explores aspects of the power and function of memory, the work also considers thematic questions relating to the nature and value of loyalty and the need for hope in the face of adversity.

As the musical begins, it quickly becomes clear that as Diana, her husband Dan, and her daughter Natalie enact their daily routines, they are each struggling with issues that make those routines a struggle. Diana is hyperactive, Dan tries hard to remain patient with her, and Natalie feels unloved and avoided. In the midst of all this is Diana and Dan's son Gabe, who seems more connected to Diana than anyone else. It soon becomes clear that for some time, Diana has struggled with bipolar disorder, that Dan feels it's time for her to change her medication, that Natalie wishes there was some way that she could get out of this situation, and that Gabe, in a surprising revelation, is dead. His presence is, in fact, a delusion primarily experienced by Diana but which, over the course of the narrative, interacts with the other characters as well.

Diana's first doctor experiments with a new drug regime that, after a few unsuccessful attempts, calms her down but numbs her experience of feeling. In the meantime, Natalie begins a relationship with Henry, a "stoner" guy at school who gets past her initial resistances and treats her with wisdom and respect. Eventually, Diana tires of being numb all the time and, with the encouragement of the ghostly Gabe, flushes all her medications down the toilet.

Diana then starts working with another therapist, Dr. Madden, who first prescribes hypnosis in which Diana's memories of Gabe's death begin to come to the surface and then, when neither hypnosis nor talk therapy appears to be doing her any real good, electroshock therapy. At first, Diana is powerfully resistant, feeling like Gabe is being taken from her. Natalie is unhappy about the idea of such a violent treatment, but Dan eventually convinces Diana to give it a chance.

After receiving the treatment, Diana's memory is erratic, and her family struggles to keep being patient as she herself struggles with putting the pieces of her memory back together. Meanwhile, Natalie pushes Henry away, and Dan becomes more insistent that Diana's memories about Gabe remain locked in her mind. Eventually, however, those memories push their way to the forefront of Diana's mind, and she remembers not only that he died when he was a baby, but she also realizes that because she grieved for him so intensely for so long, she has neglected Natalie. Her attempts to bridge the distance between them eventually result in a tentative reconciliation. Meanwhile, Diana is also realizing just how much of a role Dan has recently played in trying to keep her memories of Gabe suppressed, and realizes she has to leave him in order to come to grips with her past, and her memories of Gabe, on her own terms.



As Diana prepares to leave, Natalie opens herself to the relationship with Henry and Dan opens himself to his own memories of Gabe along with his own guilt about what happened to him. As the musical comes to an end, all of the characters join together and sing about the importance and value of hope, and of letting its light "shine" in the darkness of despair and fear.



Act One, Part 1

Act One, Part 1 Summary

This acclaimed musical, winner of several of Broadway's prestigious Tony Awards as well as the Pulitzer Prize, is the story of a family traumatized by death and struggling with issues related to the mental illness of one of its members. As it explores aspects of the power and function of memory, the work also considers thematic questions relating to the nature and value of loyalty and the need for hope in the face of adversity.

Scene 1 - Following a brief prologue, Diana, awake very early in the morning, speaks with the late-returning Gabe, confessing that once again she's been imagining how he might die. Dan calls down, and Diana says she's just talking to herself, adding that she'll be up right away for sex. Music starts, uptempo with a rock feel ("Just Another Day"). Dialogue and singing intercut the next morning, as the members of the family prepare for their day. Diana sings of how much she dislikes her family, (see "Quotes," p. 8), Gabe sings about feeling fully alive, Natalie sings of how difficult it is to hang on (the whole time ignoring Gabe's presence), and Dan sings about how difficult it is to understand Diana. As the song continues (see "Quotes," p. 11), Diana makes a huge pile of sandwiches, and then collapses on the floor. As her children watch, Dan helps her up, making plans to take her to Doctor Fine.

Scene 2 - Music plays a classical sounding piano part with some light orchestral accompaniment in the style of Mozart. Natalie, practicing the piano, sings of how, when she plays, the rest of the world goes away and she can believe in a future away from her "paranoid parents" ("Everything Else"). As the music ends Henry, who has been listening, introduces himself, revealing that he sits behind her in several classes and knows her schedule. Natalie calls him creepy and he goes - but before he's gone, Natalie says he gives up too easily.

Scene 3 - Dr. Fine gives Diana details about which medication to take when, his speech morphing into a test of her awareness. His speech and questioning intercut with Dan (who muses on who's crazier, him for hoping "things aren't as bizarre as they are," or his wife, "the one who can't cope" - see also "Quotes," p. 22) and with Diana, singing in discordant waltz time about the strangely intimate relationship she has with Fine, her psycho-pharmacologist. As time passes, the music continues with Dr. Fine and Diana trying to find the right balance of medications (Fine making it up as he goes along) and a chorus of "Voices" listing medications and their side effects, one of which is death. At that point, Gabe adds his voice to the commentary. As the song continues, Henry plays jazz as Natalie listens, their conversation commenting on the value of improvisation (i.e. the musician making it up as s/he goes along). The scene concludes with Diana saying she doesn't feel like herself ... that she feels nothing. Fine describes her as stable.



Act One, Part 1 Analysis

The characters and situations in this section, and indeed throughout the entire piece, are portrayed in vivid and at times very broad strokes that manifest both musically and textually. In other words, both words and music vividly evoke their individual states of being - their desperation, their need, their confusion, and the varied, sometimes contradictory, drives that make them do what they do in the way that they do it. Natalie in particular is very strongly developed, her text in both the songs and the dialogue very strongly evocative of a contemporary troubled teen. Diana is also effectively drawn, her illness becoming clear through her actions, rather than the audience being told that she's ill. Dan's patience is also clear, if somewhat less vivid, if only because patience is a difficult emotion to paint in particularly vibrant colors.

It's arguable, though, that the most intriguing presence in this opening section, and arguably throughout the piece as a whole, is Gabe. Actually, to be perfectly clear, his presence is only particularly intriguing in hindsight, when the reader looks at how he acts and how the other characters interact with him while taking into consideration the fact that he's dead as revealed in the following section. Thus, Diana's conversation about how he died, her comment to Dan that she's talking to herself, the stage direction suggesting that Natalie ignores him, and Gabe's lyrics in "Just Another Day," referring to feeling alive, take on additional layers of meaning, symbolism, and importance that are, again in hindsight, sometimes sinister and sometimes very sad. Perhaps most important of these is the timing of Gabe's entrance into Diana's scene with Fine (i.e. at the moment that Fine and the Voices mention death). This foreshadows the moment in Act 1 Part 4 where Gabe appears to be encouraging Diana to kill herself.

One other important point to note about this section is how comments in one scene and/or song reflect comments in another - for example, the doctor "improvising" with Diana's medications related to Natalie and Henry's discussion of musicians "improvising". This narrative technique, of parallel/mirror imaged meanings taking place at the same time, is one which theatre in general, and musicals in particular, often make very effective use of.



Act 1, Part 2

Act 1, Part 2 Summary

Scene 4 - Music plays (mid-tempo, acoustic guitar and strings) as Henry and Natalie smoke marijuana in Henry's room and he tries to convince her that he could be a good boyfriend for her ("Perfect for You"). Time moves forward as, on one of their dates, Diana watches them and Gabe confronts her about spying on them. After Gabe goes, Dan appears, dressed in clothes from years before that looks like the shirt Henry wears. The action flashes back to his marriage proposal, triggered by the news that Diana is pregnant. Stage directions suggest that Diana's memory has been triggered by watching Henry and Natalie, who realizes that Diana has been watching and hurries up to her bedroom. Music starts (acoustic guitar, folk music feel with hints of rock) as Diana sings of missing the mountains, the highs and lows of feeling and excitement ("I Miss the Mountains"). She misses feeling, she sings, and as she sings, she dumps all her medications down the toilet. "I miss my life," she says. Gabe enters, suggesting what she's doing is a great idea, and that Diana is brave. He then flushes the toilet. Sudden change into ...

Scene 5 - Dan, busy at work, sings an uptempo song, with the accompaniment of the Voices, about how, in the last two weeks, things have been really good at home and he doesn't have to worry ("It's Gonna Be Good") even though Diana is in manic phase. Meanwhile, Natalie refuses to let Henry meet her family, but Dan surprises them as they sit on the front porch, inviting Henry in for dinner. The song continues as Natalie tries to get herself and Henry out of there, but eventually joins in, along with Henry and Gabe, as Diana, moving in fast motion, serves dinner and they grab what forkfuls of food they can. At the end of the song, Diana enters with a birthday cake, lit with candles. Natalie tells Henry it's her brother's birthday, and when Henry says he didn't know she had a brother, Natalie reveals that he died before she was born. Dan gently reminds Diana that Gabe has been dead for sixteen years ("He's Not Here," a quiet, reflective ballad - see "Quotes," p. 31). Natalie storms out, and after politely saying it was nice to meet Dan and Diana, Henry goes.

Scene 6 - Diana reveals that she's gone off her medications. Dan says they'll go back to Dr. Fine to get some new ones, adding that he knows how hurt she is. She explodes ("You Don't Know," a hard driving rock tune), describing how hard it is for her to keep going, accusing him of having no idea how she feels (see "Quotes," p. 32). In response, Dan protests ("I Am The One," a slightly less driving rock tune) that he's the one who truly loves her and is not going to leave her. Gabe appears and watches, commenting that Dan doesn't truly care about what happened to him or about what is happening to Diana, both of them singing that they each won't leave Diana. As Diana again sings "You Don't Know," Gabe and Dan each sing, together, that he is the one who knows her and loves her. The song concludes with Gabe saying, "You don't know who I am."



Act 1, Part 2 Analysis

The most important point to note about this section is not only the revelation that Gabe is dead, but that he died several years ago. While the implications of this are not immediately clear (and probably wouldn't be to an audience seeing this show, which moves extremely quickly, in performance), upon reflection they suggest some significant things. Among them - that Diana has been carrying her feelings of guilt and grief with her for over a decade, that Dan has been struggling with the volatility in Diana triggered by those feelings for the same amount of time, and that Natalie has been low person at the bottom of her family's emotional totem pole also for that same time. In other words, this is a family with a lot of emotional baggage, some of which is revealed in dialogue, some in song lyrics, some in the quality and style of the music itself.

Meanwhile, another often used, and generally effective, narrative theatrical technique appears early in this section. This is the overlapping and interaction of time, a layering of time and space in which events in the past and present appear to be taking place in the same moment. The theatre is the only medium in which this kind of immediate, living interaction of past and present, and sometimes the future, can take place simultaneously, and is particularly both effective and important in this case because it dramatizes and/or illuminates one of the work's key thematic considerations, the nature and value of memory (see "Themes"). Also in this section, the interaction of similar ideas and feelings across different scenes and characters also comes into play, as it tends to do throughout the piece - see "Topics for Discussion - Examine the summaries of the various scenes..." Meanwhile, there is also substantial irony at work in this section, and indeed throughout the work, as characters strive extremely hard to convince themselves that reality is one thing when it is, in fact, something else altogether (see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss ways in which irony ...").

Finally, it's important to note the range of experiences in response to mental illness that are portrayed in this section. The work has been reviewed and commented upon as being exceptionally realistic, and several experiences portrayed by the characters in this section can be seen as examples of how that realistic perspective has been integrated. See "Topics for Discussion - Research and discuss case histories ..."



Act 1, Part 3

Act 1, Part 3 Summary

Scene 7 - As Henry offers Natalie some marijuana, music starts (a mid-tempo, folk/rock song, "Superboy and the Invisible Girl"), and Natalie vents her anger at being the child always disregarded in favor of her parents' concern about her dead brother. At one point, Diana appears, overhears, and comments that Natalie's not telling the truth, that she loves her daughter as much as she can. Diana then goes, and Natalie pleads to be noticed (see "Quotes," p. 37). Gabe appears and sings with Natalie about "the son of steel and the daughter of air." As the song ends, Natalie takes the marijuana from Henry.

Scene 8 - Dan takes Diana to a new doctor, Dr. Madden, who takes her medical history, and she comments that her mother was herself as "high spirited" as she is. Madden comments that sometimes a mental illness can lie dormant for some time, eventually becoming triggered by a traumatic event. Diana answers the rest of his questions as best as she can (see "Quotes," p. 40), but then stops when he starts asking about Gabe, who appears and sings (the edgy, rocking "I'm Alive" - see "Quotes," p. 41) about the intensity of his presence in Diana's life. His song is intercut with dialogue between Dan and Natalie in which they discuss how Gabe's presence is never going away and Diana is never going to get better, with Dan reminding the resentful Natalie that it's not all about her. Gabe, meanwhile, says, "I own you," indicating that he is alive not only to Diana, but in other ways to Dan and Natalie too. Natalie leaves Dan and goes to the bathroom, where she takes a couple of Diana's pills, Gabe singing that he is "behind" her. Meanwhile, Dr. Madden suggests that because Gabe would have been eighteen, it's time for Diana to let him go. As Gabe sings again of how alive he is, Dr. Madden proposes hypnosis to help Diana move on. The song concludes as the hypnosis begins.

Scene 9 - Dr. Madden sings the reluctant Diana into an hypnotic state ("Make up your Mind") convincing her to explore her deeper self (see "Quotes," p. 45). Scenes of hypnosis are intercut with scenes of Diana and the Voices questioning the process. Meanwhile, Gabe appears and starts singing, along with Diana, about how they're "falling" (a multi-voiced, rock-textured ensemble number - "Catch Me I'm Falling"). Meanwhile, Henry visits Natalie backstage at a concert, assuring her that her parents will be there for her. Diana tells Madden that at first everything seemed all right, until ... but she doesn't go any further, saying instead that she couldn't hold Natalie when she was born. This, Madden says, is the first time Diana ever had mentioned Natalie "in weeks of therapy." Meanwhile Natalie, who can't see her parents in the audience, erupts in anger and then, after badly messing up the first bars of her piece, starts improvising. All the characters sing lines from their previous songs, Henry helping Natalie off the stage to keep her from crumbling.



Act 1, Part 3 Analysis

Once again, many of the musical's theatrical narrative techniques come into play in this section - primarily irony and the interaction of ideas between scenes and characters (see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss ways in which irony..." and "Examine the summaries of the various scenes..."). There is also, in this section, a particularly powerful example of how this show explores the interaction of reality with non reality - specifically, Gabe's interaction with the other characters, such as in Scene 8 when he and Natalie sing the same lyrics at the same time. This is the first time in the musical that Gabe interacts, albeit indirectly, with a character other than Diana. This suggests something that Gabe himself sings about - that he has more influence on his entire family than any of them, including Diana, really knows. Meanwhile, the narrative continues peeling away the secrets that have kept this family going all these years and, at the same time, have prevented them from doing so in any kind of healthy way. Perhaps the most painful of these is Diana's comment about her distant relationship with Natalie, with Natalie's unhappiness at her parents' missing her concert, which, one senses, has happened all too often, coming a close second.

In the middle of all this volatility and uncertainty, there is the character of Henry. In the middle of a quartet of characters (Diana and her family) who each sing, with varying degrees of intense emotion and or self-delusion, he is the one who is consistently honest, genuinely caring, and matter-of-fact about himself, his relationships, and his feelings. This is perhaps ironic, in that some people might consider his frequent marijuana use as a sign of a negative, rather than a positive, character. On the other hand, Henry's relative stability and security might also be seen as another way the narrative employs irony, Henry's generosity and compassion ironically playing against the negative image of a drug user that many audience members/readers, if not most, would have.



Act 1, Part 4

Act 1, Part 4 Summary

Scene 10 - As her session with Madden ends, he suggests that it's time for Diana to clear out Gabe's room and spend some time with Natalie. A few moments later, Dan brings Diana a box of Gabe's things, and she starts sorting through them. Music begins, the tinkling sound of a music box. Diana sings of a dreamy imagined dance with Gabe, who appears in a tuxedo and dances with her to a lightly textured waltz tune, "I Dreamed a Dance," eventually influencing her to say, "I'll die to dance with..." In response, he calls her to join him in a place where there's no pain ("There's a World," a tender ballad) and where they can be free. Madden appears, commenting as he makes a report that Diana has attempted suicide, slashing her wrists and arms. He recommends treatment, including restraint and electroshock therapy. Dan wonders whether that's still practiced, and Madden tells him it's standard practice in cases like Diana's (see "Quotes," p. 53). Dan remains unconvinced.

Scene 11 - Back at home, Dan tidies up, singing of how he's always been there for Diana no matter what, how tired he is of that, and how his death is just a slower suicide than hers ("I've Been"). Gabe appears, and sings with him, without words. As the song concludes with Dan singing of how he's never been alone, Natalie appears, asking why Dan didn't take her to the hospital to see Diana. When Dan reveals that Madden is planning to give Diana electroshock therapy, Natalie again erupts in anger, accusing Dan of betraying Diana's trust. Meanwhile, Madden tries to convince Diana to try the therapy, as Gabe tries to convince her not to. Natalie storms out, Dan follows, and it's Diana's turn to erupt, as she protests that she is not as crazy as people evidently think she is, and that she will not submit to the treatment ("Didn't I See this Movie," hard driving rock). Dan comes in, Madden leaves, and Dan asks Diana to take a chance on the treatment and help him to not be alone ("A Light in the Dark," an emotional ballad - see "Quotes," p. 57). Diana eventually agrees, and she signs the consent forms. Gabe appears and watches as she hands the form to Madden, looking at Dan one last time before she goes out. End of Act 1.

Act 1, Part 4 Analysis

Narrative momentum builds throughout this section, as confrontation after confrontation leads to the climax of the act, Diana's explosion during "Didn't I See This Movie?" The movie in question is the Oscar winning "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," in which a heroic character who didn't have mental illness allowed himself to receive life-destroying treatment in order to protect his friends in the mental hospital. It's interesting to note, meanwhile, that in the aftermath of Diana's explosion, the narrative makes the first real statement of one of its secondary themes, the value of hope (see "Themes") as metaphorically represented by light (see "Objects/Places"). The reference to light here,

meanwhile, foreshadows the return of both the word and the metaphor at the end of the piece, in which all the characters sing about finding their own life and hope.

Other important elements in this section include the first appearance of the music box (again, see "Objects/Places"), an important trigger for Diana's memories of Gabe in the second act. There is also the increasing darkness of Gabe's presence as he urges her here to kill herself, and to end her pain. The act ends, as good first acts do, not only with a moment of intense emotion, but by posing a question and/or creating a situation that leaves the audience wondering and eager to come back after intermission.



Act 2, Part 1

Act 2, Part 1 Summary

Scene 1 - Outside a noisy club, a drugged up Natalie drags a reluctant Henry into yet another dance party, saying she deserves to party - her mother is getting electrocuted, "every day for two weeks." Meanwhile, as Natalie and Henry dance and talk, Natalie saying as she pops another pill that she'd never let anyone "fuck with her mind like that," Diana is prepared for treatment. Electrodes are placed on her head, music begins, and suddenly the real Diana appears, describing her experience in song (an intermittently edgy rock tune, "Wish I Were Here" - see "Quotes," p. 60). As Diana sings, Natalie joins her, both singing of the intensity of an experience for which they're not really there (see "Quotes," p. 61). They actually speak to each other in their shared hallucination, talking about how "everything is different now." As Diana's "body" is taken from the treatment room, Natalie collapses.

Scene 2 - Henry takes Natalie home, arriving just in time for her to meet Diana, whom Dan is bringing home from the hospital and who, at first, doesn't recognize Natalie, the house, its contents, or her life with her family ("Song of Forgetting," a lightly textured, haunting ballad). Diana joins the song, commenting that "Dr. Mitchell" said there might be some memory loss. As the music changes into something rockier, Natalie comments ironically on how good the treatment is - her mother's mind is "so pure / that she doesn't know anything." Dan reassures them both that memories don't die, and the three sing of forgetting ...again.

Scene 3 - Henry and Natalie meet each other at school, conversation revealing they haven't talked in weeks ("Hey #1," tentative soft rock), that Henry is worried about Natalie's drug use, and that he wants to go to a dance with her. She refuses and goes, but he chases after her.

Act 2, Part 1 Analysis

One of the most important elements in this section is the introduction of Natalie's budding drug use, which suggests that like her mother, she is desperate to escape reality, although she does it in a slightly less psychotic way. Again, irony is working powerfully in this section (see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss ways in which irony..."). Meanwhile, another of the previously commented upon theatrical techniques that appears through the work is the interaction of realities - only here, instead of taking place through the delusional memory of Gabe, the interaction here is between two dissociations, or withdrawals from reality, those of Diana and Natalie. Another piece of clever theatricality is the use of illusion - Diana's body on the gurney while Diana herself sings of what's happening to her. Here, the use of music can be seen as one of the purest examples in the musical of what music in a piece of theatre like this is intended



to do - reveal the character's innermost feelings. In this case, what the audience sees is a pure evocation or externalization of Diana's subconscious.

One last important element is Dan's commentary on the subject of memory, one of several situations throughout the narrative that explore the work's primary thematic interest, the nature and function of memory (see "Themes").



Act 2, Part 2

Act 2, Part 2 Summary

Scene 4 - In conference with Diana and Dan, Dr. Madden comments that Diana's amount of memory loss following the electroshock treatment is unusual, but that memories lost in such a way generally do return ("Seconds and Years," almost playfully up-tempo). After Diana leaves, Dr. Madden urges Dan to find some triggers for her memory and, while introducing the subject of Gabe, keep her as calm as possible ("Better than Before," slightly more serious, but still up tempo). Back at home, Dan shows Diana several things, including their wedding rings, that she doesn't remember. Meanwhile, Natalie interjects comments about the semi-actual facts that Dan is feeding Diana, but Dan insists that things can be even better than before. When Diana is unable to remember Natalie in a photo, Natalie tries to leave, but Dan makes her stay. Natalie then shows Diana a series of photos of bad experiences. Dan tries to stop her, but as a result of seeing these photos Diana's memory starts returning and the three of them sing happily of how much better things are going to be ... until the music box appears, and so does Gabe.

Scene 5 - In a quickly paced, urgent number ("Aftershocks"), Gabe compares electroshock therapy to the electric chair, implying that they've killed him while clearing him from Diana's memory. Meanwhile, Diana sorts through more pictures, starting to feel like there's something missing. "I can almost see it," she says. Dan says the memories will come back when they're meant to, and urges her to come to bed. When she doesn't come, he goes alone. A moment later, Henry arrives. Diana manages to remember his name, commenting that he looks familiar before telling him to go up to Natalie. After he goes, Gabe sings again of the hole left in Diana's mind by his having been erased from it (see "Quotes," p. 76).

Scene 6 - Henry again asks Natalie to the dance ("Hey #2," a reprise of "Hey #1") and an argument almost erupts, but Henry defuses it by saying he'll come by the following night to take her to the dance. "If you show," he says, "then we'll go. If you don't, we'll see." She comments that he doesn't give up, he asks her to not give up on him, and they say goodbye.

Act 2, Part 2 Analysis

At this point, it's interesting to consider the work's sense of structure, discussed in more detail in "Style - Structure" but here, it is worth commenting on since the action moves smoothly and without interruption from Madden's office into Dan and Diana's home. This technique is employed throughout the narrative, giving the audience an uninterrupted experience; there are, for example, no blackouts (i.e. shutting off of stage lights) at the end of scenes, cause triggering immediate, sometimes almost simultaneous effect.



Meanwhile, the work's thematic exploration of the nature and value of memory takes a slightly darker turn in this section, as Dan clearly attempts to manipulate Diana's mind and Natalie calls him on it. It seems that Dan is trying to make Diana believe that their past was better than it actually was. He's well intentioned, in that he's trying to ease or end her suffering, but is he morally right? (See "Topics for Discussion - Debate Dan's actions...").

Other important elements in this section include the return of the music box triggering, as always, troubling memories of Gabe (see "Objects/Places"), the deepening of the rift between Natalie and Diana, and the irony associated with Natalie's comment that Henry doesn't give up, a clear contrast with her comment at the end of their first scene together (Scene 2).

A "reprise" in musical theatre is a musical number in which music, ideas and even some text are sung again some time after being sung the first time. Reprises can function as reiterations of feeling or restatements of intention, both of which are taking place here in the reprise of "Hey," and which take place again when the number is reprised further in Scene 12. They can also function as ironic commentary on, or reversals of, the situation sung about earlier. An effective example of this takes place in the following section (Scene 7).



Act 2, Part 3

Act 2, Part 3 Summary

Scene 7 - Diana, in conversation with Dr. Madden, sings of not knowing or understanding what's happening to her or how her memory is working - a reprise of "You Don't Know," only this time it's "I Don't Know" (see "Quotes", p. 78). As she sings of how difficult it is to get Dan to talk, Madden's reference to Gabe stops both the song and the conversation cold. Diana doesn't remember having a son. Madden urges her to talk more to Dan. He then disappears.

Scene 8 - Diana, left alone, is handed the music box by Gabe. She listens to it, and Gabe hums along with its song. Dan interrupts, and Diana starts remembering how the music box helped their son sleep. Music starts ("How Could I Ever Forget?", a careful, slow, ballad) as Diana remembers the details of Gabe's death and rushing him to the hospital when he was only a few months old (see "Quotes," p. 81). Dan sings with her as they remember the fear and loss of Gabe's death, Diana insisting that Dan tell her the details and Dan refusing. Diana speaks of remembering him older, asks Dan why she doesn't remember Dan ever saying his name, and then asks what the name was. Dan reassures her that everything will be good, and there will be more electroshock therapy. As Diana continues to wonder about her son, singing the question of his name, and as Dan continues to reassure her, Henry arrives and Natalie comes downstairs to meet him. They watch as Dan grabs the music box from Diana and breaks it. Natalie runs back upstairs, and Henry runs after her.

Scene 9 - The action continues as Diana and Natalie ask Dan and Henry why they stay ("Why Stay", surgingly angry), a song which ends with both women saying both the men and the women might be better off. Dan and Henry profess that they made a promise ("A Promise," lightly rocking but urgent and insistent), Dan saying he'll re-make his promise to be with Diana forever. At the end of the song, stage directions describe Natalie in Henry's arms, and Dan and Diana staring at each other. Gabe appears, singing again that he is "more than memory," drawing closer to Diana, who backs away from Dan and eventually runs out, searching for Natalie. Dan pursues Diana, and is in turn pursued by Gabe, singing again of how alive he is. Natalie briefly confronts Diana, who turns from her and passes Dan. Natalie, meanwhile, tells Henry she can't go to the dance because she has to take her mother to the hospital. As Diana goes out, Henry says he'll wait for Natalie at the dance. The scene ends with Gabe singing, once more, that he's alive.

Act 2, Part 3 Analysis

As previously discussed, the reprise of "You Don't Know" in Scene 7 is, like other reprises, a reiteration of a musical motif first heard earlier - in this case, of "You Don't Know" in Act 1, Scene 6. There, the number was angry and defiant, a statement by



Diana of identity and personal perspective. Here, though, the meaning of the song is ironically reversed, in that she sings of her loss of identity and her lack of personal perspective. In other words, her singing this particular song in this particular way at this particular time is powerfully evocative of where she is in her struggle for mental and emotional health and security.

Meanwhile, and again as previously discussed, it's important to note the flow of action throughout this section, particularly between Scenes 7 and 8. Stage directions indicate that after Madden leaves, Gabe immediately appears and hands Diana the music box; in other words, the action continues. It may be, in fact, that this transition, like so many throughout the narrative, is intended to represent Diana's experience of how events are flowing one into the other in her damaged, traumatized mind raising the question of which, by the way, is the more traumatic for her - the death of her son, or the shock treatment?. Also in this section, Dan's determination to revise his and Diana's past comes into direct conflict with Diana's equally powerful determination to both know and understand that past, and to integrate it more fully into her life and memory than she ever has before. It's possible to see her action as being the more courageous and Dan's being the more fearful, but it's also possible that for Dan, his attempt to revise the past ,and bring Diana into that revision, is itself an act of courage, a moving forward in a way that wasn't possible before. He does, as he himself says, still love Diana very much; he does what he does out of love. It's just misguided.

Other important points to note include the interactive layerings of scenes, characters and experiences, Gabe's comment that he is more than memory (what exactly is he, then?) and the somewhat surprising decision that Natalie makes to help her mother. It seems that even though Natalie resents her deeply, there is still some sense of connection there, or at least a desire for one, or at the very least a sense of responsibility. Whatever Natalie's motivation, the relationship she has long sought with Diana has its beginnings in the following scene, beginnings enabled by Natalie's choice here.



Act 2, Part 4

Act 2, Part 4 Summary

Scene 10 - Diana musically asks Madden an urgent driving question: what happens when a treatment reveals a wound different from the one that had originally been treated ("The Break" - see "Quotes," p. 89), indicating that she believes the real wound is not in her mind, but in her soul. Madden, in a reprise of "Make Up Your Mind," suggests that Diana look at the situation as an opportunity for clarity, and that she might need more treatment. Then, in a reprise of "Catch Me I'm Falling," Diana and Gabe both resist the idea of both more talk and electroshock therapy. Madden continues his efforts to convince her to try again, but Diana insists there should be no limit on the amount of time she can be allowed to grieve for her child (see "Quotes," p. 92). Madden makes one last try, but Diana leaves.

Scene 11 - Outside Madden's office, Diana meets Natalie, telling her that she's going to take Natalie to the dance, and that it's time for her to find her own happiness. When Natalie protests, Diana sings (in a careful ballad, "Maybe / Next to Normal") that she doesn't know where she's at, that she's tired of trying to live by other people's rules, and that she sees herself in Natalie, a girl trapped but who might someday be free. Natalie sings that she appreciates the affection, wonders where it's been for her whole life, confesses that she once wished Diana would die, and swears there will be no more crying. Diana promises that things will get better, but Natalie protests that it will never be better for her. In one last effort, Diana reveals that Gabe died of an intestinal blockage, apologizes for not talking of it, and comments that she and Dan wanted to give her a normal life. Natalie sings that normal is too far away, but that she'd settle for something "next to normal ... close enough to normal to get by." She and Diana agree to try, and then Natalie goes to the dance.

Scene 12 - Natalie joins Henry ("Hey #3," "Perfect for You - Reprise"), revealing her pretty blue dress. Their sung conversation reveals that Henry thought they were through, and that Natalie fears she'll end up crazy like her mother. When Henry says he'll be there for her, she protests, with increasing anger, that she might turn out to ruin his life. He, however, suggests they could both go insane (see "Quotes," p. 97), and that that would be perfect. As the music fades, they kiss.

Act 2, Part 4 Analysis

Scene 10 contains reprise after reprise, re-definition after re-definition, as Diana fights hard, harder than it seems she ever has in her life, to realize her goal of having her memory in a healthy way. The argument with Madden climaxes in the powerful moment in which Diana claims there should be no time limit on how long she should be able to grieve for her child which is, or what amounts to, a cry for justice that not only Dan and Madden but she herself has been unable to realize up to this point. The irony here is



that in the moment after Diana cries out that she wants to maintain her connection with her son, she is immediately confronted by Natalie, the daughter whose relationship with her mother was undeniably stunted as the result of Diana's previous connection with Gabe. The duet that Natalie and Diana sing, meanwhile, is a reiteration of the parallels that exist between the two women, although in this case, the parallels are slightly more positive than those portrayed at the beginning of the act. It's particularly interesting to note that the reconciliation with Natalie enables Diana to reveal, for the first time in the narrative, the true reason Gabe died. There is the sense here that a release of experience in one area of Diana's life (i.e. her relationship with Natalie), an easing of parent/child relationship, enables a release of feeling in another area, the parent / child relationship that has been the source of all Diana's trouble in the first place. The same can also be said for Natalie, in that after the beginnings of reconciliation with Diana, she is able to open herself more to Henry, both in terms of admitting her fear (that she will be crazy like her mother) and her affection for, and need for comfort from, Henry. Meanwhile, for further consideration of the metaphoric value of Natalie's dress, see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss the symbolic and/or metaphoric implications ..."

Finally, it's important to note that this is also the point at which the source and meaning of the work's title becomes clear. Natalie and Diana both seem prepared and/or willing to live at least a "next to normal" life which seems, in some ways, to be what the narrative is suggesting is the most that anyone living in the aftermath of trauma can expect.



Act 2, Part 5

Act 2, Part 5 Summary

Scene 13 - Dan, alone, watches as Diana arrives with packed suitcases and announces that she's leaving ("So Anyway," a quiet ballad). She explains that she wants to face her fear and her grief alone (see "Quotes," p. 97). Gabe enters, and she sings to both of them that she loved them once and loves them still, but it's time for her to go. After she's gone, Dan and Gabe sing a reprise of "I Am the One," in which Dan wonders how Diana can leave after everything he's done for her, and Gabe reminds him that he is still in his life, no matter how hard Dan tries to deny him. Dan asks Gabe to leave him alone, Gabe insists he's going to remain, and then they both sing of how they were in each other's lives in the moments when they died. Daniel then calls Gabe by his first name, Gabriel, for the first time.

Scene 14 - Natalie arrives home, finding Dan sitting alone in the dark and learning that Diana has left. In the final song of the show, she sings that what they need is light, and that they'll keep on living ("Light"). Dan comments that they've been waiting too long for things to be made right. Diana appears in another place, singing of the need to move on and finding a way to survive ... "to be happy you're alive." Meanwhile, banter between Henry and Natalie reveals that Diana has gone to live with her parents, that Natalie feels like Henry is one too many things for her to be dealing with ... almost. Natalie sings of being glad to be able to feel pain, as long as it's real. Meanwhile, Dan consults with Madden, who says "the price of love is loss, but still we pay - we love anyway." Dan says he realizes Madden can't reveal whether Diana is working with him, but asks whether she's all right. Madden says she's working on it, and offers to arrange for Dan to talk with someone himself. At first Dan refuses, but then gratefully says yes. As Dan and Madden talk, Gabe appears, singing, as Diana did, of hope and possibility (see "Quotes," p. 103). At that moment, all the characters step into the version of light in their world, calling for it to "shine ... there will be light! There will be light! There will be light!"

Act 2, Part 5 Analysis

In Scene 13, Diana essentially declares her emotional independence from the loving but manipulative Dan and the equally loving, but much more dangerously manipulative, Gabe. Here again, realities and interactions interact and overlap, the words of one character (Diana) affecting two others (Dan and Gabe) in different ways for different reasons. After she goes, the encounter between Dan and Gabe (the first time Dan has interacted with Gabe in any way) can be seen as an echo of the scene between Natalie and Diana. Dan too has opened himself to his feelings and his memories and, like Diana and Natalie, is prepared to move on as best he can, engaged in a relationship with a child he has kept at a distance. The fact that Gabe is dead is, in this case, ultimately irrelevant; as Diana literally embraced Natalie, Dan is metaphorically embracing Gabe. Meanwhile, it's interesting to consider the metaphoric implications of

Gabe's full name - one of the most well known, and vividly named, angels in the Christian Bible is named Gabriel.

In Scene 14, all of the characters take necessary and important steps towards moving on, towards living the "next to normal" life referred to in Diana and Natalie's duet. Here, in the show's musical and emotional finale (i.e. its narrative climax, or point of highest emotional and thematic intensity), the narrative invokes another of its central themes, the power of light as a metaphor for hope. All the characters here see possibilities for the future - not a perfect future, but a time healthier and more positive than their shared, traumatized past. The trauma is still there, but now all the characters are prepared, and perhaps even closer, to being able to live with it. As Natalie says, it's ultimately healthier to be able to feel at all, even if what is being felt is pain. The light, it seems, shines equally, and with as much potential for freedom to feel, on both suffering and release.



Characters

Diana

Diana is the musical's central character and protagonist. As the narrative begins she is in her late thirties or early-to-mid forties, and in the middle of a battle with bipolar disorder, also known as manic depression. She has suffered with this disease, and her family has suffered with its effects, for several years. She has also carried with her the trauma and grief caused by the sudden death of her infant son almost eighteen years. While the narrative never explicitly makes the connection, it does hint that experiences of psychological illness like Diana's are often triggered by an emotional trauma - in other words, there is the strong sense that Diana's instability developed as the result of her son's death. Despite her illness, and the confusion and uncertainty it triggers in her life and in the world around her, Diana is strong willed and determined, resistant on a deeply profound level to challenges to what she believes is important - in particular, her grief over the loss of her son. Over the course of the narrative, as she goes through a series of medical treatments and a number of confrontations with both her physicians and her family, Diana comes to accept her condition, the loss that triggered that condition, and the need for her to address the grief caused by that loss in order to address the condition. She moves from uncertainty to a greater degree of clarity or, as the final song suggests, from darkness into light.

Dan

Dan is Diana's husband, around the same age. He loves her deeply, still desires her, and unconditionally supports her in her struggles. He is also worn and weary by having to cope with her unpredictable mood changes, her surges of active energy and her crashes into despair. While he appears, on the surface, to be self-effacing and humble, there is the sense that he is also somewhat self important, in that he repeatedly refers to himself as the only one who truly cares about Diana, the only one who has stuck with her through all the difficulties of her life. In many ways, and although he appears to accept her condition on her terms, he insists that she be his wife on his terms - seeing the doctors he wants when he wants her to, taking the treatments he wants when he wants her to and, in the second act, remembering their shared past in the way he wants her to. He is, in many ways, passive-aggressive, disguising his need to control with apparent compassion. Over the course of the narrative, he moves from this way of interacting with his wife into not only a more genuine compassion for her, but also a greater understanding of himself. He realizes how much he has denied the suffering of his past and, like Diana, prepares to move into the future with a greater sense of both honesty and possibility.



Natalie

Natalie is Dan and Diana's daughter, a moody sixteen year old who, as the stage directions put it, is "trying to be perfect. It's not going well." Tired of dealing with her mother's unpredictable volatility, her father's half-hearted affection, and the intense focus that they both place on the memory of their dead son (Natalie's brother), she acts out with anger, frustration, sarcasm, and eventually drug use. She has been, for most of her life, essentially ignored by her parents, but never gives up hoping that they'll actually come around and recognize that she is not only alive (while their son is not) but actually part of their lives. Her relationship with Henry (see below) starts out shaky, with Natalie determined to keep him at a distance - she doesn't, it seems, want to care about anybody. Nor does she think that she can, or should. Over time, however, as she realizes how dangerously like her mother she is, and how much worse she (Natalie) could become, she begins to open herself more to ALL the people around her, not just Henry but also her mother and father. As the show concludes, she hasn't completely moved beyond her moodiness, but she has, like the other characters, come to realize that there is at least the possibility of a more hopeful life ahead.

Gabe (the delusion)

Gabe first appears as a healthy, attractive eighteen year old, energized and happy to be alive. As the narrative quickly reveals, however, Gabe actually died when he was an infant (see "Gabe, The Reality," below). His manifestation in the musical, therefore, is an act of theatricalized, externalized imagination; he is both what Diana would like him to be and what Diana is afraid of, in his occasional diversions into hinting of suicide, of having control over her, and of a lingering, deathly darkness. As the narrative progresses, however, it seems clear that all this spirit of Gabe actually wants is to be remembered, to not be forgotten. As the musical concludes he, like the other principal characters, have embraced the possibility of hope, or hope of possibility. His father has begun to remember him, his mother has begun to work through her grief, and his sister has begun to realize that she truly does have an identity, a sense of self, that isn't solely defined by her relationship to him.

Gabe (the reality)

The actual Gabe died sixteen years before the musical begins, when he was approximately two years old. In Act Two, Diana explains to Natalie that he died of an intestinal blockage - when he became ill, he was rushed to the hospital, but died before anything could be done. His death traumatized everyone in his family, particularly Diana, who was pregnant at the time, and Dan, and even Natalie who, born after he died, has had to live with the silent, intense, crippling grief of both her parents.



Henry

Henry is a little older than Natalie, but goes to the same school. He is described in stage directions as a "musician. Romantic. Stoner. Slacker. Philosopher king." He is, in spite of his apparently frequent drug use, easily the wisest, most grounded, most realistic character in the whole musical. He is also more genuine and more constant in his love than Dan, more alive and more empathetic than Gabe but at least as insistent and, while somewhat unstable, is ultimately far more together than Diana. His persistent and honest affection for Natalie finally breaks down her resistance, and she finally agrees to attend a high school dance with him, a trigger for both of them to join in the show's final song celebrating the power of hope and possibility as symbolized by light.

Dr. Madden

Dr. Madden is Diana's psychiatric therapist. Confident and mature, he is described as "ageless." At first he tends to baffle Diana with scientific jargon, but as he warms to her and gains more insight into her condition, and her interaction with her condition, he becomes less formal and more human. He tends to be unquestioningly confident in his abilities and treatments, and is somewhat shocked when Diana seems to repeatedly reject them. At the conclusion of the narrative, however, he has come to realize that his is not the only way; there are other ways, other methods, to approach and embrace the healing process, as manifest for him in the song "Light."

Dr. Fine

Dr. Fine is Diana's pharmacologist, or physician specializing in medications (he is played by the actor who plays Dr. Madden). His interactions with Diana are not many, but define him as being focused on jargon and on what seems to be his enjoyment of making things complicated.

The Voices

On several occasions throughout the narrative, a group of singers (a chorus) sings text and music that comments, ironically or honestly, on the action playing out in the narrative. They don't necessarily have a character or identity of their own, but come into the narrative to suggest the presence or perspective of a large group of people from whom one of the characters emerges. For example, in Act 1 Scene 3, the Voices can be seen as echoing the experiences of Dr. Fine and Diana, as they deal with the large number of medications that Diana has been prescribed. In short, in some ways the Voices are simply back up singers, adding layers of musical harmony and, therefore, musical depth and variety. In other ways, however, they offer valuable insight, counterpoint and commentary on the action.

Mozart

In Act 1 Scene 2, Natalie sings "Everything Else," in which she refers to Mozart as both a genius and insane; his ability to integrate harmony and logic into his emotionally expansive music helps her forget all the troubles in her life. He is, in short, a valuable inspiration to her.



Objects/Places

Music

As is the case with any musical, the music in *Next to Normal* illustrates and defines the characters' feelings. It is an expression of their subtext, their inner life, their desires and passions and fears. On another level, for Natalie, music, or rather the music she plays (i.e. as composed by Mozart - see "Characters") is an escape, an opportunity to get away from the parts of her life that are making her crazy.

Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder is the name given to the mental illness in which the sufferer swings unpredictably, and with sometimes violent volatility, between deep, debilitating depression and intense hyperactivity. Also known as manic depression, it can be treated with medications and with therapy, so that the sufferer can live a so-called "normal" life, on a relatively even keel without the extreme mood swings.

Anti-Depressant Drugs

As discussed above, bipolar disorder and many other mental illnesses are treated with powerful medications. Early in the narrative a doctor (Dr. Fine - see "Characters") experiments with different anti-depressant drugs in an effort to determine which combination will help Diana navigate her illness. It's generally acknowledged, meanwhile, that one of the side effects of such drugs is a loss of sexual desire. This, among other circumstances associated with her meds, is why Diana decides to go off them and try a different therapy.

Diana's Sandwiches

At the beginning of the musical, Diana, who is on the hyperactive side of the bipolar swing, makes stacks of sandwiches. Their presence is an important, inescapable clue to the rest of her family that she is once again having difficulty with her mental state.

The House

Virtually the family's entire home is onstage, the set portraying the kitchen, the living room, Natalie's bedroom, and the attic, among other rooms. It is the setting for several important scenes, and is, for Diana, at different times either a refuge or a trigger for her suffering (i.e. a trigger for her memories and delusions of Gabe).



Dr. Madden's Office

Several times over the course of the narrative, Diana visits Dr. Madden in his office. On some occasions he offers her treatment, on other occasions she challenges his methods of trying to make her well. In short, Madden's office is the setting for some of the musical's most confrontational scenes, and also some of its most moving moments of truth.

Electroshock Therapy

Electroshock therapy is, in some ways, a therapy of last resort used in treating mental illness. The patient receiving the treatment is strapped down, and powerful pulses of electricity are shot into his/her mind, in an attempt to restore balance in the brain's electrical impulses. There are serious side effects to the treatment, including burns, memory loss, and at times even death. Diana is subject to electroshock therapy in Act 2 of the musical, emerging damaged and slow to remember but ultimately, back on the track to health.

The Music Box

A music box that plays a delicate, dance-like melody is a particular trigger, for Diana, of memories of Gabe. Desperate to keep her from remembering too much that would cause her suffering, Dan breaks the box in the middle of a confrontation with Diana in Act 2.

Natalie's Dress for the Dance

Also in Act 2, Natalie wears a pretty dress to the dance she attends with Henry. It's interesting to note that the dress is, for much of the act, covered with a coat. Only when she has accepted the tentative offer of peace presented by her mother does Natalie take off the coat. For further consideration of the metaphoric meaning of the dress, see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss the symbolic and/or metaphoric implications ..."

Light

Throughout the musical, light is a symbol of hope, possibility, and truth. Nowhere is this more apparent, or more potently dramatized, than in the work's final moments, as all of the characters sing about the "light" now moving into their lives, or the life that they're moving into now that they're beginning to put their various darknesses (grief, anger, denial, illness, fear) behind them.



Themes

The Importance and Function of Memory

Experiences of memory take place on several levels throughout the narrative - the loss of it, the search for it, the changeability of it, the feelings associated with it, the hidden truths associated with it, all come into play at one point or another. The character most obviously affected by the many shifting qualities of memory is Diana, whose life and existence are entirely haunted by the memory of her son and of his death. Her connection to that memory, and to the feelings associated with it, are so strong that she manifests an alternate, idealized, living version of her son, a means to escape or deny memory. Later, she realizes memory's importance and fights with everything she has to both rediscover it and honor it. Meanwhile Dan does his best to suppress the painful parts of his memory, and Natalie struggles to emerge from the shadows that her parents' memories cast over her life. It's important to note, though, that while he may at first glance appear to be all about memory, Gabe is in fact a delusion, which is not the same thing - a delusion triggered by memory, absolutely, but he is not memory itself. The two doctors (Fine and Madden) treat memory, and their patient's reaction to it, as a symptom or a manifestation of a core problem, not as an independent aspect of character and identity. In terms of the piece as a whole, its thematic message seems to be that memory, whether of good or of bad, whether traumatizing or enlightening, must be welcomed and integrated into identity. Otherwise, suffering will result, and not just extreme suffering in the form of mental disease as suffered by Diana; Dan and Natalie, and indirectly Henry, all suffer as the result of their unwelcomed, un-integrated experiences with memory.

The Need for Hope

All of the characters, to varying degrees and for varying reasons, act out of hope, enduring difficult situations and facing down intense challenges in the name of keeping hope alive. Diana acts out of hope that she will feel better, and that she will be able to keep the memory of her son alive. Dan also hopes for Diana's health, and does what he does in an effort to make that hope a reality. Natalie acts out of hope that she can escape her parents, Gabe acts out of hope that he will continue to live through the memories of his mother. Henry acts out of hope that Natalie will see his affection and attraction clearly, and accept it. The doctors act out of a clinical hope that their expertise will enable another life to improve. For each of these individuals, hope increases in intensity throughout the narrative, as the characters try harder and harder to realize the goals that their hope inspires, encounter obstacles that challenge that hope, and try even harder. Ultimately at the end of the musical, all of them have, to one degree or another given up hope and have rediscovered it more powerfully than ever. The experience of this rediscovery is the focus and content of the work's final song, "Light." In that song, hope and possibility are represented by light which, it seems as the song concludes, has been the ultimate purpose at work in each of the characters all along -



the drive to live in a state of being in which hope can be realized more often than it is undermined or destroyed.

Loyalty and Steadfastness

Many of the main characters (the notable exception is Natalie) exhibit profound loyalty or steadfastness to the other characters - or, at least, they proclaim it to the other characters. Whether they actually act upon it is another question. For Dan and Henry, their belief that they have been loyal to the troubled women they care about (Diana and Natalie respectively) is an arguing point they frequently deploy as they try to convince the women to trust them. They see their loyalty as a worthwhile value, an expression of their hope for the well-being of the women that the men feel should be rewarded with a similar expression of loyalty and trust from the women. The question of whether their loyalty is sincere or merely a tactic is not explicitly answered by the narrative, which leaves the boundary between loyalty and manipulation blurred, but engagingly so. Diana, meanwhile, feels more loyalty to her memories of Gabe than she does to her husband, believing Dan to have been insensitive and selfish, and ultimately profoundly disloyal. Gabe, for his part, is profoundly, almost psychotically, loyal to his mother as the result of what he feels has been her unquestioning, absolutely steadfast loyalty to him - or at least to his memory. His loyalty, and Diana's to him, is ultimately revealed to be misguided, because it has prevented Diana from moving forward into a healthier, more positive and hopeful life. In contrast to all these states of being is Natalie who, interestingly, seems to have no loyalty to anyone or anything. She is simply trying to survive which, it could be argued, is simply loyalty to self. Eventually, however, she comes to realize that the protestations of loyalty from both Dan and Henry might be believed, her acceptance perhaps tipping the balance of the question above (are Dan and Henry honestly loyal, or just manipulative?) in favor of the former.



Style

Point of View

The narrative explores the points of view and experiences of all the main characters, each of them revealing at one point or another, through song and/or through confrontation, the truth and depths of their feelings, attitudes, beliefs and reactions. Diana is the character whose point of view is most frequently explored, her journeys and her struggles being placed front and center in the narrative. What makes the work so interesting, and so engaging, is not only that the points of view of the other characters are also explored, but that each of them is portrayed and/or experienced as being multifaceted, both admirable and flawed, worthy of respect and even affection as well as triggers for frustration, complication, and even resentment. This is true of the reactions of audiences and characters alike. In other words, the work's overall narrative point of view is quite objective, presenting the characters warts and all, as the saying goes, but ultimately, the piece is compassionately objective, suggesting that the characters are doing what they do, right or wrong, because they are suffering, they are needy, and they are vulnerable. The point to note here is that they're not weak, or self-pitying. They are presented from a perspective that portrays them as strong, but flawed. It is, overall, a profoundly humanist, and wise, point of view. Here it's important to note that point of view manifests in structure as well as in content - see "Structure" below.

Setting

The most interesting thing about the setting of this piece of theatre is that it moves in and out of reality - specifically, in and out of actual physical settings (i.e. the family's home, the doctor's office, the operating room), in and out of the characters' minds. The most vivid, and dramatically effective, of the latter is the relationship between Diana and Gabe, which takes place almost entirely within the boundaries of Diana's imagination; he's not alive, he is a delusion, a product of her imagination and fantasy ... a product of her mind. Here it's important to note that while Diana is the only character who interacts with Gabe directly, his presence is also a manifestation/externalization of the minds of the other characters - Dan's memory and assumptions, Natalie's memory and resentments. In that sense, the scenes with Gabe could also be viewed as projections of their minds, as being set in their minds. Ultimately, though, the setting of this piece of theatre is a product or manifestation of the possibilities inherent in theatre as a whole; as previously discussed, in theatrical narrative, realities can become layered, or be experienced as layered, in ways that they can't be in film or in written narrative. A setting can provide physical environment for events in the past and in the present at the same time, and this is a vital component of the setting for *Next to Normal*. Its setting in a theatrical environment, in a theatrical context, enables its story to unfold in a way relevant to the experience of its characters and particularly to the experience of its central character, Diana, that it would otherwise be less able to effectively invoke.



Language and Meaning

The first thing that's important to note in this area of "Style" is the fact that there are two different languages at work in this piece - musical language and textual language, melody / harmony and words. It's therefore essential to consider both. In terms of the former, one of the most intriguing elements of the piece, if one listens to the score, is the variety of sorts of music incorporated by the composer. The predominant sensibility is rock, edgy and driven, a style (musical language) appropriate for the edgy, driven, desperate nature of the central situation (Diana's struggle with reality). Here it's also important to note instrumentation (i.e. what instruments are employed at which point to enhance which mood), is in many ways the equivalent of textual vocabulary. An example is the frequent use of screaming electric guitars, evoking the internal, emotional screaming going on inside the characters. In terms of textual language, audiences accustomed to traditional musical theatre would probably be surprised, perhaps even shocked, by the coarseness of the language (several variations on the f-bomb, among others, are incorporated). Again, the sense here is of edginess, specifically of the characters being on edge. Their internal censors are down, their nerves are raw. Politeness doesn't really exist any more, not in the face of such driving, intense need. This is particularly important when one final note about language is considered - the use of medical jargon; its coldness, its clinical sensibility, its insensitivity and, essentially, its lack of humanity contrasts vividly and powerfully with the heated, passionate, ultra-sensitive and rawly human language, both textual and musical, employed by the other characters.

Structure

On one level, the work's structure is essentially linear, built on the relationship of action/reaction, of cause and effect. Diana acts out - action, cause. Dan takes her to see Dr. Fine - reaction, effect. Fine offers Diana hope - action, cause. Diana takes a chance on what he offers - reaction, effect. And so on and so on, all the way through the narrative. On another, and more engaging level, a very theatrical level, there are frequent diversions from that narrative line, offshoots into other subplots (i.e. the Natalie/Henry relationship, the Diana/Gabe relationship) that at times reflect the action in the main plot, at times affect that action, at other times contradict that action. The point is that in some cases, the movement between those narrative lines, between images in each of those lines, and between characters enacting those images, takes place within a phrase or two of music. Scenes flow one into the other with little or no sense of separation or division. Structure is fluid, moving not only from narrative line to narrative line or from scene to scene but from past to present, from internal experience to external experience, and back again. It's as though the central plot (Diana's tentative, daring journey back to mental and emotional health) is the string, and all the other narrative lines, all the journeys back into the past or into the minds of other characters, are varicolored beads tied onto that string. Those beads, in turn, create a collage of story and feeling that yes, is defined to a significant degree by how they're placed on that string, but which ultimately defines Diana's experiences not only in terms of herself,

but also in terms of how other people's experiences reflect and/or manifest hers. And vice versa.



Quotes

"So my son's a little shit, my husband's boring / And my daughter, though a genius, is a freak / Still I help them love each other / Father, mother, sister, brother, cheek to cheek!" Act 1, "Just Another Day," p. 8 - Diana

"Cause what doesn't kill me doesn't kill me / So fill me up for just another day." Ibid - Diana, Dan, Gabe, Natalie

"Who's crazy - the one who's uncured? / Or maybe the one who's endured? / The one who has treatments, or the / One who just lives with the pain? / They say love is blind, but believe me - love is insane." Act 1, "Who's Crazy?", p. 22- Dan.

"Why is it you still believe? / Do you dream or do you grieve? You've got to let him go. He's been dead / Sixteen years / No, my love, he's not here." Act 1, "He's Not Here", p. 31 - Dan

"Do you read obituaries / And feel jealous of the dead? / It's like living on a cliffside / Not knowing when you'll dive / Do you know / Do you know what it's like to die alive?" Act 1, "Do You Know?", p. 32 - Diana

"Take a look at the invisible girl / Here she is, clear as the day / Please look closely and find her before / She fades away." Act 1, "Superboy and the Invisible Girl," p. 37 - Natalie

"Most people who think they're happy just haven't thought about it enough. Most people who think they're happy are actually just stupid." Act 1, p. 40 - Diana.

"I am more than memory / I am what might be, I am mystery / You know me / So show me / ... / I am so alive, and I feed on the fear that's behind your eyes." Act 1, "I'm Alive," p. 41 - Gabe.

"Make up your mind to explore yourself / Make up your mind you have stories to tell / ... / Then make up your mind to be well." Act 1, "Make Up Your Mind," p. 45 - Dr. Madden.

"Sometimes patients recover just enough strength to follow through on suicidal impulses, but not enough strength to resist them." Act 1, p. 53 - Dr. Madden

"Tell me why I wait through the night / And why do I leave on the light / You know. I know. / Our house was a home long ago." Act 1, "A Light in the Dark," p. 57 - Dan.

"It's like someone drained my brain out / Set my frozen mind to thaw / Let the lethargy and pain out / While I stood and watched in awe." - Act 2, "Wish I Were Here," p. 60 - Diana.



"Am I feeling what I think I'm feeling / The hope, the heat, the fear / Wish I were here / Is this someone else's head trip? / Do I just disappear?" Ibid, p. 61 - Diana, Natalie

"The memories are gone / The aftershocks live on / But with nothing to remember, is there nothing left to grieve?" Act 2, "Aftershocks," p. 76 - Gabe

"I'm some Christopher Columbus sailing out into my mind / With no map of where I'm going, or of what I've left behind." Act 2, "You Don't Know (Reprise)," p. 78 - Diana

"Those weeks of joy / Then - a moment of dread / Someone simply said / Your child - is..." Act 2, "How Could I Ever Forget?", p. 81 - Diana.

"What happens when the burn has healed / But the skin has not regrown? / What happens when the cast at last comes off / And then you find the break was always in another bone?" Act 2, "The Break," p. 89 - Diana.

"My first psychiatrist told me that according to the manual, grief that continues past four months is pathological and should be medicated. Four months. For the life of my child. Who makes these decisions?" Ibid, p. 92 - Diana

"Sometimes life is insane / But crazy I know I can do / 'Cause crazy is perfect / and fucked-up is perfect / So I will be perfect ... / Perfect for you." Act 2, "Perfect for You Reprise)," p. 97 - Henry.

"With you always beside me / to catch me when I fall / I'd never get to know the feel of solid ground at all." Act 2, "So Anyway," p. 97 - Diana.

"And when the night has fin'ly gone / And when we see the new day dawn / We'll wonder how we wandered for so long, so blind / The wasted world we thought we knew / The light will make it look brand new." Act 2, "Light," p. 103 - Gabe.



Topics for Discussion

Discuss ways in which irony (i.e. characters saying one thing when the audience knows the truth is something else) is used to particular effect throughout the musical. Consider not only the text, but what is known of the music. What are some examples of musical irony (i.e. the quality/type of music ironically juxtaposed with the dramatic moment in which the music is utilized)?

Research and discuss case histories of people suffering with mental illness. What aspects of their experience do you see in the actions and reactions of the characters, not just of Diana but also her family?

Examine the summaries of the various scenes for examples of how events, feelings, themes and/or ideas in one scene, character or relationship, have echoes, ironic or genuine, in a simultaneous or parallel scene, character or relationship.

Debate Dan's actions in Act 2 as he tries to manipulate Diana's memories of her past. Was he right to try to ease her suffering? Or was he wrong, and should the past be recalled for what it was, pain and all? What would you do in a similar situation - try to ease a loved one's pain, or reawaken their pain all over again?

Recall and discuss a traumatic experience in your life - how it felt as you recovered from it, how people treated you, how you reacted to their treatment. How easy was it to recover? What did it take to recover? How did you help yourself to recover?

Discuss the symbolic and/or metaphoric implications of the dress Natalie wears to the dance, in particular the point at which she takes off her coat and reveals it. How does the timing of this particular gesture relate to where she is emotionally at that point in the story?

What role does memory play in your life? Is it a standard against which you measure the experiences of the present and hopes for the future? Does it represent parts of your life that are completely over, and have no more effect on you? Do your memories affect you emotionally, or are you able to distance yourself from them?

What do you wish you couldn't remember, and why? What do you wish you could remember better, and why?

How do hope, and/or possibilities for the future, define your present actions? Your relationship with the past?

What are your experiences of loyalty - with friends? with family? with social groups? other forms of loyalty (i.e. to a belief, to a country)? Do you consider loyalty a value? How do you react when someone behaves in a way you perceive as disloyal to you? Describe an act of loyalty on your part - how did it make you feel? Have you ever felt

you've been loyal to the wrong person, or too loyal for too long? If yes, how did you change the situation?