

**“Escaping from the Inescapable”:  
Looking at Familial Abuse in *August: Osage County***

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*Tracy Letts wrote his award winning play, August: Osage County, based on his own personal experience. With resilient truth, Letts shows how familial influences have both a positive and negative impact on an individual’s mental, physical, and emotional health. Whether one is from a healthy, communicative family or from a cocaine-addicted one, it is inevitable that family ties will have a direct influence on an individual’s view of herself and her future. But is this influence set in stone? The question becomes, not whether family ties impact one’s wellbeing, but whether or not one is able to escape those ties in order to separate oneself from one’s family and determine one’s own future. In August: Osage County, Letts explores an individual’s need to determine her own path through his characters’ relentless attempts to escape their dysfunctional family ties.*

Family influences have shown to have both a positive and negative impact on an individual’s mental, physical, and emotional health. Whether one is from a healthy, communicative family or from a cocaine-addicted household, it is inevitable that family ties will have a direct influence on an individual’s view of themselves and their future. But is this influence set in stone? The question becomes not whether or not family ties impact one’s well being, but if one is able to escape these grasps in order to separate themselves from their family, and determine their own future. In his play, *August: Osage County*, Tracy Letts explores an individual’s need to distinguish their own path through his characters’ relentless attempt to escape their dysfunctional familial ties.

All major actions in this play show the character’s need for escape through a push a pull pattern found within the scenes. Throughout act two, the characters constantly push and pull against one another, unable to keep their bodies or their mouths still and quiet. They argue and fight one moment, and then the next, they have nothing to say. Their restless demeanor illustrates their need to escape from their family both physically and emotionally. About halfway through the act, once Johnna announces that dinner is ready, all eleven characters enter from different parts of the house talking over each other. Ivy tells Violet not to mention to the others that Ivy is dating someone:

IVY. Don’t you dare—

VIOLET. You’d think you might be happy to tell your family some good news on a day like today?—

IVY. It’s nobody’s business (78).

As this dialogue is going on, two more conversations are being held. One by Mattie Fae, Charlie, and Little Charles as they argue about Little Charles not showing up on time for Beverly’s funeral that day. And another with Barbara, Steve, and Karen as they discuss the mowing of the

lawn, being hungry, and other babble in order to fill the awkward conversation. The coinciding dialogue conveys their impatience and frustration with one another. Letts structured this dialogue to happen simultaneously in order to communicate the family's uneasiness towards each other. It paints the scene to have a loud atmosphere with everyone impatiently talking over one another.

In stark contrast, the rest of the scene jumps from this concurrent discussion to awkward pauses and beats. When everyone finally take a place at the table, Violet comments on the men's jackets, "I see you gentlemen have all stripped down to your shirt fronts. I thought we were having a funeral dinner, not a cockfight," (*An awkward moment. The men glumly put their suit coats back on.*), (84). These pauses are placed in between their heated discussions in order to express this push and pull relationship that the characters have with one another. One moment they are all willing to voice their opinion; the next, they do not have energy to fight. Because this pattern is not one hundred percent one way or the other, the audience can detect their restlessness in this scene. It is as if the scene is a car, and the driver is constantly pumping the brakes; there is a little bit of release every once and a while, but that liberation is soon brought to a stop. Letts communicates this immense tension towards one another through his back and forth pattern of interactions between the characters.

The actions in this notorious act all lead up to the final moment when Barbara lunges at Violet to snatch the bottle of pills in her hand. Letts wrote the entire second act to have a push and pull feel in order to build tension and pressure between the characters. The tension has been built so high by the end of it, that Barbara's lunge at her mother does not come as much of a surprise. However, Violet still fights back:

VIOLET. You can't do this! This is my house! This is *my* house!

BARBARA. You don't get it, do you? (*With a burst of adrenaline, she strides to Violet, towers over her*) I'M RUNNING THINGS NOW! (97).

In her last attempt to escape her mother's emotional black hole, Barbara jumps at the bottle of pills in Violet's hand. By wrestling her mother to the ground and eventually grabbing the pills from her hand, Barbara is asserting her power and showing Violet that she can stand her own ground. Barbara also does this to show Violet that she is now in control of the dynamics in the room. Barbara has distinguished her power and worth over her mother, escaping her clutches, and taking control of the situation.

The language throughout the play conveys a lot about the characters' eager attempts to escape their past. Karen's undying attempts to make her new fiancé Steve a part of the family illustrates her need to distinguish herself as her own woman. Throughout second act, she continuously talks about him to the others, making him out to be the greatest thing that has ever happened to her, "I've been really unhappy most of my life...But now I'm...well, now I'm really happy. And I'd really like us to get to know each other a little better'...(*Karen wraps her arms around Barbara*)," (62). Though she says she is happy here, the language tells the audience that she is, instead, extremely unhappy in her relationship with Steve. Letts utilizes pauses in her speech in order to convey her denial towards her unhealthy relationship with her fiancé. If she were truly content, she would be overjoyed to be telling her sister about the wonderful new man in her life. There would be no room for hesitation. However, the hesitation is there to convey how deep she

is in her denial. In making Steve a part of the family and getting her family's approval, she would be able to truly distinguish herself away from her hometown in Oklahoma. She wants to be her own person with Steve, living a new, glamorous life away from all the madness and disorder she once knew. The hesitation in her voice shows Karen's desperate need to move ahead in her life and escape her family's chaos, even if this means being in denial in her relationship with Steve.

In addition to the language conveying hesitation, it also reveals the characters' frustration with one another. The characters constantly interrupt and speak over each other in order to get their individual point across. In the second act, Violet brings up that Bill has gone through some of Beverly's things, and wants to make sure that everyone knows all of her husband's assets go to her:

BILL. I found a couple notebooks that had—

VOILET. You girls know there's a will—

BARBARA. Mom...

VOILET. We took care of that some time back, but—

BARBARA. Mom, really, we don't want to talk about this now—

VOILET. I want to talk about it. What about what I want to talk about, that count for anything? (91).

By interrupting the others, Violet demonstrates her frustration with the rest of her family and her dying need to get her point across. Like Violet, the other characters seek to make a statement by interrupting as well. In this example, Violet interrupts Bill to make sure he knows that all Beverly's assets belong to her. In return, Barbara interrupts Violet in order to tell her that the dinner table is not the place to talk about Beverly's assets. This constant frustration is shown in the text with dashes at the ends of the lines. Through the frenzied, chaotic interruptions in language, Letts paints a picture of aggravation and entitlement within his characters. This language evokes a loud sense of disorder within the house, showing each person's dissatisfaction with the environment he or she is in.

With this sporadic language, Letts also utilizes contrasting images of order and harmony to further convey a sense of disorder. The house is constantly a mess, something that is inevitable in a household with two substance abusers. However, Johnna creates a sense of order that the house does not possess on its own. In the beginning of act two, the stage directions show the house to be in pristine order,

*The house has been manifestly refreshed, presumably by Johnna's hand. The dull, dusty finish has been replaced by the transparent gleam of function... stacks of paper are neater, books are shelved...table is set with fine china...the warm, clean kitchen now bubbles and steams, redolent of collard and kale, (57).*

With this imagery, Letts was able to create the hygienic image of a spotless house, complete with the smell of a warm, home cooked meal. By doing this, it made it seem as if the house was rejuvenated for the first time in many years. These stage directions occur at the beginning of act two, the act with the notorious dinner scene that ends with Barbara physically lunging across the table at Violet. By using this harmonious image of a spotless house at the beginning of the act, Letts was able to set up the madness that ensues later on in story. This contrasting imagery of chaos and harmony continuously work together create the family's sense of disorder more clearly throughout the play.

Letts also uses literal images of the blacked-out windows at the beginning of the show to create a setting in which the characters want to escape. From the top of the first act, the audience immediately sees a dark, gloomy home, "*All the windows in the house have been covered with cheap plastic shades. Black duct tape seals the edge of the shades, effecting a complete absence of outside light,*" (10). This enclosed, dark image of the house sets up a feeling of imprisonment. In fact, there is no outside light coming in, making it almost look like a jail cell. Letts introduces the feel of the whole play in this beginning scene, showing that each character that walks into the house feels the need to immediately escape from it.

Another way Letts shows the inescapable feeling in this show is through the unbearable Oklahoma heat. This is present from the minute the stage lights come up in the opening scene with Beverly and Johnna. Once Beverly gets done with telling Johnna about his wife's addiction to pills, Johnna starts wiping the sweat from her head:

*(Johnna wipes sweat from her brow. Beverly takes a folded handkerchief from his pocket...)*

BEVERLY. This is clean.

JOHNNA (Wiping her forehead). Thank you. (12).

The heat is representative of the intolerable dysfunction present in Beverly and Violet's home. Once Beverly started talking about Violet's addiction, Johnna physically shows the audience that she is hot. This idea is manifested throughout the play to show how inescapable the family dynamics are. Once Mattie Fae arrives at the house, she also notes how hot it is:

MATTIE FAE. I'm sweating. Are you sweating?

CHARLIE. Hell, yes, I'm sweating, it's ninety degrees in here.

MATTIE FAE. Feel my back...Feel it. Sweat is just dripping down my back, (20).

Though the Oklahoma heat is inevitable, the characters never comment on the weather outside the house, even when they are on the porch. By writing the characters to only talk about the heat when they are inside the house, Letts is able to create a claustrophobic atmosphere in which the characters want to escape from.

In order to escape from these kinds of conditions, each character has their own way of going about it. The audience sees Violet's means for escape through her drug addiction. This is brought

out through the repetitions and slurs in her language. This need for escape first comes out through the repetitions in her language at the top of the show when she is introduced to Johnna, “You’re tell me’s a woman...A woman. Wo-man. Whoaman,” (14). The repetitions in her language show her inability to control what is coming out of her mouth. This pattern is echoed throughout the play to the last scene when everyone has left, and she is left all alone with Johnna, “And then you’re gone, and Beverly, and then you’re gone, and Barbara, and then you’re gone, and then you’re gone, and then you’re gone...” (138). By the end of the play, she has lost all control over her other family members, left all alone in her big house. This loss of control mimics the same pattern of that of the first scene when she is also not in control of the drug’s effect on her.

Another example of Violet’s need to escape through her drugs comes out through her slurred dialect. In the beginning scene when she first meets Johnna, she can hardly get a solid sentence formed, “(Attempting to over-articulate). ‘In the int’rest of...civil action...your par-tic-u-lars ways of speak-king, I thought you meant you had though a whoa-man to be HIRED!’” (14). Through this language, the audience can quickly pick up on her inability to control the affect the drugs are having on her body. In an attempt to regain control and make sense, she tries to over-articulate. But despite her attempts, the drugs have taken over her ability to do so, thus causing her to slur her words. This slurred language shows up again in act one, scene three when Sheriff Gilbeau comes to tell the family of the discovery of Beverly’s body, “Idn’t it’s good beat? Inna good beats. Mmm, I been on the music...pell-man onna sheriff...Armen in tandel s’lossle, s’lost?” (55). Violet was unable to handle the possibility of her husband disappearing forever. In an attempt to escape her own situation, she gets high. This desperate attempt to escape reality is shown through her uncontrollable, slurred speech throughout the show.

Along with her speech, Violet’s major actions in this play also demonstrate her need to escape reality with drugs. In the beginning of the second act, Violet is standing in Beverly’s study after his funeral, going through some of his things,

(She takes a pill.) *That’s for me...one for me...* (She picks up...Meadowlark, flips to the dedication.) *“Dedicated to my Violet...”* (She drops the book on the desk. She takes a pill.) *...You think I’ll weep for you? Think I’ll play that part...* (She takes a pill.) *You made your choice. You made this happen...*(58).

In this passage, Violet is unable to process her sadness and anxiety. She cannot fathom the thought of having to take care of the bills and house all by herself now that her husband is gone. She is slowly realizing that she will be the one taking care of everything now, and cannot deal with all of the overwhelming feelings that come with the responsibility. This slow loss of control is shown in her taking pills in order to escape from her pain.

In addition to taking pills, Violet tries to escape all responsibility regarding Beverly’s death by placing the blame elsewhere. A prominent theme in *August: Osage County* is the way shame is used to dehumanize another character. Each character does it in some form or another, giving him or her a feeling of false power over the other. In act one, scene two, Violet’s scolds Barbara about never coming home, “You’re grown-up people, growed-ups. You go where you want...but your father. You broke his heart when you moved away,” (38). In trying to escape responsibility, she transfers her own guilt onto her daughter. This transfer of guilt is echoed later in the play as

well. In the last scene, the audience finds out that Violet could have stopped Beverly from killing himself. Though she is mainly the one to blame for his suicide, Violet still places responsibility on Barbara, “You had better understand this, you smug litter ingrate, there is at least one reason Beverly killed himself and that’s *you*,” (136). Violet relentlessly defends herself by justifying her actions and placing the blame elsewhere. Her vulnerability is beginning to show in this scene, for she does not appear as strong as she was before. The strong façade is slowly beginning to crumble as she is realizing her husband is really gone. She is slowly not able to escape reality, having to face her responsibility in his death.

Just like Violet, Mattie Fae is unable to deal with the responsibility of her past actions, and therefore projects the blame onto her son, Little Charles. In the beginning of the first act, Mattie Fae disgraces her son’s intelligence and lack of motivation:

MATTIE FAE. Honey, you have to be smart to be complicated.

CHARLIE. That’s our boy. Are you saying our boy isn’t smart?

MATTIE FAE. Yes, that’s what I’m saying, (20).

Here, she is dehumanizing her own son by ridiculing his intelligence. Later in the play, she embarrasses Little Charles again after he runs from the dinner table unannounced, by turning to her husband and saying, “I gave up a long time ago...Little Charles is your project,” (96). Here, Mattie Fae is dehumanizing him by making him out to be a project one would tackle versus a person one would talk to. By objectifying him, Mattie Fae is making him out to be something that can be given up on, or something that is only worth one’s time only if one has enough energy to deal with it. Unable to cope with the shame she feels for sleeping with her brother-in-law and bearing his child, she projects the blame onto her son, hoping to feel some sort of relief from the immense weight on her shoulders. The way that she shames Little Charles in front of the whole family is heartbreaking, for she is not seeing her son for the person that he is, but the mistake she made in the past. In this way, she is using blame and projection in order to escape from her harsh reality.

Another theme in this show is the character’s need to escape their problems with something external, whether that is drugs or physically leaving home. Barbara and Karen moved away from home and started their own families; Bill escaped his relationship with Barbara by having an affair; Jean escapes her father’s affair and parent’s separation through marijuana; Ivy and Little Charles plan to get away by moving to New York together; Beverly and Violet used alcohol and drugs in order to escape their troubles. Violet summarizes it perfectly when she announces she is downsizing, “I don’t plan to spend the rest of my days walking around and looking at what used to be,” (65). This quote echoes what each of the characters feel when walking back into Beverly and Violet’s home. By taking a step in their home, they have taken a step back into their past. Fearful that the path they have made for their future will be tarnished by the past, they try to run past everything they used to know.

In trying to forget their past, the characters attempt to save their future by not only trying to escape their problems, but also completely turning a blind eye to reality. This complete abandonment of reality comes forth in the molestation scene between Steve and Jean. When

Johnna comes downstairs to find Steve molesting Jean, the rest of the family quickly trickles in from all areas of the house. Karen immediately refuses to believe that her fiancé could molest Jean, because she has painted such a lovely picture of her future with him, “(Karen manages to push Steve out of the dining room, into the living room. During the following, they get dressed and pack their bags...)” (119). Instead of trying to figure out the truth, Karen immediately decides to turn a blind eye because she wants to save the future she had planned with Steve. She fears that if that vision does not become a reality, she will be stuck in this dysfunctional web she calls family. In order to secure her place away from the family, she immediately turns, pushes Steve out of the room, and packs their bags, attempting to escape from the harsh truth that may ruin her future. In this way, Karen is once again running away from her past in an attempt to escape it for good.

In accepting her parents for exactly the way that they are, Barbara is the only family member who truly finds freedom from her dysfunctional family ties at the end of the show. In the last scene, Barbara is furious when she finds out that Violet could have stopped Beverly from killing himself. After her mother’s explanation of it all, she slowly takes a step back and sees her mom for the drug addict that she is, “You were both fucked-up. (Beat.) You were fucked-up. (Beat.) You’re fucked up,” (136). The beats between Barbara’s sentences convey that she is taking pauses, and having changes of thought and direction in her speech. After this sentence, she calmly listens to Violet’s response, kisses her on the forehead, and walks out the front door. In this moment, she is accepting her mother for who she is, drugs and all. In doing so, she is not neglecting the past nor running away from her current problems, but simply accepting them for what they are and realizing that she has no control over what Violet does. When Barbara does this, she earns her freedom.

Playwright, Tracy Letts wrote *August: Osage County* based on his own personal experiences. Lett’s grandfather committed suicide when he was just ten-years-old, causing his grandmother to fall into years of drug addiction in order to cope with her grief. Being involved in the theatre, Letts knew he had the right material for a spectacular story. He reported to NPR,

*After I became a dramatist, it certainly seemed like ripe material for a play, and I just thought about it for a really long time before I thought, OK, I think I've got the right container for this story. I think I know the way to tell this story in a way that's personal for me, and ... yet not too personal.*

Letts wanted to introduce questions about family: do we have a choice? When do we need to be responsible for ourselves and when do we need to be responsible to our family? Letts wrote *August: Osage County* so it could be universal to all types of audiences, for family issues are simply inevitable.

I admire the way that Letts wrote this play to “be personal...yet not too personal. It allows him to write a truthful story, but also not shove his opinion on family in the audiences’ faces. In producing my own production of *August: Osage County*, I would want to stay true to this vision of the play; I would want to raise questions about one’s responsibility to themselves and their family. As far as structure of the play as a whole, all patterns of action point towards the characters’ need to escape their claustrophobic environment. I would do this by using dusty orange and yellow lighting to represent the heat, and using a hazer to create a heat wave-like

effect. I would also create this uncomfortable, suffocating environment by keeping the family within close quarters of one another, highlighting their fidgety need to escape from their past. There would be lots of natural lighting during the day, and then dim lighting at night.

For the costumes, I would like to stay true to the costume designs of the seminal production of *August: Osage County*. The actors would have loose-fitted clothing to acclimate to the unbearable Oklahoma heat. The color scheme would be dusty yellows, reds, browns, oranges, and greens, much like the colors one would find in Oklahoma. Violet, however, would be in a brighter teal blue color to highlight her unpredictability throughout the show.

Tracy Letts took a risk when he wrote a show about substance abuse and its affects on the people around the addict. I would want to bring out this truthfulness as best as I could in my production, highlighting the unstableness and volatile dynamics of the Weston family. I hope to raise questions about one's independence and responsibility to their family through the vivid imagery that represents the inescapable realm of addiction, as well as the volatile actions of Violet Weston. Attempting to escape one's problems through external things is a theme that many audiences can relate to, and I also hope to bring this versatility out in my own production. Although the characters establish their individual lives outside of the family, they never stop trying to escape their pasts, proving that one cannot truly release their family ties unless they are willing to accept their problems for what they are. In doing so, one can create a sense of freedom for themselves, just as Barbara did in the ending scene of this show.