

Water by the Spoonful Study Guide

Water by the Spoonful by Quiara Alegría Hudes

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Plot Summary

This play, winner of the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, is a highly theatrical, multi-faceted story of addiction and recovery, despair and hope, past and future. In the aftermath of a significant death, the dead woman's sister, her son, his cousin, and several other characters struggle to come to terms with the immediate loss, painful memories, and the possibilities for a future free of past suffering.

The play begins with traumatized Iraq war veteran Elliot receiving the news of the sudden death of his mother, Ginny, and with him sharing the news with his musician cousin, Yazmin. As Elliot and Yazmin work through their own grief, cope with the grief of other family members, and struggle to make funeral arrangements that will please everybody, Ginny's sister Odessa continues to run a pet project: an online chatroom that offers support for people, like her, struggling to recover from an addiction to crack cocaine.

As the action of the play unfolds, it's revealed that Elliot (who is haunted by a particularly traumatizing experience in Iraq), is himself addicted to pain killers, and that Odessa was his biological mother: she gave him to Ginny to raise because she (Odessa) realized that she was unfit. Further revelations reveal the depth of that lack of fitness: in order to get a fix of her drug, Odessa abandoned Elliot and his weaker younger sister while they were suffering from a severe flu, with the result that Elliot's sister died. Elliot continues to angrily blame Odessa for what happened, and when he reveals her past to a member of the chatroom community with whom Odessa was meeting in person, the guilt becomes too much for her and she relapses. Her subsequent re-use of crack leads to a near fatal overdose.

Meanwhile, two of the regular visitors to Odessa's chatroom – an Asian-American woman nicknamed "Orangutan", and an African-American man named "Chutes and Ladders" – challenge each other to move further into their respective recoveries than they ever have before, taking risks and reaching out to each other and to members of their estranged / lost families. Orangutan travels to Japan in search of the home in which she was born, but finds herself unable to take the last necessary steps. To help and support her, Chutes sells his beloved car and flies over to join her. They continue Orangutan's journey together.

As Odessa recovers from her overdose, she is helped by Fountainhead, a new addition to the chatroom community who is challenged to actually step up and both admit his own addiction and help another sufferer. At the same time, Yazmin and Elliot travel to Puerto Rico to scatter Ginny's ashes, as per her wishes. While there, Yazmin reveals her decision to move into the family home, while Elliot reveals HIS decision to get as far away from his family and his past as he can.

The play ends with the scattering of Ginny's ashes into the wind, an image of freedom and possibility that has resonance / echoes of the experiences of all the characters.



Scene 1

Summary

Part 1 – Elliot and his cousin Yazmin eat breakfast while waiting for the (late) arrival of someone Yazmin has arranged to meet. Elliot asks “Yaz” for help with his stubborn mom. Yazmin says that his mom (Ginny) is just being herself, and then asks Elliot to be a witness to her signature on her divorce papers. Elliot protests that he never saw Yaz and her husband William argue, and thinks they’re getting divorced because one or the other of them was having an affair. Yaz says that they just woke up one day and realized that they didn’t want “mediocrity” any more.

Part 2 – Professor Aman arrives hurriedly, late for his lecture. Yazmin introduces him to Elliot, then hurries off. Conversation between Elliot and Aman reveals that Elliot has an Arabic phrase in his mind that he wants Aman to translate. After he recites the phrase to Aman, further conversation reveals that Elliot was honorably discharged from the army as the result of a leg injury a few years before. Aman comments that that’s a long time for a phrase in Arabic to be stuck in an English speaker’s head. Elliot again asks for the translation. Aman asks whether he’d be willing to help out a buddy, a filmmaker making a documentary on the military who wants a veteran to help him with language, contacts, etc. Elliot refuses, saying he’s done enough interviews, and that the media seem determined to get everything about military service wrong. Aman reveals that he wants the documentary to be accurate because he’s investing financially in it, and gives Elliot a card with his buddy’s phone number on it. Elliot says he might call. Aman then gives him a rough translation of the phrase: “Can I please have my passport back?”

Analysis

This scene sets up several important elements of the overall play. The first is the establishment of the main plot (Elliot’s evolving relationship with his past, more specifically in this case with the woman who raised him), and the identities and relationship of the co-protagonists playing out that line (Elliot and Yazmin). Significant related elements introduced here include the complex, multi-faceted relationship (sometimes frank, sometimes bantering, sometimes emotionally intimate) between Elliot and Yazmin, said relationship providing a narrative and emotional anchor for the entire play. Similarly significant are the references to Ginny (Elliot’s mother / Yazmin’s aunt), whose stubborn nature is portrayed as troublesome here, but is later revealed to have had positive aspects) and the reference to Yazmin’s divorce. This latter is particularly noteworthy not because the divorce is an essential element of the plot, but because Yazmin’s separating herself from William can be seen as an early manifestation of two of the play’s main themes: its interest in the relationship between the past and the present, and its interest in how individuals realize their true identities.



The most significant element introduced here also manifests these two themes, but in a far more narratively impactful way. This is the reference to the phrase in Arabic that haunts Elliot, and which he receives help from Professor Aman in translating. The phrase is a clear, vivid, and powerful evocation of the play's examination of the past/present relationship in that, as Professor Aman says, the fact that the phrase has stuck with Elliot for so long says a lot about the circumstances in which he heard it, circumstances that are referred to several times later in the play. This, in turn, makes the conversation about the phrase an important piece of foreshadowing. Meanwhile, the second thematic reference (in relation to the theme about realizing true identity) is less overt but no less significant: eventually, Elliot's struggle with his memories / feelings about the phrase, and the incident in which it came up, become PART of his realization of identity, but at this point, that realization is an aspect of his story, and the play's story, yet to come.

Discussion Question 1

In what way does Yazmin's divorce from William reflect and/or manifest the play's themes related to individual identity and the relationship between past and present?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways might Yazmin's reference to "mediocrity" relate to the play's initial thematic references in this scene?

Discussion Question 3

What are your experiences of having a word or phrase stuck in your mind for a long period of time? Why did it stick with you – what qualities did it have that made it significant, and/or important?

Vocabulary

chemo, quinoa, verdict, mediocrity, conundrum, reluctant, authentic, manipulate, civilian, patriotic, accurate



Scene 2

Summary

Conversation in this scene is written as actual dialogue spoken by actual characters, but is in fact a representation of an online conversation in a chatroom between Orangutan, Chutes and Ladders, and Haikumom (Odessa), each of whom is given an icon / avatar that indicates his / her presence in the chatroom.

“Haikumom” turns on her computer and makes coffee as she carries on her conversation with “Orangutan”, that conversation revealing that it’s been some time since they connected.

“Chutes and Ladders” joins the conversation, asking Orangutan where she’s been.

Orangutan explains that as a result of her parents reading some of the blogs on her website, they bought her a one way ticket to her home country – Japan. She explains to Haikumom and Chutes and Ladders, who are both surprised to learn her country of origin, that she was born in Japan, was adopted and moved to America, and in her entire life had seen one other Japanese person. There are hints of her addiction in her story, which also contains a reference to her at-the-moment situation: sitting on a beach chair next to the ocean.

The reference to water leads Chutes and Ladders to explain how a near-drowning experience simultaneously caused him to steer clear of the ocean forever and triggered attendance at his first self-help meeting for drug users.

The conversation ends with a moment of camaraderie between the three online friends, with Haikumom and Orangutan both urging Chutes to take swimming lessons.

Analysis

The most significant element of this scene is the way in which it portrays the chatroom and the relationships that take place therein. Stage directions make the specific point that the characters, do not sit at keyboards and type as they chat: instead, they are intended to be chatting while moving around / participating in activities in their own, individual physical realities and spaces. The reference to Haikumom making herself coffee while she chats is an example of how this layering of action and dialogue might play out.

The chatroom and the relationships / situations of the characters who meet there define the play’s secondary narrative line, or sub-plot. Information and/or actions that arise from this and the other chatroom scenes play an important role in defining and / or motivating actions, characters, relationships, and situations in the main plot, but they are not PART of the main plot: they inform it, they illuminate it, but they do not enact it.



That said, the other primary purpose of this secondary narrative line is to develop the play's themes. The characters in the chatroom, and the subplot enacted therein, are all recovering crack addicts: as such, they are the embodiment of one of the work's central themes. Other, related themes developed here include the relationship between past and present, since every recovering addict, including the characters here, is struggling to move away from a troubled past tormented by addiction and its causes. At this point it's important to note that the action / content of the scene indicates that for the chatroom characters, it's not just their past as addicts they're struggling to deal with: it's traumatic incidents in their pasts period.

Another theme explored here is the struggle to establish true identity: every recovering addict struggling, in a similar way, to discover and hold on to who they are without the substance to which they're addicted. Finally, the chatroom also embodies and manifests the theme of reaching for human connection, since that's exactly what these characters are doing: reaching out for support, understanding, and compassion from others who are in similar situations and who understand better than anyone the challenges they face to stay clean and sober.

Three other important points to note. The first is Chutes' online name, which is a variation on the popular children's game "Snakes and Ladders", which can be seen as having a metaphoric value: the struggle with addiction is like the game: one day the addict is climbing towards being clean (up a ladder); the next day, he or she might be sliding back into addiction (down a chute). Then there are the references to water (which is a recurring motif / image throughout the play, representing both healing/hope and danger), and Orangutan's reference to her Japanese heritage, which foreshadows later events in the play when she makes efforts to reconnect with that heritage ... another example, in fact, of how the narrative explores different aspects of the past / present relationship.

Discussion Question 1

What are some of the possible ways the actual nature of the chatroom, and the conversations that take place there, be shown onstage? How might it look? How might the characters interact?

Discussion Question 2

Consider the words of the haiku that opens this scene, and that Haikumom publishes on her website: "if you get restless / buy a hydrangea or rose / water it, wait, bloom". In what ways might it relate to the purpose / content of the chatroom? In what ways might it relate to any / all of the play's themes?



Discussion Question 3

Research the nature and structure of haiku poetry, and then write a haiku, using poetic language and imagery, about a troubling experience or situation you're facing / experiencing.

Vocabulary

primate, orangutan, censor, homeland, delusion, discriminate, anvil, lucid

Scene 3

Summary

Part 1 – Elliot is at work at a hoagie shop “on Philadelphia’s Main Line”. As he goes to answer the ringing phone, he walks with a limp. He takes down a phoned order.

Part 2 – As Elliot continues to take the order, Yazmin appears in the middle of a lecture being given to a music theory class she’s teaching. She speaks of how a certain musical vocabulary (“dissonance”) in jazz music developed a sense of freedom, evolving into something more widely recognized.

Part 3 – As the other two scenic elements continue, The Ghost (played by the same actor who plays Aman) comes into the shop and speaks the Arabic phrase quoted by Elliot in Scene 1. As he repeats the phrase over and over, Elliot tries to concentrate on the order. Suddenly Elliot gets a text. He says that there’s a family emergency, telling the person on the phone that he has to go.

Part 4 – Yazmin continues to lecture, becoming angry at the lack of response she sees in her students faces. She gives them an assignment: to think about and analyze the first time they heard musical “dissonance” of the kind she’s describing. She narrates her own first time: a music lesson she had when, as an aspiring composer, a teacher told her that what she wrote was “pretty” and that it all went “together”, then challenged her to play a pair of dissonant chords on the piano. “My first music lesson,” she says, “was seven minutes long.”

Part 5 – Yazmin’s lecture is interrupted by a phone call from Elliot, calling with news that Ginny has been taken to the hospital. He makes a reference that suggest he broke the bathroom mirror at work, that his father hasn’t been responding to calls or texts, and that he’s angrily fed up with his job. Yazmin gets a text from Elliot’s dad. She reads it while his anger and desperation to get to his mom erupts. Yazmin tells him the content of his dad’s text: “waiting for Elliot ‘til we turn off the machine.”

Analysis

There are several important elements to note about this scene. The first is its structure, with multiple realities going on at the same time: the reality of Elliot taking the order, the reality of Yazmin giving her lecture; and, perhaps most significantly, the reality of Elliot being haunted by The Ghost. This last is noteworthy for several reasons: it takes an internal experience (the phrase running through Elliot’s mind) and gives it a visual / physical reality for the audience. This is a technique known as “externalizing”, and is often employed by playwrights who want to take the inner life of a character and give it an external, active presence with which the character can interact. In prose and poetry, feelings / memories / impulses / aspects of personality can be described, but they rarely (if ever) actually INTERACT with a character. This type of externalization is something



that theatre, as a narrative form, can do that other narrative forms can't. A character can literally interact with and/or confront him/ herself, or an aspect of him/herself. Externalization, such as is on display here, gives a playwright a chance to dramatize, or enact, otherwise internal conflict that could only be spoken about, not shown.

Other significant elements in this scene include the content of Yazmin's lecture (which can be seen as having both thematic and narrative resonances); the reference to Elliot breaking the bathroom mirror (which can be seen as a reference to the sort of explosive anger commonly experienced by soldiers, like Elliot, with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder); and the reference to the severity of Ginny's situation. "Turning off the machine" is a commonly used euphemism for taking someone off life support. In other words, Ginny's condition is not going to improve: there's nothing the doctors can do, therefore there's no reason to keep her alive any longer. Aside from its obvious significance for the characters, the moment is noteworthy for its structural placement: putting such an important piece of news at the end of the scene, without resolving the questions it raises, draws the audience even more deeply into the action / story.

A few other points here: the fact that Elliot refers to Ginny as his mother when, as the narrative eventually reveals, she is something a little bit different; the fact that Elliot's father never actually appears in the play, a fact that suggests that for the most part, the far more significant relationship in Elliot's life, both in terms of positive and negative aspects, is with the woman who raised him; and the fact that Ginny's situation is communicated by text. Within the context of the play's thematic consideration of the value of human connection, this aspect of the moment can be seen as ironic / contrasting foreshadowing of moments later in the play when actual, person-to-person communication is seen as important and valuable, perhaps even ideal.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways might the concept of musical dissonance (i.e. sounds that don't go well together but make a unique music anyway) apply to other experiences / situations portrayed in the narrative?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Elliot remember the Arabic phrase in its original language, and not in the translation given to him by Professor Aman?

Discussion Question 3

How would you feel if important information about a family member's health, or other important situation, was communicated by text?

Vocabulary

inconvenience, hoagie, dissonance, resolution, triton, democratize, demeanor, jowls, presumptuous



Scene 4

Summary

Part 1 – In the same manner as the online chat took place in Scene 2 (that is, with the characters speaking the words of their online postings), Fountainhead (a wealthy, successful white man) makes his first posting in Odessa’s chat room. He speaks at length of his successes as a younger man, how he first used crack, how his use became a habit, how he’s managed to be clean for a day, how he desperately needs for his habit to not become worse, and how he came to the chatroom for help from the “experts” to do exactly that.

Part 2 – Orangutan, Chutes and Ladders, and Haikumom all respond to Fountainhead's story. Chutes and Ladders is angry and cynical, resentful of Fountainhead’s success and what he (Fountainhead) sees as the relative lightness of his problem. Orangutan is doubtful that Fountainhead is actually real, and angry that Fountainhead seems to want “a pat on the back” for having a day of sobriety. Haikumom welcomes Fountainhead with supportive words, censoring Chutes and Ladders’ curse words and telling both him and Orangutan to be respectful. Without saying another word, Fountainhead logs off and disappears. In their last messages, Orangutan and Chutes and Ladders taunt him. Haikumom closes the conversation, posting a comment telling Fountainhead that if he ever wants to come back, he can send her an email.

Analysis

A new, and eventually quite significant, character is introduced in this scene: Fountainhead, the only Caucasian character in the play. His language in his initial posting is, as Chutes suggests, full of self-perceived privilege, which is important for a couple of reasons: it clearly and vividly contrasts him to the other chatroom characters, and it marks him at the beginning of his individual journey of transformation as a character which eventually sees him, later in the play, realizing that in many ways, he is just as human and just as vulnerable as the people with whom he interacts here.

Other important elements in this brief scene include the reference to Haikumom’s censoring of bad language (which foreshadows a moment later in the play when one of the chatroom characters identifies someone posing as Haikumom by the non-censoring of bad language), and the actions of Haikumom in supporting Fountainhead and inviting him back. On one level, this can be seen as a manifestation of a couple of the work’s themes: the need for human connection (which is also manifest in Fountainhead’s initial appearance) and, as later events in the play suggest / bear out, the need for redemption.



Discussion Question 1

Why is it significant that Fountainhead is Caucasian and successful?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think the playwright makes the specific point that Fountainhead does not log off until AFTER Haikumom's encouragement?

Discussion Question 3

Which of the chatroom characters do you feel has the most appropriate reaction to Fountainhead's arrival, and why?

Vocabulary

javelin, severance, allotment, predetermined, pseudonym, alias, sobriety, seltzer



Scene 5

Summary

Part 1 – Elliot, limping heavily after a visit to the gym to “blow off steam”, meets Yazmin at a flower shop to pick out some flowers to send to Ginny’s funeral. They discuss how impossible it’s been to get hold of Odessa (who, Elliot says, is shutting herself off from the world as usual), and which wreath to get, with Elliot guessing that Yazmin has found the perfect one and isn’t telling him. She reveals that he’s right, and shows him what she found: a wreath called Orchid Paradise, which they both recognize as looking a lot like Ginny’s garden. His recognition leads Elliot to confess that while Ginny was dying at home, he stopped watering her garden, and also refused to take her down to look at it in spite of her requests. Yazmin responds by reminding Elliot how much care he actually was giving to Ginny, including bathing her. She also admits to her own sense of guilt at not having watered the garden either. Elliot also tells Yazmin that he wants her to speak the eulogy at the funeral, but she says she doesn’t want to: she hates public speaking. Elliot reminds her that she’s a teacher and speaks in front of students all the time, but she says that’s different. Finally, conversation reveals that Ginny is to be cremated, and her ashes are to be scattered in her home country, Puerto Rico.

Conversation also reveals that Ginny’s family is already fighting over her belongings; that William (Yazmin’s ex) wants to come to the funeral, and that Yazmin wants Elliot to tell him not to; and that Elliot’s father is planning to move out to New York to be with his sisters. There are also references to occasional actor Elliot’s having gotten a job filming a toothpaste commercial, to his burgeoning ambition to go to Los Angeles and be a full time actor, and to Yazmin’s efforts at getting away from her Puerto Rican identity.

Analysis

This scene has a great many moments that in terms of dramatic action are relatively small, but in terms of narrative and/or thematic meaning are quite significant. The first is Elliot’s negative attitude towards Odessa, the reasons for which are revealed later in the narrative and which prove to be traumatically significant (or significantly traumatic). The second is the reference to neither Yazmin nor Elliot having watered Ginny’s garden while she was sick, not even “a single petal”, which is important for three reasons: one, it’s a manifestation of the motif of water, various images of which (as both a nourisher and a threatener) occur throughout the play. The second reason is related: the reference is a foreshadowing of an important moment later in the play in which the withholding of even a small amount of life-saving water is defined as a source of difficulty and suffering. There is also a kind of reverse foreshadowing in Yazmin’s reference to Elliot bathing Ginny: where the reference to withholding water is a negative, the reference to bathing is a positive, referring to a moment later in the narrative where one character’s bathing of another is a positive, affirming moment of human connection. Finally, it’s a past incident (regret?) that Elliot is struggling to get over, making it a



manifestation of the play's thematic consideration of the relationship between past and present.

Meanwhile, other manifestations of the past/present theme include the reference to William (Yazmin's ex) wanting to attend the funeral, and the various references to other members of Yazmin and Elliot's family, which are important because they are also a foreshadowing of how, later in the play, Yazmin's decision to reverse her ideas and reconnect with her family becomes a manifestation of the play's thematic exploration of connecting with one's true identity. Another piece of foreshadowing is Elliot's reference to going to Los Angeles, which foreshadows an important decision he makes at the end of the play. One last piece of foreshadowing: the reference to scattering Ginny's ashes in Puerto Rico foreshadows the scene later in the play when that event actually happens.

Discussion Question 1

What other references to water have there been in the play to this point? How does the reference here contrast to those earlier references?

Discussion Question 2

How is Elliot's imagining himself as an actor in Los Angeles similar to Yazmin's imagining herself as being separate from her Puerto Rican family?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Elliot refused to water Ginny's garden and/or take her to visit it? What are the possible references to the play's themes here?

Vocabulary

carnation, eliminate, articulate, elaborate (adj.), relinquish, communal



Scene 6

Summary

Part 1 – Orangutan logs on from Japan, her postings indicate that she's having a hard time staying clean – she's craving crack, she says, and asks Chutes and Ladders to distract her. Their conversation leads her to reveal that she's working on ninety days sober while he's working on ten years; that he thinks he looks like a corgi; and that she, half-seriously, would like him to come to Japan and help her through her difficult time. He refuses, and she half-jokingly insists, becoming angry when she confesses that just having an honest, drug-free friendship would be just the kind of challenge she needs. For his part, when challenged by Orangutan about why he doesn't want to try to contact his son, Chutes and Ladders says that his son is having a good life without being in contact with him. When Chutes and Ladders tries to change the subject, Haikumom enters the conversation, saying that in spite of Orangutan's relative shortcomings (youth, chattiness, impulsiveness), the fact that she's reaching out for a friend should be respected and supported. She then reveals that she's figured out Chutes and Ladders' identity, and promises to send him a gift. Finally, she says "I love you" to Orangutan.

Part 2 – Fountainhead logs on, and is welcomed by Haikumom. Fountainhead tells the story of how, after three days clean, he slipped and smoked. Chutes and Ladders berates and bullies him into admitting he's on the site because he's "a crackhead". Further conversation reveals that Fountainhead has lost his job and no longer earns the large salary he once did. He also says he can't tell his wife about his using because she's emotionally unstable, and that he believes he's doing right by her by not telling her. Haikumom congratulates him for acknowledging his truth, urges him to tell his wife (because he needs all the help he can get), and offers to be an in-person source of support to him. This leads her and the others to quote a series of slogans associated with recovery – "The only way out it is through it." "Nothing changes if nothing changes." "It came to pass, it didn't come to stay." At the same time, The Ghost appears, and whispers the phrase in Arabic to Elliot, who also appears, boxing with a punching bag at the gym as he struggles to ignore the Ghost, who continues to whisper the Arabic phrase to him. As this and the slogans continue, Yazmin appears, writing the eulogy for Ginny, starting with a line that also sounds like a slogan: "Today we send off our beloved Ginny P. Ortiz", a line that she scribbles out just like she scribbles out the other lines she tries out.

Part 3 – Haikumom, who is reading the newspaper as she continues her online conversation, reads the obituary as eventually printed. She reveals to the other online personalities that Ginny was her sister. Meanwhile, Elliot (in a phrase that sounds a lot like one of the slogans that have just been recited), tells himself his wounded leg feels fine. In the final image of the scene, The Ghost breathes on Elliot, knocking him to the floor. This is the end of the first act.



Analysis

All of the play's key themes are developed in this section. The primary theme, from which the other themes develop and/or emerge, is the relationship between the past and the present: all the events in this scene (particularly Elliot collapsing after The Ghost breathes on him) relate to this theme. The theme of addiction and the struggles to cope with it manifests throughout the various contributions to the chatroom dialogue by the chatroom characters – specifically, Orangutan's particular struggle to not use in this particular moment. The theme of human connection is evident in the conversation between Chutes and Orangutan about whether the former can / should join the latter in Japan (which is also a foreshadowing of extremely important events later in the narrative), and also in Haikumom's promise that she's preparing a gift for Chutes. Finally, the themes of realizing true identity and redemption are developed in less overt, less significant ways, the events of this scene actually becoming seeds and/or foreshadowings of important development of these themes later in the narrative.

Also worth noting: the revelation that Ginny and Odessa / Haikumom are sisters which is NOT foreshadowed earlier in the play, and which is a revelation that begins to put a different light on Elliot and Yazmin's relationships with them both, a light that becomes continually brighter as the narrative itself continues. Then there is the return of a storytelling / theatrical convention first employed in Scene Three and further utilized on a couple of important occasions in the second act. Even more so in Scene Three, the layering of action / realities here creates thematic and narrative echoes and resonances between the various elements. Also important is Haikumom's / Odessa's offer to be an in-person source of support to John, which foreshadows the scene that takes place at the beginning of the second act.

A note: slogans, such as those recited by the chatroom characters, are often used in addiction recovery programs as ideas, concepts, and maxims (rules) through which recovery can be assisted, if not fully realized.

Finally: there is a strong sense here of all the various events of the play to this point having built up / led to the intersection of events here, simultaneously the climax (high point of dramatic and thematic action) of the first act and an important, energized hook to bring the audience back into the theatre for the second act. Here the layering of actions, words, and ideas performs its additional function: hinting at even more connections than the layering of action in the final moments of the act suggest.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways do the various events / conversations / revelations in this scene relate to the play's central theme exploring the relationship between past and present? Consider both literal (i.e. words and subjects) and non-literal representations?



Discussion Question 2

In what ways does the layering of simultaneous action at the end of the scene create links and/or connections between the various images and experiences of the characters?

Discussion Question 3

What are some possible slogans or sayings that might help with current issues / struggles of interest in your school and/or your life?

Vocabulary

sarcastic, agnostic, atheist, envious, anonymous, corgi, ambitious, irrelevant, obituary



Scene 7

Summary

Part 1 – Fountainhead (now referred to by his real name, John) and Haikumom (now referred to by her real name, Odessa) meet for coffee. At first, John deflects Odessa's questions about how long he's been clean, their conversation eventually leading to Odessa's interest in Buddhism, which emerged once she finally decided to put Catholicism behind her. Eventually, Jon confesses that he's been using for two years. Odessa, meanwhile, reveals she's been clean for seven and still craves crack every single day, adding that she uses the computer and the chatroom as a lifeline to sobriety and sanity. He tells her he wants to be sober for his family, but she tells him to stop talking about them and do the work of getting sober. As she continues to speak frankly, almost harshly, to him, at times offering him contact information for expensive, high-end rehabs, he repeatedly threatens to leave, but never actually goes.

Part 2 – The conversation between John and Odessa is interrupted by the arrival of Elliot and Yaz. They complain that they were supposed to meet Odessa at the flower shop (to talk about the wreath for Ginny's funeral) but that she never showed, and also complain about her not being able to pay for it, Elliot revealing that he had to pay for Ginny's medications for the last six months of her life. Yazmin, meanwhile, reveals that her mother (Odessa and Ginny's sister) is paying for Ginny's headstone, "a proper Catholic piece of granite."

The discussion of how to pay for the flowers gets increasingly angry: meanwhile, John tries to keep both his identity and his using secret, and Elliot becomes so angry with Odessa's lack of contribution to the flowers that his temper explodes. Rejecting John's effort to pay the full cost of the flowers, and ignoring Yazmin's efforts to keep the peace, Elliot angrily reveals that Odessa is his birth mother, that he was raised by Ginny, and that he had a little sister who died of neglect because Odessa, instead of taking care of her while she had the flu (feeding her a teaspoonful of water every five minutes to keep her hydrated), went out and used crack.

John leaves, leaving money for his coffee. Yazmin reminds Odessa of her daughter's name, Mary Lou, and tells a story of how Odessa insisted that all three of the children she was at one point taking care of (Elliot, Mary Lou, Yazmin) learn how to share. "In this family," Odessa apparently said, "we share everything." Odessa gives Elliot the key to her apartment, and tells him to pawn her computer and use the money to pay for the flowers.

Analysis

Aside from the fact that this scene (the beginning of the second act) marks the first time that any of the chatroom characters are shown meeting in person, the main point to



note about the first part of the scene (i.e. the meeting between Fountainhead/Jon and Haikumom/Odessa) is that it develops several, if not all, of the narrative's main themes. This is in clear contrast to the second part of the scene which develops more plot and story than theme: the theme of the past haunting the present is developed a particularly vivid and heartbreaking way, but the other four themes slip for a moment, into the background.

Aside from the revelation's overall effect on the plot, and on the audience's understanding more about the play's complexity of relationships, its other major contribution to the work as a whole is the introduction of the title image – the idea of water by the spoonful giving life ... or, in the case of Elliot's sister, failing to sustain life. This is significant in two ways. First, it adds another variation to the metaphoric motif of water, which appears throughout the narrative as both a life-sustainer and as a fear inducer. Here, in the story of what happened to Odessa, Elliot, and Mary Lou, it's both. The second reason that the concept / image of "water by the spoonful" is important is that it introduces a core element of one of the piece's central ideas: the idea that hope, that possibility, that life can, like water by the spoonful, be sustaining and nurturing even in the smallest amounts.

Discussion Question 1

Which of the narrative's themes are developed in the John / Odessa section of this scene, and how?

Discussion Question 2

Given some of the things that Odessa says in the first part of the scene, what is ironic about Yazmin's comment about a "proper Catholic piece of granite"?

Discussion Question 3

What is ironic about Odessa's comment to the young Elliot that the family shares everything?

Vocabulary

condolence, tenacious, diorama, rhetorical, practitioner, custodial, archaeological



Scene 8

Summary

Part 1 – Chutes and Ladders and Orangutan are in the chatroom. Orangutan cheers on Chutes and Ladders as he makes a series of attempts to contact his son, but chickens out on all three of them, most notably when a male voice actually answers the phone. Right after that happens, Chutes and Ladders logs off, leaving Orangutan “speaking” into the empty room. She “looks” for Haikumom, saying it’s been a while since she (Haikumom) has posted a poem of the day.

Part 2 – Elliot and Yazmin arrive in Odessa’s/Haikumom’s apartment, looking for her computer. They see that the computer is on, that the chatroom is open, and that Haikumom’s sign-in window is open. Elliot tries logging on, eventually discovering that the password is Elliot. At first Orangutan thinks he is Haikumom, but when he starts asking questions about what it’s like to use crack, she catches on that he’s a hacker. Eventually he confesses that he is Haikumom’s son, his conversation with Orangutan leading her to reveal that Haikumom shared his story of addiction, service, and surgery on the forum.

News of Elliot’s addiction (to painkillers, resulting from his injuries) comes as a surprise to Yazmin, but her efforts to get more information from Elliot result first in an explosion of violence (leading him to rip the computer out of the wall), and then pleas from him to not ask any more questions. Eventually, he says he’s clean, and that the only thing he’s got left from those days is the nightmares. “That’s when he came,” he says, adding that “some days I swear he ain’t never gonna leave.” When Yazmin asks who he’s talking about, he begs her to end the conversation. She tells him the pawnshop is going to close in fifteen minutes.

Analysis

The most significant element to note in the first part of the scene is the online conversation between “Chutes” and Orangutan, which is important for several reasons. First, it illustrates the play’s thematic interest in developing human contact, not only through the increasingly close and frank relationship between Chutes and Orangutan, but also through Chutes’ efforts to reach out for his son. This latter is also important because it develops two other themes: the relationship between past and present (given that the relationship between Chutes and his son is difficult because of Chutes’ past history of addiction); redemption (given that Chutes is trying to redeem that past history by trying to be a better dad / person). Finally, Chutes’ refusal to speak to his son when he has the chance foreshadows events in the next scene, in which he reveals why he has reasons to fear rejection).



The latter part of the scene is more significant in terms of the main plot, or A-story. Elliot's discovery of how many details of his relationship with Odessa got shared with the chatroom changes their relationship yet again, in a situation that some might argue is tit-for-tat: in Scene 7, Elliot revealed truths about Odessa that he perhaps shouldn't have, while here he learns that Odessa has done exactly the same thing. What's interesting about the revelation of his drug use, or perhaps more accurately that revelation's aftermath, is that it comes as a surprise to Yazmin, and that Elliot is so determined to not talk about it: there is the sense that he is afraid that if he opens the door to that part of his life, all the addiction and fear that he's been keeping at bay will come rushing back, and he will relapse ... which is exactly what happens to another character later in the narrative. There is also the sense that Yazmin realizes the emotional and/or psychological danger Elliot might be in if he does, in fact, "go there", and changes the subject back to taking the computer to the pawnshop.

Finally, a note about Elliot's explosion of violence. Such explosions are frequently a consequence / symptom of PTSD, or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. This is a mental / emotional illness frequently experienced by soldiers having returned from military combat, such as the war in Iraq from which Elliot returned several years prior to the beginning of the play. The trauma of being on the battlefield can, and often does, lead to emotional / physical difficulties when sufferers return home, those difficulties in turn often leading to the sort of addiction (attempts to numb the pain) that Elliot refers here to having experienced. That said, the explosion here foreshadows a similarly intense release of emotion on Elliot's part in Scene 12.

Discussion Question 1

What are the significance and implications of Haikumom's / Odessa's choice of password into the chatroom?

Discussion Question 2

Who is the "he" who visits his dreams that Elliot refers to?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Elliot beg Yazmin to stop asking so many questions?

Vocabulary

nostalgia, martyr, dopamine, pathetic, forum



Scene 9

Summary

While he's at work, Chutes and Ladders sorts through a bundle of mail while dealing with an on-line client and chatting with Orangutan. The latter is excited because she's about to board a train for Kushiro, the town where she was born. Ignoring, with increasing determination and anger, Chutes' attempts to talk her out of it, she gives the background of the Kushiro River, where the town was located: a river straightened as part of a national make-work project, and now about to be re-curved as part of another make work project. She also reveals that she promised herself that if she made it to ninety days sober, she was going to go visit the home where she was born. Eventually, she challenges Chutes to explain why he's being so negative. Chutes reveals that at one point in his recovery, he went to visit his son and grandchildren; that his son turned him from the door; and that he thinks Orangutan is just opening herself to more pain.

Orangutan insists that she needs to do this; that she's trying to become actual, non-cyber, flesh and blood friends with Chutes (because she thinks their cyber friendship isn't real); and that she's going to go ahead and visit the house, because even if it turns out to be a bad choice, she's going to go ahead and feel something. She logs off.

Chutes throws down his phone, his mail, just about everything on his desk. The only thing left is a padded envelope, which he opens. He pulls out a gift from Haikumom – a set of inflatable water wings.

Analysis

Here again, the narrative develops / explores several themes at the same time, primarily the theme of realizing true identity and the relationship between past and present, both developed through Orangutan's efforts to visit the town where she was born. Meanwhile, her comment about trying to become real friends with Chutes (and her comment about their cyber-friendship not being real) and Chutes' gift from Haikumom both represent developments in the play's thematic exploration of the importance / value of human connection.

Meanwhile, an interesting point to note about this scene is that Chutes and Orangutan, here and in future scenes, make the connections they do without Haikumom's presence. The point is not made to suggest that she deliberately interferes and/or blocks their friendship in any way, but rather to point out that when she's not controlling or moderating the conversation in the chatroom, things happen for the other visitors that might not have happened if she WAS there.



Discussion Question 1

What is the metaphoric / symbolic importance of Orangutan's story about the straightening of the Kushiro River?

Discussion Question 2

What incident in Chutes' past, discussed earlier in the play, does Haikumom's gift of water wings refer to? Why is it thematically significant?

Discussion Question 3

What is your experience of cyber-friendships? Do you agree with Orangutan that they're not real? Or do you agree with Chutes' implication that they're as real as they need to be, and/or the people involved need them to be? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

monosyllabic, kindling, ritual, catharsis, gasket, cordial, imbecile



Scene 10, 11

Summary

Scene 10 - Three actions play out simultaneously

In the first, Yazmin and Elliot deliver Ginny's eulogy, listing her accomplishments by the numbers: her one adopted child, her three years in the army, the forty seven wheelchair ramps she got installed in homes with disabled individuals, twelve abandoned lots she turned to parks, and so on.

In the second, Odessa repeatedly takes a teaspoon of water out of a mug and pours it onto the floor, eventually creating a small pool.

In the third, Orangutan waits on the train platform in Japan while boarding announcements are made. She never moves.

At the end of the scene, Elliot finds himself unable to go on and leaves. Yazmin continues the eulogy alone. "Elliot is the standing, walking testimony to a life. She. Was. Here."

Stage directions comment that "Odessa turns the cup upside down. It is empty."

Scene 11 – At his desk at work, with the water wings inflated in front of him, Chutes does a sales pitch to a potential buyer for his car. He puts the buyer on hold for a moment and sings a jazzy old song to himself. He then goes back to the call, tells the potential buyer that he put up his advertisement only half an hour before and that he's had a lot of inquiries, and then talks about the car's racing stripes.

Analysis

In Scene 10, the narrative again employs the uniquely theatrical narrative technique of having several events occurring at the same time. Here, perhaps more than any other point in the play, there is a clear sense of interconnection between the three events portrayed – the eulogy, Orangutan on the train platform, and Odessa's spilling out the water (a clear reference to a previously revealed incident in her past). That sense of interconnectedness, it seems, has to do with the play's thematically central exploration of the relationship between past and present. The eulogy, like any eulogy, is a present day commentary on the past life of the dead person being spoken of, an examination of how the past of the person affected, and/or should be perceived by, those left behind in the present. Odessa's pouring out of the water is, as noted, a return to / evocation of a past experience in the present, while Orangutan's refusal to move from the present into her past suggests that that past isn't yet something that she wants to bring into her present.



By contrast, the visual of the inflated water wings on Chutes' desk suggests that on some level, and in some way, he has moved beyond his past while his efforts to sell his car suggest that he has some kind of plan for his future, a plan that at this point, the narrative doesn't make clear. Here it's interesting to note the juxtaposition of images: that of hope and possibility, as represented by the water wings, and that of despair and hopelessness, as represented by the image of Odessa, the spilled water, and the cup.

A narratively intriguing point to note is how the two scenes raise clear questions in the mind of the reader / audience and draw both further into the narrative. What is going to happen to Orangutan? What is Chutes up to? And, perhaps most importantly, what's happening with Odessa? The point here is that the play is building narrative momentum towards its climax, raising questions in the mind of the reader as to how all these various questions and conflicts could / will be resolved.

Discussion Question 1

What incident, previously referred to in the narrative, is echoed here by Odessa? What do you think the gesture (pouring water onto the floor) implies about her feelings about that incident?

Discussion Question 2

Given what Yazmin and Elliot say about Ginny's successes in life, discuss the contrasts between Ginny and Odessa.

Discussion Question 3

What does the image of the inflated water wings suggest about Chutes in Scene 11?

Vocabulary

lectern, indigenous, refurbish, civil, pilgrim



Scene 12

Summary

In one part of the action, Orangutan sleeps on a bench at the train station in Japan.

In another part of the action, Elliot and Yazmin arrive at Odessa's apartment. They discover her passed out on the floor, see the spoon from the previous scene, and jump to the conclusion that she's been using it to cook crack cocaine.

Odessa steps away from the other two characters as they lift "her" body to the sofa – the idea is that Elliot and Yazmin are interacting with her body, while the actor playing Odessa represents her soul. As Yazmin make panicked phone calls to 911 and to Yazmin's mother (Odessa's sister), and as Elliot rushes out to release his temper by breaking something in the kitchen, Odessa has a memory: of an abandoned suitcase at an airport, circling endlessly on a luggage carousel.

A policeman appears and shines a light in Orangutan's face ...

... while at the same moment, a white light appears from above and illuminates Odessa. Yazmin sees the light, and tells Odessa that she is loved, that she is beautiful, and that she can go.

The policeman tells Orangutan to move along: there's no sleeping at the station. Orangutan goes, the policeman turns off his flashlight ...

... and in Odessa's apartment, the white light disappears. There is the sound of an ambulance siren. Odessa climbs into Yazmin's arms, and the scene becomes an image of what is "really" going on. Elliot comes back in. Yazmin tells him he has to forgive Odessa.

Analysis

The action flows almost continuously into this scene from Scene 11, and again plays out on more than one level of both action and meaning. What's particularly interesting here is the way in which Odessa's "soul" leaves her body and "speaks", leaving Yazmin and Elliot interacting with a "body" that they see, but the audience does not, using its imagination to fill in the visual blanks of what they're not seeing. It's a highly theatrical device, again the sort of thing that novels and/or other forms of narrative can't really accomplish with the same immediate, visceral effect. That said, the appearance of light in the experiences of both Odessa and Orangutan suggests clear parallels between their experiences in this moment, parallels that could include, for example, an experience of freedom and/or release.



The other noteworthy element in this scene is the reference to the suitcase on the luggage carousel, an image with both metaphorical implications and narrative significance, given that it foreshadows a reference later in the play to an actual suitcase on an actual carousel.

Finally, in narrative terms, there is the sense that this scene, as emotionally and visually intense as it is, is not the play's climax: there are still too many significant questions (will Odessa live? Will Elliot be able to forgive her? What will happen to Orangutan? What is Chutes up to?) to be answered. Rather than serving as the climax, the intensity of this scene's multi-layered events serves to increase momentum into the remaining scenes where the play's true climaxes, both thematically and narratively, take place.

Discussion Question 1

What are the specific implications of the simultaneous appearances of the the light from the policeman's flashlight and the light in Odessa's apartment? What present / future parallels in the lives of Odessa and Orangutan does the simultaneous light suggest?

Discussion Question 2

At this point in the narrative, what / who might the image of the abandoned suitcase refer to?

Discussion Question 3

Why, at this point in the play, does Yazmin tell Elliot that it's time for him to forgive Odessa?

Vocabulary

seizure, carousel, spiral (v.), radiant, intoxicated



Scene 13

Summary

Part 1 - In the chat room, Chutes logs in, looking for Orangutan. She eventually shows up, confessing that she didn't board the train and that he was right – he knew she'd fail. Chutes reveals that he sold his car to pay for a plane ticket to Japan: he's coming to see her. Just as they're excitedly starting to make plans ...

Part 2 – Fountainhead logs on to the site, revealing that Odessa/Haikumom used, that her system reacted badly, that she's barely hanging on, and after being accused by Chutes of using with her, reveals that he (Fountainhead) was her emergency contact. He also reveals that Odessa's niece and nephew (Yazmin and Elliot) have had to go to Puerto Rico on a family matter. Chutes tells Fountainhead feelingly that his (Fountainhead's) job has just changed: that he has to drop everything and take care of Odessa. At first Fountainhead resists, but Chutes presses hard, eventually reminding Fountainhead that he (Fountainhead) is a believer in actions and that this is a chance to take some action, to help all of them continue to recover. Fountainhead agrees, giving his word that he will take care of Odessa. He also says that Odessa told him she needs someone to take over the running of the chatroom and website, then logs off to take a phone call. The phone call is from his wife. He tells her he has to take care of a sick friend, and even though he insists it's not a "romantic" friend, his wife hangs up on him.

Analysis

Questions raised in Scenes 11 (what is Chutes up to?) and 12 (what happened to Odessa? What's going to happen to Orangutan?) are answered in this scene, which simultaneously asks a few more: what is going to happen when Chutes and Orangutan finally meet? Will Fountainhead actually be able to follow through on what he's agreed to do? Will Odessa recover? This narrative technique – simultaneously asking and answering important questions – is a valuable one in terms of keeping audience / reader interest alive and active.

Meanwhile, all the incidents of the last few scenes can be viewed as playing out on multiple thematic levels. All are related, in one way or another, to the struggles experienced by each of the characters as they deal with their addictions (Odessa fails in her struggle, while Orangutan and Chutes are taking unexpected steps to move further from theirs, and Fountainhead is confronted with an opportunity to do the same). All relate to the haunting of the present by the past (Orangutan's and Odessa's past have both won victories in the present; Chutes and Fountainhead are taking clear steps to move away from their pasts). Finally, all relate to their discovery of the importance of human connection (Chutes taking the next step to connect with Orangutan who, in turn, is a step closer to her goal of making a connection with Chutes; Fountainhead being forced into an even deeper personal connection with Odessa).



Finally, in the scene's closing moments, Fountainhead's wife rejects him and his choice to help a friend rather than come home for dinner. While there is the sense that the relationship is not the strongest to begin with, it seems telling that Fountainhead is rejected at a point where he seems to be taking an important personal step towards self-rehabilitation. The implication here is that in the same way as he's taking an important, if tentative, step towards being a healthier, more responsible human being, he is also taking a step away from an unhealthy past, which includes a relationship with his wife that, as the play has revealed, has been troubled for some time. In short Fountainhead, like many (most?) of the characters in the narrative, takes steps towards being more of a true self than one governed by addiction, lies, and fear.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways (metaphoric and/or literal) might Chutes' use of the water wings have foreshadowed events in the first part of this scene?

Discussion Question 2

Why, do you think, Odessa made Fountainhead her emergency contact?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Fountainhead agree to take care of Odessa? Why is Chutes' reference to taking action significant?

Vocabulary

mensh, cardiac, responsive, complacent, inpatient



Scene 14

Summary

Part 1 - Yazmin logs onto the chatroom from her hotel room in Puerto Rico. She explains that for now, she'd like to be the temporary site administrator for Odessa's chat room, describing their early relationship (i.e. Odessa was her babysitter for a long time, before she disappeared because of her drug use), how that relationship changed for the better once Odessa was firmly in her recovery, and explaining that she wants to take over the site as a kind of thank you to her. As she's reminding herself of the number of syllables necessary to write a haiku ...

Part 2 – Elliot comes in, their conversation revealing that they're there (i.e. Puerto Rico) to scatter Ginny's ashes. He notices that Yazmin is logged onto the website and urges her to not get involved, but Yazmin speaks at insistent length of how she's done what she considers to be nothing with her life, and because Odessa did something with hers, she (Yazmin) is going to do what she needs to do in honor of her. As Elliot comments with familiar bitterness about how Odessa failed him, Yazmin reminds him that Odessa, his birth mother, saved his life by giving him to someone else (Ginny) to take care of, adding that he's got to take responsibility for himself.

Part 3 - After Yazmin goes out to make some more preparations for the ash scattering, Elliot has another encounter with The Ghost, stage directions suggesting that "he's probably been there the whole time." The Ghost chants the Arabic phrase that's been haunting Elliot, and they interact: initially with violence, then with a degree of authoritative intimacy, finally with a degree of personal connection. The Ghost goes, and Elliot, shaken, takes out a bottle of pills. He first takes out one, then empties the bottle into his hand. "He stares at the pills, wanting to throw them away."

Analysis

Aside from being the first moment in which Yazmin interacts with the chatroom, this scene is significant for several reasons. First, it's the scene in which Yazmin, like the other characters have repeatedly done to this point, indicates that she too has a past that she would like to escape. In her case, it's a past that feels futile, selfish, and pointless, leaving her resolved to follow in the footsteps of her two aunts (Ginny and Odessa) and put something positive into the world: she seems to be trying to redeem herself for having lived, to this point, a selfish life as opposed to the selfless sort lived by the aunts. Here, Yazmin's intentions (and probable actions?) can be seen as manifesting the work's thematic interest in redemption. Meanwhile, a related point is the new facet to the portrait of Odessa: the honesty and directness she showed to the young Yazmin indicates the courage that she (Odessa) has had in facing the truth, a courage that is arguably echoed (as Yazmin points out) in the decision to hand Elliot over to someone (Ginny) who could raise him healthily, safely, and well.



Here it's interesting to note that the narrative gives no direct indication of whether / how Elliot responds to Yazmin's insight and/or commentary, except to have another vision of The Ghost. The suggestion made by this juxtaposition is that Elliot's being haunted by Odessa's past actions is equivalent, in some / many ways, to his being haunted by whatever happened in Iraq. The further suggestion, born out by events in the following (and final) scene, is that because both troublesome elements come from the same source and affect him in the same way, Elliot must deal with them in the same way, a choice he makes in the following scene and which is foreshadowed her in Yazmin's comment that he has to take responsibility for himself (rather than, for example, blaming Odessa for his situation). The description of the final encounter with The Ghost (in which The Ghost "chooses" to disappear as the result of Elliot's decisive actions) suggests that for Elliot, that process of taking responsibility is beginning. The final image with the pills, however, suggests that he's still got a way to go: it's important to note the specificity of the stage directions – that he "wants" to throw them away, not that he actually DOES.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Elliot so insistent that Yazmin not get involved in the chatroom?

Discussion Question 2

Why is the stage direction that The Ghost has "been there [i.e. in the scene] the whole time" significant? What does it suggest about Elliot's state of mind / being in that moment / situation?

Discussion Question 3

What is the implication of the final image (i.e. Elliot with the pills)? What are the options he seems to be considering?

Vocabulary

interim, tenure, oratorio, minimalist, bonsai



Scene 15

Summary

Part 1 – In Odessa’s apartment, John (Fountainhead) brings Odessa into her bathroom and gently bathes her, his words revealing that she’s about to go into rehab and that he’s given his wife the information he needs to log onto the website, adding that she (Odessa) might be his only friend. She weakly whispers a question, and after several tries, he finally understands: she’s asking whether someone took swimming lessons ... used water wings.

Part 2 – As John continues to bathe Odessa, Chutes finally arrives in Japan, conversation with an angrily anxious Orangutan revealing the complicated, mis-communicated route he took to get there, including her wait while a last piece of luggage circled the carousel. He explains his situation, including the fact that he got sick with nerves and has had to clean himself up. They then introduce themselves (Orangutan as Madeleine, Chutes as “Buddy”) and, for the first time in their relationship, make physical contact by first shaking each other’s hands, and then embracing fiercely.

Part 3 – Elliot and Yazmin arrive at a mountaintop in Puerto Rico, overlooking a waterfall. Yazmin is excited about a wild plant that she’s found, and the cousins joke about the ways (and consequences) of smuggling the plant back into the States, their conversation referring to how their grandmother used to do exactly that. Elliot gets a text from his father saying he sold Ginny’s house, conversation with Yazmin revealing that she bought it (selling her expensive piano to do it) and has plans to both renovate it and live there, close to the rest of the family. Elliot tells her that he’s moving to Los Angeles to pursue an acting career: he reminds her of how he woke up sobbing from a dream the night before, but that this dream was different. Instead of the ghost, he saw Ginny, screaming at him in horror. He confesses that he has realized he wanted Odessa to overdose, pushing her and manipulating her: God took the “good mom” (i.e. Ginny), he should take the “bad mom” too. He also confesses another realization: that if he stays in Philadelphia, he’ll relapse into addiction. “You’ve got armor,” he tells Yazmin, “you’ve got ideas”, but he doesn’t. Yazmin tells him to go, and never look back.

In Odessa’s apartment, John helps Odessa to stand ...

... as Yazmin talks about how she is now the elder, staying home and holding down the fort.

On the count of three, she and Elliot throw Ginny’s ashes into the air.

End of play.



Analysis

The first point to note about this scene is how each of its three sections - the one set in Odessa's apartment, the one set in Japan, and the one set in Puerto Rico – embodies the narrative's main themes. All three manifest ways in which the characters are simultaneously attempting to move beyond their struggles with addiction and pasts that have, for many years, haunted the present. All three manifest ways in which the characters make stronger human connections: the fact that both stage directions and dialogue include references to the chatroom characters' real names is a small, but very significant, reflection of this, while the intimacy of John bathing Odessa, the face to face encounter between Madeleine and Buddy, and the honesty and vulnerability of the Elliot / Yazmin conversation all reflecting this theme in larger ways.

There is the sense that in all the above moments, the characters are also becoming more themselves, realizing their true identity; moving past the various addictions that have haunted them so much; and that they are all, to varying degrees, redeeming themselves for their past actions. John is redeeming himself for being a lying addict; Odessa is beginning the process of redeeming herself for being a bad mother (in the past) and a weak addict (in the present); Madeleine and Buddy are redeeming themselves for making choices to not really connect honestly and vulnerably with other people; Yazmin is redeeming herself for not living an unselfish life; and Elliot is trying to redeem himself for whatever happened in Iraq, his choice to not take the pills in his hand at the end of the previous scene a clear and vivid contrast to Odessa's relapse in the scene before: he's found the strength, she hasn't ... but she seems to be about to. In any case, it's arguably no coincidence that the image that begins and runs through the scene is of one character bathing another: aside from being a further development of the play's recurring motif of water, the image is also evocative of baptism, the Christian sacrament in which sins are symbolically washed away by water.

Ultimately, at this point in the play, all the characters are trying to move on, to be better people, and leave their self-sabotaging behavior behind, an aspect of their lives that seems to find climactic conclusion in the final images. John helping Odessa to stand seems to embody what characters have been doing for each other all along: Odessa helping the chatroom characters, Orangutan/Madeline and Chutes/Buddy helping each other, Yazmin and Elliot helping each other. Meanwhile, the scattering of Ginny's ashes seems to evoke the point at which all the characters, to varying degrees, seem to be at least beginning to transition out of a past life and into a newer, better present / future. This is the play's simultaneous thematic and narrative climax, the visual symbolizing of the point to which they've each been driving towards: a moment of transcending the confines and struggles of their history and finding at least the beginnings of a new freedom.



Discussion Question 1

How does the use of water in John's bathing of Odessa echo previous references to water throughout the narrative?

Discussion Question 2

To what other character / situation does Odessa's question about the water wings literally refer? And given what the water wings represent metaphorically, what additional characters/actions might her question symbolically reference?

Discussion Question 3

The image of a single piece of luggage circling on a carousel refers back to which character / scene? What are the differences between the implications made by that initial reference and the reference here?

Vocabulary

inaudible, mensch, cardiac, responsive, complacent, skeptical, outcropping, conspiratorial, adjunct



Characters

Elliot

Elliot is one of two characters who are the play's ostensible protagonists: the other is his cousin Yazmin. While there are several characters whose journeys of transformation through the narrative and whose amount of stage time indicate that they are important to both the play's story and its themes, Elliot and Yazmin rise to the top of the list because scenes with them bookend the play; because their actions define more events, and more significant events, in the story than the others; and because their journeys and experiences tend to embody more of the piece's primary themes than the other characters. Again, this is not to say that the other characters are less important, or that their journeys / stories have less impact: it's just that Elliot and Yazmin are, in many ways, the narrative and thematic ANCHORS of the piece, and their stories and struggles make up its foundations.

For his part, Elliot is a former soldier, having returned from combat duty in Iraq with both an external injury (to his leg) and an internal one (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – PTSD). He struggles to function with both, but finds it difficult: his mobility is sometimes hampered by problems with his leg, while emotional stability (particularly when faced with anger and/or other stressful situations) is hampered by his PTSD. He celebrates his successes (a handsome and attractive man, he is a part-time actor) when he can, but for the most part finds life a struggle, particularly when present day events of the play (i.e. the death of the woman who raised him) trigger even more confrontations with his troubled past than he usually struggles with. He is volatile, unpredictable, loyal to those he loves (even when he's angry with them), prone to impulsivity, but ultimately a good person struggling to deal with an extremely difficult set of circumstances that have been imposed upon him.

Yazmin

Co-protagonist Yazmin is a clear and vivid contrast to her cousin Elliot. Where he is volatile, she is rational; where he is physically challenged, she is mobile; where he is sometimes inarticulate, she is thoughtful and good with words. A part time teacher, musician, and composer, Yazmin has had a much more stable history within their shared family than Elliot has: they both tend to react negatively to its idiosyncrasies, but where Elliot reacts with frustration, Yazmin tends to react with a somewhat amused compassion. The defining moment of her life, she suggests, was the moment when a very direct teacher told her that music didn't have to be pretty to contain truth, an experience that she (and the play?) suggest applies to life as well.

Over the course of the narrative, as various circumstances become increasingly challenging and/or intense for Yazmin and Elliot, Yazmin comes to realize more of what she has done to herself and to her life than she had previously allowed herself to



understand. While not as traumatized as Elliot, she realizes she has simultaneously cut herself off from the “more” she could have been and settled for the “less” she feels she can safely and/or comfortably get. The process of both this realization and of acting on it begin before the play begins, with her leaving her relationship with the controlling William. For much of the play, she seems somewhat lost, filling the emotional gap left behind by that relationship ending with taking care of Elliot and, in the aftermath of a family crisis, with taking care of the situation. By the end of the narrative, however, and as a result of the events she encounters and/or moves through, Yazmin’s choices embody one of the narrative’s key themes: she finds a connection with her true identity, and appears to be making a deliberate effort to act according to the circumstances, needs, and feelings associated with that connection.

Odessa

Middle-aged Odessa is one of four recovering crack cocaine addicts whose online interactions (in a chat room set up and run by Odessa) form a secondary narrative line, or sub-plot, in relationship to the primary narrative line or plot involving Elliot and Yazmin, and their struggle with a family drama. The point is not made to suggest that the two narrative lines do not interact: on the contrary, there is a strong connection between the two, given that Odessa is Elliot’s birth mother and the family drama involves the death of his adoptive mother, Odessa’s sister Ginny.

In terms of her present day life, Odessa (known online as “Haikumom”) is portrayed as struggling to stay clean of her crack addiction; struggling to help others (particularly the other three members of her chat/support group) with THEIR addiction; and, eventually, struggling to come to terms with the addiction-defined actions of her past that led to Ginny taking over the care and raising of Elliot. In the midst of, and/or throughout, these struggles, Odessa is portrayed as being firm and determined, generally honest, and making as positive an effort as she can to move forward in her life. When a series of circumstances reminds her of the truth of her past, however, she relapses into her addiction, a situation that ironically catalyzes positive movement forward for other characters with whom she interacts.

“Chutes and Ladders” (Buddy)

“Chutes” is the first of three characters who interacts with Odessa in her chat room. A middle-aged African-American man, “Chutes” works in a call center, struggles to hold onto his ten-year old sobriety, and tends to react with cynicism and barely suppressed anger when it seems as though anyone else with whom he interacts seems to be not telling the truth, either to him, to others, or to themselves.

He too has a troubled, crack-defined past: his relationship with his son was ruined by “Chutes”’ drug use, and remains so in spite of his (“Chutes”’) efforts at reconciliation. His relationship to Orangutan is somewhat like that of an opinionated father with his independent daughter, but because they have a shared history and set of



circumstances (i.e. they are both crack addicts), their relationship is also one of comrades and allies. Their decision to meet in person and reveal their real names to each other is one of the most vivid manifestations of the play's thematic interests in human connection and realizing true identity.

Orangutan (Madeleine, Yoshiko)

“Orangutan” is the second of the three crack addicts with whom Odessa (Haikumom) interacts in her chatroom. Orangutan is an Asian woman in her early thirties adopted into a white family. Where Odessa's online manner is somewhat bossy and reassuring, and where “Chutes” is somewhat cranky and opinionated, Orangutan's tends to be outspoken, impulsive, and occasionally poetic. Her decision to travel to Japan to find the city and house where she was born is a key component of the narrative's thematic exploration of realizing true identity, and also becomes a catalyst for developments in her relationship with “Chutes”.

Fountainhead (John)

The third of the three crack addicts in Odessa's chat room, Fountainhead is a recent arrival: the narrative includes his first appearance in the room, his first attempt at reaching out for help in the face of his addiction. He is also the first of the three other addicts to meet Odessa in person, at her suggestion. Fountainhead is a wealthy, once successful but now unemployed businessman, desperate to keep his addiction secret from his wife and family. His acceptance of his true nature as an addict, as well as his acceptance of his true nature as a fellow human being, are both key elements in the exploration of the themes of human connection and identity. Meanwhile, the struggles of all four addicts form the primary narrative backbone of the novel's thematic interest in the struggles associated with recovering from addiction.

Professor Aman

In Scene One of the play, Professor Aman (who works at the same university as Yazmin) provides a translation of a phrase that has haunted Elliot ever since he returned from Iraq. Aman reveals himself to be quite the negotiator, bartering services with Elliot in exchange for the translation. He only appears in the play once.

The Ghost

The Ghost (who is played by the same actor who played Aman) is a representation of someone from Elliot's past – specifically, an Iraqi who spoke the Arabic words that have haunted Elliot for years. The narrative never makes it clear just who The Ghost (or rather, the actual person) is. He is presented, in fact, as a memory, an embodiment of the phrase without a real identity.



The Policeman

When Orangutan visits Japan, she falls asleep on a train platform. A Policeman wakes her up, at first with suspicion. Later, however, when she reveals her purpose for traveling and her reason for falling asleep, he becomes more compassionate. His appearance, attitude and actions could be perceived as a manifestation of the play's apparent contention that honesty can, and will, be met with compassion. The Policeman is played by the same actor who plays Aman and the Ghost.

William

William is spoken about but never seen. He is Yazmin's selfish, insensitive, possessive ex-husband.

Ginny

Ginny is also spoken about, but never seen. She is Elliot's adoptive mother, and his and Yazmin's biological aunt. She is portrayed as generous, unselfish, community minded, and deeply compassionate. She is a powerful contrast to Odessa, whose present life is entirely haunted and/or defined by her past: in Ginny's case, her present life is portrayed as being mostly, if not entirely, defined by creating positivity with which people (including Elliot) can move into the future.



Symbols and Symbolism

Addiction

Struggles with substance addiction form a fundamental part of the lives of most of the play's major characters (with the apparent exception of Yazmin), and as such is the basis of one of the narrative's major themes. The experience is portrayed as being intense, dangerous, and life threatening; as being something that continues on a day-to-day basis; and as something that cannot ever be regarded as completely resolved.

Crack Cocaine

This potent, processed, highly addictive form of cocaine is the drug of "choice" for Odessa and the other addicts in the chatroom / support group she runs. It is also the drug used by Odessa in response to a stressful situation in her life that leads, at the play's climax, to a near-fatal overdose.

The Phrase in Arabic

Former soldier Elliot is haunted by a phrase spoken in Arabic that he heard in a situation of some significance at some point during his tour of duty in Iraq. The circumstances of his initially hearing this phrase are never explicitly detailed – only hinted at in a silent "conversation" recalled by Elliot late in the narrative. As Professor Aman reveals at the end of the first scene, the phrase roughly translates into "Can I please have my passport back?"

Haiku

A haiku is a three-line Japanese poem that focuses primarily on aspects of nature, but which can also explore / comment on the experience of being human, whether in relationship to nature or not. Part of Odessa's work in her chatroom is to write new haikus that somehow reflect and/or support the process of recovery from addiction.

Orchid Paradise

This bouquet, filled with tropical flowers, is the memorial bouquet finally chosen by Elliot and Yazmin as their gift for Ginny's funeral. It is representative, according to Elliot, of the flowers in Ginny's garden.



Odessa's Computer

Odessa operates and moderates her addiction recovery chatroom/website from her computer which, as Elliot and Yazmin discover, is old and slow. Odessa comments that work on her computer became a substitute / replacement for the crack to which she became addicted. It's interesting to note that once her computer is taken from her (a situation she herself creates), it's a relatively short time before she uses again.

Water

Throughout the narrative, in many ways and many forms, water manifests as a means of saving and supporting life, while its withdrawal is portrayed as life destroying. At one point, its appearance has the opposite context: for "Chutes", it represents an experience of near-drowning, and as such is more destructive than affirming. A gift from Odessa / Haikumom, however, helps him learn to transform that fear into something more positive.

The Water Wings

Odessa / Haikumom gives "Chutes" a pair of water wings as an inspirational present to help him get over his fear of water. The gift turns out to be inspiring enough for "Chutes" to take a risk aside from learning to swim: to travel across the world to see Orangutan in Japan.

Elliot's Pills

In the same way as Odessa and the other chatroom characters are addicted to crack cocaine, Elliot is addicted to prescription pain medication. He has been free of his addiction from some time, but near the end of the play, the narrative portrays him as being tempted to relapse into his addiction. Unlike Odessa, however, he finds himself able to resist the temptation, and to find the strength to not use.

Ginny's Ashes

At the end of the play, and in their family's home country of Puerto Rico, Elliot and Yazmin throw Ginny's ashes into the air. The gesture seems intended to represent freedom and completeness, hope and possibility – experiences that all of the still-living characters, at the end of the play, seem to be embracing.



Settings

Philadelphia

The so-called “City of Brotherly Love” is the setting for the majority of the play’s actions. It is home to Elliot, Yazmin, and Odessa, and is the community from which Odessa operates her chat room.

Odessa’s Chat Room

The online chat room, set up as a place for crack cocaine addicts to come for anonymous support from other addicts is, in this play, a real place: online names / identities / avatars are given real voice, real physical presence, and real relationship by onstage actors and elements of setting.

Odessa’s Apartment

This is the place from which Odessa runs the chatroom; where she overdoses (in the middle of the second act); and where she and Yazmin have, in the aftermath of the overdose, some kind of encounter with a spiritual other world. The apartment, described in stage directions as being one step above a slum, is a place of both (and literally) darkness and light.

Puerto Rico

The ancestral home country of Elliot, Yazmin, and the rest of their family is the setting for the main part of the play’s final scene. Elliot and Yazmin return to Puerto Rico to scatter the ashes of their beloved Aunt Ginny.

Iraq

While the narrative includes no literal scenes that take place in this Middle Eastern / Arab country, the scenes in which The Ghost appears to haunt Elliot appear to take place there. Iraq is where Elliot fought in combat, where he developed post-traumatic stress disorder, where he developed his addiction to pills, and where he had a traumatizing encounter with someone over a passport, an encounter that serves as the subject / focus of his troubled dreams and imaginings.



Themes and Motifs

How the Past Haunts the Present

This is arguably the play's primary / central theme: not only is it the first one introduced (through Elliot's reference, in the very first scene, to an Arabic phrase that remains stuck in his head years after leaving duty in Iraq), but is the one from which all the other play's thematic considerations emerge.

All the principal characters, in one way or another, are haunted and/or troubled by painful past experiences. The so-called "chatroom" characters who are mostly seen / heard from in the addictions support chatroom run by Odessa (Orangutan, Chutes and Ladders, Fountainhead), face the challenge of moving beyond the causes, actions, and consequences associated with their past addiction to crack cocaine. Meanwhile, Odessa and Elliot are both haunted, in different ways and to different degrees, by a particular set of addiction-triggered circumstances: specifically, the preventable death of Elliot's seriously ill sister. The long-lingering feelings of failure and guilt (on Odessa's part) and anger (on Elliot's part) define them and their actions through much of the narrative, to the point that their respective agonies become too much for them to bear. Simultaneously, Elliot struggles with the memories of the above-referenced encounter that lodged the Arabic phrase in his mind, an encounter that is never fully defined or portrayed, but which for some reason has shaped his identity in traumatizing ways that echo Odessa's and those of the other addicts.

The primary characters who don't appear to have been damaged or traumatized by their pasts, at least to the same degree as the other characters, are Yazmin and Fountainhead (John). In Yazmin's case, there is the sense that she has regrets and/or that she's having difficulty of moving beyond some of her experiences (particularly her attachment / connection to her ex-husband), but that the pain associated with either has neither crippled her emotionally nor led her to damaging coping mechanisms, as it as the others. In John's case, he is relatively new to the process of recovery from addiction, and there is the sense that he is either in denial about what he's done and/or what caused him to be an addict, or hasn't done the self-work to understand and/or define his actions in that way. In his case, there is the sense that the haunting is yet to come.

Struggling With Addiction

Almost all the principal characters in the narrative are struggling with addiction of some kind or another. The only exception seems to be Yazmin, who appears to be able to cope with the difficulties and/or challenges of her past without resorting to chemical substances (granted, there is the sense that her history has less trauma associated with it than the other characters: the two circumstances are probably connected).



For the other / addicted characters, it seems that the pain of their past is the reason for their addictions: unable to cope with the pain they experience in any other way, they desperately, and self-damagingly, bury that pain in the superficial euphoria / freedom associated with substance abuse. Or at least that's what they've done in the past: the "chatroom characters" (Odessa, Orangutan, Chutes and Ladders, Fountainhead) are portrayed as taking steps, with varying degrees of success and/or experience, to move beyond their addictions, while Elliot is also striving to move past both his addiction and the pain that drove him into it, but with less support, and arguably less overall healing: he still, the narrative suggests, has substantial issues to acknowledge, let alone deal with.

A vivid example of what perhaps lies ahead for Elliot, and of what the other chatroom characters have experienced physically, emotionally, and metaphorically, manifests late in the play: Odessa, unable to handle the reminders of the pain that her addiction caused Elliot and the rest of the family, numbs herself by relapsing and using crack, arguably in the same way as the other addicted characters numbed THEIR pain with similar substances. What's interesting about this particular incident in the play is that its aftermath (Odessa almost dying) can be seen as suggesting what lies ahead for the other characters if they choose to return to their addiction-defined past ways of dealing with pain: they can, and could, easily die. There is the sense that they are all (with the possible exception of John, who is just at the beginning of his recovery process) aware of this potential end to their story, which is why their struggles to not go back are so intense, and so desperate.

The Importance of Human Connection

Throughout the narrative, characters making connections and/or developing relationships with each other is portrayed as an almost vital way in which both addiction and past trauma can be transcended.

Perhaps the most overt and/or direct representation of this theme takes an important role in the narrative right from the beginning: the presentation / evocation of Odessa's chat room which, as soon as the first character logs in, is portrayed as a means of support, of developing relationships with similar sufferers, and of offering helping hands (albeit cyberspace hands) to one another in difficult times. Over the course of the narrative, the connective foundations of this semi-reality are taken even further, into the construction of real relationships, first by the in-person interactions between Odessa and John (in which she face-to-face challenges him to face, and build on, his personal truths and identity – see below) ... then in the eventual, similarly in-person interactions between Orangutan and Chutes (which takes them both to the next level of healing) ... and finally, in the last, intimate encounter between John and Odessa, which shows them both literally and metaphorically beginning to cleanse themselves and each other of who they were simply by connecting with each other vulnerably and gently.

The narrative as a whole, meanwhile, is anchored by the consistently in-person connection between Elliot and Yazmin, who support each other with similar vulnerability,



honesty, and frankness throughout the many and varied challenges they encounter. As a result of their connection, and how they both develop and trust it, they come to essential realizations about who they are and how they interact with the world, and are therefore transformed. The connection between the two, and how that connection is mutually transformative, are in many ways exactly what the other characters are striving for and eventually achieve, albeit in different ways.

Connecting With True Identity

The second way in which the play suggests that the struggles with both addiction and the hauntings of the past can be at least partially overcome is through the connection with an individual's true identity – or, more specifically, the true identity of an individual that lies beneath and/or within addiction and/or memory.

It's important to note that for most of the characters, by the end of the play this connection with a true self, a compassionate self, a human and/or genuine self is only beginning: as the result of the play's events, they have learned the value of making such a connection and, at the play's conclusion, are beginning to take the necessary steps towards ensuring it happens. Orangutan / Madeleine and "Chutes" / Buddy begin making the connection at first individually (Orangutan by traveling to Japan, Chutes by traveling to join her) and then together (as they continue the journey in each other's company). Elliot and Yazmin, through connecting with both their shared family heritage and the memory of the inspiring Ginny, discover that their true identities lie, perhaps paradoxically, away from home (in the case of Elliot) and closer to home (in the case of Yazmin). Both characters, as the play concludes, are taking clear steps to move away from the past and into the future as a result of having come to a clearer understanding of who they really are. As they reach the end of the play, these characters are clearly making a new beginning based on discoveries they have made about themselves, who they truly are and what they truly want / need.

On the other hand, Odessa ends the play having taken steps backward on a journey that, for some time and to a degree, had hitherto successfully taken her into a truer self and away from her addicted self: she has found that truth, the play suggests, as the result of her work in the chatroom and with the other visitors there. But the play also suggests because she hasn't fully dealt with her past (i.e. her treatment of Elliot and his dead sister), she is unable to sustain the connection with her true self and lapses into addiction. She is, in that sense, a contrasting character to the others, highlighting their success by regressing into failure. Fountainhead (John) is somewhere in the middle, just beginning to make the connection with the truth of who he is, both as an addict and as unconditionally compassionate, but has yet to make the NEXT connection – between the awareness of that self and recovery / healing. He is taking the first step of his ending, but has yet to move through it enough to really be considered at the beginning, in the same way as Elliot, Yazmin, Orangutan, and Chutes are.



Redemption

Perhaps the play's most significant thematic suggestion is that on the other side of the choices made by the characters to get past their addictions and / or the traumas of their past is what might be described as the light at the end of the tunnel: the experience of redemption.

Redemption is, in basic terms, the experience of compensating for past, pain-causing actions by taking positive, affirming, healing actions, either towards the self or towards others. The most vivid example in the play of an active attempt at self-redemption is Odessa's establishment of the chatroom, which the narrative implies is a significant part of her effort to put good back into the world (through helping others in their recovery from addiction) after creating so much bad (through her own addiction and/or bad parenting). Granted, the redemption she experiences isn't lasting – or rather, she loses track of it, when she is painfully reminded by Elliot of her past and subsequently relapses. That doesn't mean, however, that her acts of redemption are invalidated or go unrewarded / unnoticed: proof of that is the way that as a result of Odessa's efforts in the chatroom, Chutes and Orangutan are able to start moving even more past THEIR addictions, while Fountainhead (John) begins the process of redeeming himself for his actions as the result of recognizing how Odessa has redeemed HER self and Yazmin sees Odessa's actions as inspiration for her own positive steps.

By contrast, Elliot seems to still be struggling too much with his past to be in a place where redemption is a possibility. Haunted, almost to the end, of the play by whatever passed between him and The Ghost in Iraq, and simultaneously haunted by what passed between him and Odessa when he was a child, by the end of the play he is making the first steps towards healing: choosing not to take an overdose and leaving a situation in which his addictive tendencies are triggered. Perhaps an act of redemption is down the road for him: but the examples of the other characters, even in spite of Odessa's relapse, suggest that for him, redemption is at the least possible for him.

Styles

Point of View

In the same way as the work's language and meaning are defined by its genre / medium as a play, its point of view is similarly defined by its nature – that is to say, there is no storyteller, no narrative point of view, no first person / past tense or present tense. There is, however, a thematic point of view, which may or may not be that of the author (i.e. an authorial point of view).

In terms of the former, and as noted in “Themes”, there are five primary themes at work throughout the narrative, playing out in character, action, and relationship. These themes all have a degree of interrelation and/or interaction, meaning that none of them functions with complete autonomy and/or independence from the other. It could be argued, however, that of the five, there is a single, root theme from which the other four emerge, or develop: the central thematic point of view that redemption and forgiveness are possible no matter what history, what past actions, or what past circumstances a person is haunted by.

As the play draws to its close, each of its troubled main characters has an encounter with a troubling, potentially debilitating past; each of those characters passes through that frightening, risky encounter and survives; and on the other side of that passage, each of those characters has an experience not only of hope and possibility, but of transforming past suffering and/or bad choices into something positive, potentially healing, and ultimately forward looking ... in other words, an experience of redemption. All may not be forgiven, and certainly all may not be fully forgotten: issues associated with addiction, as the play makes clear, never entirely leave an addict's life. But they can, the play suggests, be transcended: they can be moved past; and they can, the play's thematic point of view contends, become less of a defining, driving force in an individual life and experience.

Language and Meaning

The first point to note about the work's use of language is that it is a play, meaning that most, if not all, of its meaning comes from dialogue, rather than from prose, narration, or stage directions. Story, theme, and character all emerge as the result of what characters say, as well as how and when they say it. Why is revealed as a result of all three of those initial qualities.

The second point to note is that several of the characters aren't technically verbalizing. Most of the conversations between Odessa/Haikumom, Chutes and Ladders, Orangutan, and Fountainhead take place in cyberspace: they are the “dialogue” of people chatting online, given theatrical life in the play by real actors with real bodies speaking real words. It's not until the beginning of the second act, with the in-person



conversation of Fountainhead (John) and Haikumom (Odessa), that the conversations between these characters become actual spoken words, a circumstance that develops even further in the narrative as “Chutes” and Orangutan finally interact in person, a scene that’s followed shortly afterwards by another, even more intimate interaction between John and Odessa. This movement from online conversation to in-person conversation can be seen as representing / developing at least one of the play’s themes.

A third point about language and meaning is that each character speaks with a distinct voice, style, and vocabulary. For example: because she is more educated than many of the other characters (most significantly family members Odessa and Elliot), Yazmin’s vocabulary and sentence structure come across as relatively sophisticated, particularly when contrasted with Elliot. He, for his part, speaks with the rough, impulsive, angry, expletive-ridden vocabulary of the PTSD-ridden ex-soldier, which is in turn a contrast from the image-oriented, delusion-dominated language of Fountainhead.

A final point about language has to do with the Arabic-language dream / vision that haunts Elliot throughout much of the play. As the only element of the script not spoken in English, its presence / nature has even more impact on the audience and on Elliot.

Structure

The first point to note about the play’s structure is that there are two narrative lines: the “Elliot and Yazmin respond to the death of Ginny” plot, and the “Odessa and her chatroom friends struggle with their addiction” plot. As the play begins, it’s not clear exactly how the two lines are going to interact / intersect, but eventually they do, with events / characters in one interacting with events/characters in the other: as a result, both plotlines are affected.

A second point to note is that in general, the overall structural line of action is linear, with events in both plots playing out in the order in which it seems that they actually happen. Here it’s important to note that for much of the first half of the play, scenes from the two plot lines alternate: an Elliot/Yazmin scene, followed by an Odessa/chatroom scene, back and forth (in a technique known as “intercutting”) until the end of the first act, at which point elements of the two narrative lines take place onstage simultaneously. This technique (of placing several different scenes onstage at the same time) takes place several times throughout the rest of the narrative as the interactions between the play’s various narrative and thematic elements intensify. This is something theatre can do that other forms of narrative can’t: different scenes / timelines / places / interactions can exist in the narrative, and in the viewer’s perceptions of the narrative, at the same moment.

Another key / vivid example of this layering technique appears at the play’s climax – specifically, in its final moments and/or images. As John (Fountainhead) lifts Odessa from her cleansing bath, Elliot and Yazmin fling Ginny’s ashes into the air. In these two

images, representative of action in two narrative lines, the climactic image is one of freedom and celebration.



Quotes

... she crawls out of bed for the first time in days and cooks eggs for breakfast. In two inches of pork chop fat. I'm like, Mom, recycle glass and plastic, not grease ... but it has to be her way. Like, 'that's how we ate them in Puerto Rico and we turned out fine.
-- Elliot (Scene 1 paragraph Page 9)

Importance: This quote references the Puerto Rican background of Elliot and his family (which plays an important part in both the plot of the play and its themes - specifically, its exploration of the relationship between past and present); reveals Ginny's single-mindedness; and portrays the loving exasperation with which Elliot views the woman who raised him.

if you get restless / buy a hydrangea or rose / water it, wait, bloom
-- Orangutan (Scene 2 paragraph Page 12)

Importance: This quote is a haiku, a Japanese form of poetry. Haikumom, who runs a chatroom support group for addicts, starts each day with a haiku like this one, encouraging addicts to move forward into their recovery.

I'm just a looker. I was never one to actually have an experience.
-- Orangutan (Scene 2 paragraph Page 14)

Importance: This quote is an important piece of ironic foreshadowing, as later in the play, Orangutan actually goes beyond looking and DOES have an experience.

Diminished chords, tritones, still didn't have the right to be their own independent thought. In 1965 something changed. The ugliness bore no promise of a happy ending. The ugliness became an end in itself ... Freedom. It was called Free Jazz but freedom is a hard thing to express musically without spinning into noise.
-- Yazmin (Scene 3 paragraph Page 15)

Importance: This clear, literal, factual explanation of a particular form of dissonant (i.e. un-harmonious) music thematically echoes and resembles the struggles of many of the characters to move past the ugliness of their pasts and find some kind of beauty.

Elliot: You're a teacher. Yazmin: It's different when it's ideas. Talking about ideas isn't saying something, it's making syllables with your mouth. Elliot: You love ideas. All you ever wanted to do was have ideas. Yazmin: It was an elaborate bait and switch. The ideas don't fill the voided, they just help you articulate it.
-- Elliot / Yazmin (Scene 5 paragraph Page 23)

Importance: This exchange of dialogue between cousins Elliot and Yazmin suggests that while ideas and words are important, it's actually taking action that matters, a suggestion that has echoes later, in which characters are challenged to actually take action to move their recovery along.



I'm floating. I'm a cloud. My existence is one sustained out-of-body experience. It doesn't matter if I change my shoes, there's not a pair I've ever been able to fill. I'm a baby in a basket on an endless river. Wherever I go, I don't make sense there.

-- Orangutan (Scene 6 paragraph Page 27)

Importance: This somewhat poetic expression of hopelessness can be seen as resonating with the feelings / experiences of the other characters, each of whom is drifting in his / her own ways.

...I was the kid who ate the crayons. Was. I went clean and all personality left my life. Flew right out the window. I had to take life on life's terms. Messy, disappointing, bad shit happens to good people, coffee stains on my necktie, boring life.

-- Chutes and Ladders (Scene 6 paragraph Page 28)

Importance: In this quote, Chutes and Ladders comments on how dull he feels his life has become after giving up his addiction to crack, an experience that's arguably common to many addicts leaving behind their addiction.

... welcome to the dinner party ... pull up a chair and pass the salt. Some people here may pour it in your wounds. Just like you, we've all crawled on the floor with a flashlight. We've thrown out the Brillo and bought some more. But guess what? You had three days. For three days straight, you didn't try to kill yourself on an hourly basis.

-- Haikumom (Odessa) (Scene 6 paragraph Page 32)

Importance: This pointed comment from Odessa is an expression of welcome to Fountainhead, newly arrived in both the chatroom and addiction recovery. The reference at the end of the speech, about him not killing himself, is particularly pointed, given that essentially, and to one degree or another, killing oneself is just what every addict is doing.

In my neck of the woods, staying clean is like trying to tap dance on a minefield. The website fills the hours.

-- Odessa (Scene 7 paragraph Page 34)

Importance: In this quote, taken from Odessa's in-person conversation with Fountainhead (John), Odessa explains how important the website has become to her.

That you had a bunch of leg surgeries in Iraq. That if a soldier said they hurt, the docs practically threw pills at them. That you OD'd three times and were in the hospital for it. She was real messed up about it. I guess she had hoped the fruit would fall a little farther from the tree.

-- Orangutan (Scene 8 paragraph Page 43)

Importance: With this quote, Orangutan reveals to Elliot what Haikumom (Odessa) told the chatroom characters about him and his situation. Elliot reacts with anger, as he feels it's his story to tell, not Odessa's.



...I'm gonna dig a new hole and I'm not putting a wish or a list in there, I'm putting a scream in there. And I'm gonna sow it like the ugliest, foulest, and most necessary seed in the world and it's going to bloom! This time it's going to fucking bloom!

-- Yazmin (Scene 14 paragraph Page 57)

Importance: The idea here is that even out of the ugliest feeling or experience, beauty and possibility can bloom, an image or idea that echoes throughout the play and in the experiences of hope and possibility encountered, to varying degrees, by all the characters.

Elliot, your birth mother saved your life by giving you away. You think she's the one holding you back? Nobody can make you invisible but you.

-- Yazmin (Scene 14 paragraph Page 57)

Importance: With this quote, Yazmin speaks clearly and firmly to Elliot - and to the reader/audience - about where the responsibility for recovery truly lies.