On Domestic Angel's Wings, the Impact of the Mother in the American Family Drama

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Abstract

The American Family Drama rarely dramatizes the iconic American family as found on a Hallmark card. Plays like Eugene O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*, and Tracy Letts' *August: Osage County*, present images of families in decay by problems of their own creation, which asks the question, "What's happened to this family anyway?" Feminist scholars place the blame for these circumstances firmly on the male characters. They accuse the playwrights of marginalizing the mothers, referring to them as weak, helpless, and only present to serve the male characters.

Close examination of each of the four plays, however, will determine how the mother's choices influence the story and its members. The generation in which each author places his characters will also have an effect on each story. Finally, an exploration of the symbolic connection between the mothers and each of their settings will further highlight the significant role each woman holds in her play. For while it is the father's philosophy, or point of view, which has created the crucible each family faces, the mother's choices are directly responsible for the circumstances that brought it to bear. Moreover, she will be the voice of the truth for her children, pointing the way off the path that the parents themselves were unable to escape.

For my mother, who taught me the power of a mother's agency on the day she chose me.

And for my dad, in whose footsteps of the eternal scholar I walk.

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Chapter I

Introduction

The nuclear unit in the American way of life is the family. We build laws around its protection; Its concerns drive our commerce. We celebrate its members with the reverence of national holidays. Our literature, television, and films have idealized the family as the place to which we return that is safe and supportive. Not surprising then, is the fact that some of the greatest contributions to the canon of American theater center around the family.

Eugene O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, and Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* serve as standards of the genre of the American drama and *August: Osage County*, by Tracy Letts, appears to be on its way to joining them. Each of these playwrights closely examines the family. However, these are not the *Life* magazine portraits of enduring spirit that our culture holds so dear. Rather, they are voyeuristic glimpses of a family unit in decay at the hands of father, mother, and the children. The wreckage presented to the audience demands an answer to the question, "What has happened to this family?" In *A Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941), years of family secrets and vices entrap the Tyrone family in their mist enshrouded Connecticut home. *Death of a Salesman* (1949) reveals the Loman family forced to face the consequences of a lifetime of ill-conceived choices in their small house in New York

City. *Buried Child* (1978) presents a carcass of a Midwestern family killed by its dark secret. Finally, in *August: Osage County* (2007), the reunion of the Weston clan over the disappearance, and later death, of their patriarch causes what's left of the family to implode in a backwater Oklahoma farmhouse. To find the answers to why these circumstances have come to pass requires an examination of the women in each play – particularly the mothers. Critics, however, have taken issue with these playwrights for marginalizing these characters, as they are very often in the shadow of the father and children.

Plays have often been considered an ugly stepchild in the world of literary criticism. It is almost always the award-winning work whose analysis transcends from the theatrical review to the literary analysis. Three of the four plays, *A Long Day's Journey into Night, Death of a Salesman,* and *Buried Child,* have been duly celebrated sufficiently to warrant such attention. One of the commonalities of these three works is the negative attention they have attracted from the feminist critics. All three playwrights have been taken to task for their limited and stereotypical characterization of the female characters.

Many scholars have examined Eugene O'Neill's female characters defining them as either Madonnas or whores, and there is a lot of truth to that analysis. However, they also describe these characters as confined and weak. Ann C Hall, in her article, "'What Is a Man Without a Good Woman's Love?' O'Neill's Madonnas" makes the following claim:

> In his later plays, O'Neill's male characters frequently require that women, both on stage and off, masquerade as women through stereotypical roles, thus giving to men a sense of personal power, identity, and autonomy. O'Neill's later plays demonstrate the process by which the male characters banish their female counterparts into "a kind of Alaska," a marginalized

> position that denies female desire and there-by creates a perfect looking glass for the men themselves (23).

In speaking specifically of Mary Tyrone, the mother figure of *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, Hall goes on to say, "Mary Tyrone's struggles, pain, and power are absent" (36). Other examiners, such as Gloria Cahill and Lauren Porter, agree that, although Mary is the center of the dramatic action, she should be labelled as isolated and lost to the reality of the world around her.

However, Mary Tyrone, although marginalized to the confines of her home and often her room, makes her presence keenly felt, not by what she says, but by what she chooses to do. Mary uses her drug addiction as a means to escape the gilded cage that the men in her life have constructed for her. She would rather escape into a morphine-induced haze than play the role that her husband and sons demand of her. She refuses to indulge the facade they have created which gild the actions that each of her men have taken. Mary's choice to embrace that chemical freedom, forces her husband and sons to confront the truth of how they arrived at this place. It is that confrontation that releases her sons from the life to which her addiction has kept them tethered.

Critics disparage Arthur Miller for the subjugation and abuse of his female characters at the hands of those who supposedly love them. Kay Stanton, in her essay "Women and the American Dream of *Death of a Salesman*" begins her discussion with the charge, "Careful analysis reveals that the American Dream as presented in *Death of a Salesman* is male-oriented, but it requires unacknowledged dependence upon women as well as women's subjugation and exploitation" (120). Scholar Dana Kinnison further details Linda's suppression in her article "Redefining Female Absence in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*":

> Linda epitomizes the notion of female passivity, caretaking, and self-sacrifice. She stands by her man, seldom questioning and never opposing him. Linda occasionally notices the discrepancies between Willy's exaggerated claims and the reality of their circumstances, but she seems to have neither the desire nor the force of will to counter his distorted perceptions. She is not without insight at times, but her worthwhile observations go unheeded. Although her husband and sons love and even admire her, they do so while simultaneously disregarding her as a full person.(88)

While Linda Loman differs from Mary Tyrone - as she has no wish to escape her family - she, too, has her own definite agenda over the course of her story. While she physically is confined to the family home, her men, regardless of how far they travel, feel her influence. Serving as the moral center of the play, she attempts to spare her sons their father's fate by holding them tightly to the home in an effort to force them to see the reality of their situation. Although she remains loyal to her husband, she is not blinded to the realities and shortcomings of her men. What is more, while she cannot save her husband, she is not afraid to speak her mind to her boys in an effort to enable the potential success of one of her sons.

Perhaps the American playwright who gets the most condemning analysis by feminist critics is Sam Shepard. Florence Falk claims “In the plays of Sam Shepard, the cowboy is the reigning male; consequently, any female is, perforce, marginalized” (Falk 91) and “In general, women are a straggling group of camp followers, and men treat these "bitches," "broads," … as recalcitrant and dangerous possessions” (96). Ann Hall weighs in on specifically on *Buried Child* saying, “Shepard tends to present the action from a male perspective while ignoring female characterization” (91) and “In the end, *Buried Child* demonstrates that the law of the father is oppressive and that the family it creates is dysfunctional and violent” (97).

However, Halie, the mother in *Buried Child*, is neither ignored nor oppressed. She, like Mary Tyrone, breaks free from the decaying cage of the home her husband Dodge has built. Where Mary indulges in morphine, Halie uses other men as a means to to escape the dark secret that has destroyed the family long before the play even began. As in *Death of a Salesman*, Halie's choices expose the reality of the family's circumstances. Her actions reveal the way to freedom for another member of the family. Unlike the previous two plays, it is not one of her own children. Halie's actions have damned *them* to the farm surrounded by dead cornfields. It is an outsider, her grandson's girlfriend Shelly, bearing witness to the result of these actions, who escapes from a family's fate.

Tracy Letts' *August: Osage County* is a more contemporary piece and therefore has far less criticism written about it. Much of the literary analysis about the play tends to draw comparisons between it and other works. Elizabeth Fifer draws clear parallels between *August: Osage County* and *Long Day's Journey into Night,* "Letts owes his greatest debt to *Long Day's Journey*" (Fifer 184). In Theresa Choate's Broadway review, the theater critic asserts that the play is:

> Blatantly derivative, pointing to the father's suicide (Death of a Salesman), the drug-addicted mother (Long Day's Journey into Night), cutthroat family politics (Little Foxes), the slash-and-burn arguments of husbands and wives (Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?), and three sisters who have everything and nothing in common (Crimes of the Heart). (Choate 105)

Nicholas de Jongh's examination in the *Evening Standard* identified Sam Shepard's voice in the play while Benedict Nightingale's *London Times* review cited "echoes of *King Lear"* (Fifer 183).

August: Osage County, at first, appears to be a gender mirror image of the previous three plays. The father, Beverly, appears isolated and disappears almost as the play begins. His disappearance draws home, not two sons, but three daughters. His wife, Violet, is a force of nature and has the dominant personality in the relationship like James Tyrone or Willy Loman. However, look closely and it becomes clear that Letts has remained true to the structure of family dramas that have come before. The Weston family finds itself in its current situation as a result of Violet's choices. In addition, even with her very memorable moments onstage, she spends a near equal amount of time isolated in her bedroom, as her family can only cope with her in limited doses. Likewise, though the sons have become daughters, two of them will still find themselves becoming just like their parents while the third will hear her mother's truths and escape repeating her family's mistakes.

Academics have focused on what the characters in these works do *not* say or do *not* do. Careful character analysis reveals, however, the influence and impact of the words, actions, and presence of these mothers. They are far from the powerless, "domestic angels" only present to serve the purposes of their men. The mother's choices are the driving force behind the family's story. Moreover, the mother characters have the gravitational pull that keep the family tied to their respective places as each family deals with their given crucible, which has been a construct of the father's view of the world. Nevertheless, even when physically absent or confined out of sight, she is still powerfully present in the consciences of the rest of the family, particularly her children. These women are the voices of truth within each story; exposing the flaw in each of the fathers' point of view. Moreover, while each of the mothers cannot change their husbands, nor

prevent the tragedies each father has created, she can impart some insight or wisdom to the next generation, which although often unheard or unheeded, points the children off the path that she has had to follow. The character of the mother evolves over the course of the four plays, gaining an agency that is more overt. With her rise, the children, and in the later plays, the secondary female characters likewise become more aware of the reality of their situation, allowing them a means of escape. These mothers are powerful, rather than meek, and central rather than marginalized. It is from them that the actions in these four plays flow.

Chapter II.

Mary Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*

Just as Eugene O'Neill is considered the father of American playwrights, his character Mary Tyrone sets the standard for the mother in the American Family Drama. Raised in a lace-curtain Irish immigrant family by merchant class parents, she was married in the Catholic Church to a handsome Irish actor, and gave birth to three sons, only two of whom survived infancy. Now in their adult years, the sons return home to overcome a crucible of their parents' creation. With that, O'Neill established a family unit that becomes the standard for the American Family Drama. Many scholars examining O'Neill's work believe that the playwright does not give the heroine enough attention. Critics believe that O'Neill reduces Mary's contribution to her own story into one of two submissive, fragile characterizations.

Ann C. Hall gives voice to the argument that Mary is merely a fragile Madonna, whose purpose is to personify virtue in order to save her wayward men. She describes how she sees O'Neill marginalizing Mary, and some of his other female characters, into their confined, albeit spiritually virtuous, compartments:

> Female characters… must occupy the position of nothing in order to uphold patriarchal expectations on the part of their fictional male counterparts and their audiences. Motherhood is particularly "off limits."… Furthermore, the play contains numerous references to offstage mothers, from the Virgin Mary, human-ity's sacred mother in the Catholic doctrine, to James Tyrone's Irish immigrant mother.(37)

She goes on to claim:

> In many ways, [Mary's] decisions only create further confusion. Constructed by the patriarchal church, this female figure embodies the patriarchal ideals regarding the virgin and the mother. The Virgin Mary perpetuates patriarchy and the Christian faith, but she does so without any sexuality… Such characterization diffuses any threat of female sexuality. (43)

Doris Nelson echoes Hall's descriptions in her article, "O'Neill's Women":

> The female characters, with few exceptions, are defined only by their biological roles - in other words, by their relationships to the men in their lives…female characters can be, like the men, dreamers, searchers after some unrealized goal. However, in all these cases (and others) the search is a quest for the perfect marriage, the perfect love, the perfect son. (4)

Lauren Porter chooses to qualify Mary as an absent angel whose isolation results in loneliness that drives her at the end of the play to retreat into madness. She claims that Mary's limitations are dictated by the expectations of O'Neill's era:

> Mary Tyrone…is constructed by society as the "angel in the house" whose sole responsibility is to be wife and mother…She does not exist as an autonomous individual with the same access to agency and power that the men have…Mary is constructed by the gaze of men, a phenomenon which …helps account for Mary's isolation and deep loneliness. (Porter 43)

Porter also claims that Mary does not exist for her own purposes. She exists for the benefit of her men who are constantly on guard that she doesn't back fall into her addiction which would supersede their own needs:

> For while Mary occupies the center of the Tyrone family and, in many ways, the center of the play, her husband and sons persistently try to marginalize her. Although they love her, as the focus of their constant and watchful gaze she is important to them primarily for what they need from her as wife and lover (James), cured addict (Jamie), and mother and comforter (Edmund). Her own needs - for acceptance, for forgiveness, for agency - go unmet… the entire play is drenched with comments about the men watching Mary, scrutinizing not only her physical appearance but also her behavior and her movement about the house, constantly looking

> for signs that she has relapsed into her addiction… Constructed by their gaze, aware of their constant surveillance, Mary is a prisoner in her own home. It is her husband and sons' space, not hers, just as it is their language and their power. (38, 43-44)

The problem with these assertions is rooted in one fundamental truth: our choices make us who we are. Also, the decisions that incite this family's destruction and drive the story to its inevitable conclusion are Mary's. She is the central figure of the play and the gravitational force that keeps all the other characters trapped in the house. Mary's immature and impulsive choices as a naïve and coddled young woman set the story on its path. Her inability to embrace her role in creating this reality, preferring instead to blame her husband and sons, drives the plot of the story. Mary's self-reflection, gradually emboldened by morphine, reveals the truths behind the family's gilded façade. Finally, Mary's choice to escape from this prison into the "absence" of morphine allows the millstone of the parents' making to slip from their sons' necks, allowing for the possibility of future change.

From the beginning, everyone in this family operates to make Mary happy. Raised by a "pious and strict" (116) mother and doting father. She was convent educated. By her account, the sisters, who taught her music in addition to her academic and theological studies, adored her. Young Mary sought an illustrious, or even divine, future from the start. First, she wished to join the convent, becoming a holy bride of Christ, a position of reverence in the Irish Catholic community. Then, she chose to pursue a life as a concert pianist, where she would perform in elegant concert halls sharing her gifts with the world. As Mary tells her maid Cathleen reminiscing about her life:

> My father paid for the special lessons. He spoiled me. He would do anything I asked. He would have sent me to Europe to study after I graduated from the Convent. I might have gone – If I hadn't fallen in love

> with Mr. Tyrone… I had two dreams. To be a nun, that was the more beautiful one. To become a concert pianist, that was the other. (106)

However, she breaks her intended promise to God when she chooses instead to marry the famous actor James Tyrone. Her choice is motivated by his glamorous looks and the attention she would receive as a result of her match. This choice is the first of many Mary makes that lead to the family's current circumstances:

> He had the reputation of being one of the best-looking men in the country…He was a great matinee idol then, you know. Women used to wait at the stage door just to see him come out. You can imagine how excited I was when my father wrote me… that I was to meet him when I came home for Easter vacation. I showed the letter to all the girls, and how envious they were... I fell in love with him right then. So did he, he told me afterwards. I forgot all about becoming a nun or a concert pianist. All I wanted was to be his wife. (107-108)

What Mary does not consider is the reality of his vagabond lifestyle. Her life with James bears little resemblance to her girlish fantasy. Mary finds herself, perhaps for the first time, not at the center of an admirer's universe:

> I never felt at home in the theater. Even though Mr. Tyrone has made me go with him on all his tours, I've had little to do with the people in his company, or with anyone on the stage. Not that I have anything against them. They have always been so kind to me, and I to them. But I've never felt at home with them. Their life is not my life. It always between me and – (104)

Dissatisfied with these turn of events, Mary escapes in the only way provided to her in a Catholic marriage; she has children and returns to her parents' home for their births. However, the alluring call of her husband's attention and the hiring of a nurse entice Mary back on the road after the birth of their first son, Jamie. Mary returns to her parents' home for the birth of their second son, Eugene. Still, child rearing can be tedious and unglamorous work, so once again, when Tyrone professes his desire for his wife's

company, she jumps at the chance to join him. This time, she leaves her baby and young son in the care of their nurse and grandparents. This act leads to what Mary sees as the couple's original sin: the death of their son Eugene after contracting the measles from his older brother Jamie.

For any parent, losing a child is the ultimate pain to endure. Mary's devastation is unquestionably understandable. She cannot face the fact that her choices have brought about the death of her son. James cannot help her find a way out from under her grief, but he is unwilling not to have her by his side. It is at this point that a hotel doctor introduces Mary to morphine for the first time. The drug allows her to avoid facing her culpability in the death of her son. Without it, she wallows in the disappointment at how everyone around her has failed her. Her husband, unable to face the magnitude of their loss and his wife's judgment, leaves Mary in the care of a physician who overmedicates her. Tyrone, meanwhile, goes back on the road to provide for her. Mary, rather than mourning her loss, numbs her pain in her morphine haze.

As the play begins, many years later, Mary has done battle with her addiction but has not managed to conquer it. She still refuses acknowledge that her choices have brought the family to this place. The morphine allows Mary some moments of introspection that reveal that she blames her men who, she believes, have each done wrong by her. She paints herself as a woman bearing up under trying circumstances as she blames her youngest son Edmund for her failing health:

> I was so healthy before Edmund was born. You remember James. There wasn't a nerve in my body. Even traveling with you season after season, with week after week of one night sands, in trains without Pullmans, in dirty rooms of filthy hotels, eating bad food, bearing children in hotel rooms, I still kept healthy. But bearing Edmund was the last straw. I was

> so sick afterward, and that ignorant quack of a cheap hotel doctor – All he knew was I was in pain. It was easy for him to stop the pain. (89-90)

Then she plays the devoted wife as she blames her husband and elder son Jamie for killing Eugene:

> I blame only myself. I swore after Eugene died I would never have another baby. I was to blame for his death. If I hadn't left him with my mother to join you on the road because you wrote telling me you missed me and were so lonely, Jamie would never have been allowed, when he still had the measles, to go into the baby's room… I've always believed Jamie did it on purpose. (90)

Later she claims that if it was not Jamie's actions that were to blame for her unhappiness, it was her husband's jealousy:

> I know why he wants to send you to a sanatorium. To take you away from me! He's always tried to do that. He's been jealous of every one of my babies! He kept finding ways to make me leave them. That's what caused Eugene's death. He's jealous of you most of all. He knew I loved you most because – (121)

Mary's reality is that her actual life did not live up to her girlish expectations. There was no glamor in being part of a traveling theater troupe. It is more likely that she went back on the road because of the rumors of Tyrone's affairs:

> I had waited in that ugly hotel room hour after hour. I kept making excuses for you. I told myself it must be some business connected with the theater. I knew so little about the theater. Then I became terrified. I imagined all sorts of horrible accidents. I got down on my knees and prayed that nothing happened to you… I didn't know how often that was to happen in the years to come. How many times I was to wait in ugly hotel rooms. (115)

In fact, if anyone was jealous, it was Mary, not of the children, but of the competing circumstances that kept her men's attention away from her. These are not the sentiments of a tragic, fragile Madonna, or an ethereal domestic angel with no agency of her own. Rather these are the self -deceptions of a woman for whom life has not turned out the

way she envisioned. Unlike most women, though, she finds no satisfaction in the accomplishments of her family and the hand she had in bring them to bear. Instead, she languishes in her drug-induced haze trying to shut out the attempts of her men to pull her back into their world of reality.

At the beginning of Act One, Mary makes mention of both the fog and the horn whose call irritates her at night, "Thank Heavens, the fog is gone…I do feel out of sorts this morning. I wasn't able to get much sleep with that awful fog horn going all night long" (17). This statement is the introduction of O'Neill's symbolic mirroring of the foghorn and fog with Mary's addiction and its ability to both draw and entrap the family.

The horn is the harbinger of potential danger out on the sea and calls the sailors back to shore. Likewise, Mary's complaints about the foghorn, and the effect the incoming fog will have on her "rheumatism," serve as warnings to the Tyrone men that she may need a fix. Each act, the fog gets closer and thicker, wrapping itself around the harbor-side homestead until eventually the lack of visibility makes it too dangerous to leave. As the fog outside grows, so does the fog in Mary's mind as her heroin-induced haze gets thicker, wrapping itself around Mary until the lack of clarity makes her unable to feel the painful remorse of her unfulfilled dreams.

By Act Four, the entrapment inside the house has the opposite effect on the men as it does on Mary. Stuck in the parlor and worried that Mary has once again turned away from sobriety, James, Jamie, and Edmund are forced to confront the family's situation among themselves. At first, it becomes a verbal sparring match of blame as each of them seek to cast aspersions on the others, rather than accept responsibility for their own role. Rather than discussing the unvarnished truth, they subvert their issues in a sea of literary

allusions which bring no clarity and collapses into an all-out argument between father and sons. Mary, on the other hand, after announcing her entrance on the piano, sweeps into the parlor, dressed iconically like the Virgin Mary with a wedding dress over her arm. In her drug-altered state she makes it clear that she is no longer interested in their men's bickering and squabbling for her attention. She ascends the staircase like the bride of heaven she had originally dreamt of becoming, no longer willing to embrace earthly cares.

It is Mary's desire to hide away in the fog of her addiction that reveals the truths about her sons. Although, they too would prefer to hide behind their semi-famous family name and the tenuous trappings that Tyrone has built. Each of the sons must face the outcome of the choices that the family has made in service of the public facade. However, the facade is no more substantive than the fog out of which they are trying to pull Mary.

On the surface, Jamie Tyrone appears to be the good-for-nothing son. He has his father's build, constitution, wits, and perhaps even his talent (19). However, Jamie prefers to spend his time drinking in bars, sleeping with easy women, and gambling on the ponies to building a career in the theater. His mother's addiction noticeably agitates him. He blames his father for favoring the miserly mismanagement of her care over his irresponsible real estate transactions. He remains tied to his father professionally, and every summer travels back to the house his mother claims is not a real home. In an early altercation with his father, the audience learns:

> TYRONE: At the end of each season you're penniless! You've thrown your salary away on whores and whiskey!
>
> JAMIE: My salary? Christ!

> TYRONE: It's more than you're worth and you couldn't get that if it wasn't for me. If you weren't my son, there isn't a manager in the business who would give you a part, your reputation stinks so.
>
> JAMIE: I never wanted to be an actor. You forced me on the stage.
>
> TYRONE: That's a lie! You've made no effort to find anything else to do…that you have to come home every summer to live on me.
>
> JAMIE: I earn my board and lodging working on the grounds. It saves you hiring a man.
>
> TYRONE: Bah! You have to be driven to do even that much…
>
> JAMIE: All right, Papa. I'm a bum. Anything you like so long as it stops this argument. (33)

The question to ask is why a grown man would keep himself tethered to a situation with which he apparently is dissatisfied. Why does he not simply walk away? The answer has everything to do with Mary's anesthetized, self-centered view of the world.

Mary blames Jamie for the death of his brother Eugene, "[Jamie] was jealous of the baby. He hated him… Oh, I know Jamie was only seven, but he was never stupid. He'd been warned it might kill the baby. He knew. I've never been able to forgive him for that" (90). Jamie's punishment for the crime his mother has convicted him of is a self-induced indentured servitude to the family. He pursues a career of his father's choosing and does it badly, not for lack of talent, but by being unreliable and inebriated. Jamie makes these choices because he recognizes that his father does not want a successful son Tyrone preferrs a poor reflection instead to make his appearance shine. Jamie also works for the family by maintaining the property. He indulges his father by claiming it is for money. In fact, Jamie is working to turn the house Mary has always hated into the home she has always wanted as penance for his crimes. Furthermore, Jamie acts as caretaker for

Mary when she wanders upstairs at night. He advocates for a "real doctor" to look after her (38).

Youngest son Edmund appears to be the carefree world traveler of the family working as a merchant marine and a newspaper writer, although he is not very successful at either. Edmund runs as fast and as far from the family as he can, and yet he returns when summoned to support his mother's recovery leaving the audience to question why.

Mary blames Edmund's birth for her nervous condition and her subsequent addiction to morphine. As a result, he has stayed out of sight to avoid further agitating her condition. She has, to some degree, recovered. He also keeps running from her constant neediness disguised as favoritism:

> You know, I think it would be much better for you if you stayed home this afternoon and let me take care of you. It's such a tiring trip uptown in the dirty trolley on a hot day like this I'm sure you'd be much better off here with me…Right after I returned from the sanatorium, you began to be ill. The doctor warned me I must have peace at home with nothing to upset me, and all I've done is worry about you. (94-95)

Edmund's travels have also been, in part, to prove to himself that he is a strong, independent man – not the feeble, infirm burden that Mary sees. Now that he has been summoned home, however, he must reveal that he is sick. His illness, like his birth, will be an excuse for his mother to drive herself back to morphine. He also must ask Tyrone to fund his medical treatment (because no one in this family has learned the value of saving money.) In doing so, Edmund may fall victim to Tyrone's stinginess, which caused Mary's addiction, allowing his father to throw him into a "cheap" asylum where he will be out of both sight and mind. Both sons need to confront these truths about their circumstances and make a choice about how they will move forward. Moreover, the example that they have to follow is Mary herself.

Mary's choices allow Jamie to earn himself redemption as he stands up and advocates for the care and well-being of one brother, which will serve as penance for the crime of taking the life of the other. When Jamie pays this debt to his family and frees himself from the tether of his mother's addiction, it may be possible for him to free himself from his chosen vices and find his happiness in the world. On the other hand, perhaps he might exchange the servitude of caring for his mother for caring for his brother. However, having had the shared experience of life with Mary and James Tyrone, it is possible that the brothers could treat each other with the sense of kindness that their parents never could.

Edmund, witnessing his mother's choice to withdraw into the morphine mists, may find the strength to take command of the treatment of his condition. With his brother's support and without the distraction of Mary's situation, Edmund may be able to convince his father to take better care of his son than he did of his wife. Also, without Mary's nagging, perhaps Edmund can convince Tyrone to invest in his health instead of Tyrone's questionable real estate speculations. Doing so will enable Edmund to survive his father's gloomy expectations of the fate expected of all victims of consumption and allow his youngest son to come home finally.

None of this would be possible without the driving force behind this story, the mother figure. Mary makes the determined choice to escape the unhappiness and dissatisfaction with the way her life has rendered itself. She ascends the stairs of the family home, in her wedding gown, to abandon her earthly family in favor of becoming the bride of heaven that she always dreamed. Unfortunately, this can only be achieved through the sweet release of her morphine addiction. She is neither fragile, in need of

rescue, or without agency. Mary, from childhood, had dreamed of what her life was meant to be. Although she would like the audience to believe they were wholesome, righteous goals that destiny denied her, they are in fact the hopes of a spoiled, sheltered girl who plays the victim when the reality of life challenges her expectations. To reclaim what she feels she has been deprived; she blames her sons and her husband for failing her. By placing this blame, rather than facing the reality of her circumstances, the truths of how this family came to be in its current condition are allowed to surface. It is also by Mary's choices that her sons confront their reality, which may, or may not, enable them to escape the fate into which their mother had manipulated them. Is Mary Tyrone a fragile domestic angel with no agency? She would be appalled at the notion people saw her as such.

Chapter III.

Linda Loman in *Death of a Salesman*

Seven years after the first production of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, drama critic John Mason Brown reviewed the original production of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman.* In it he wrote of the mother figure, "[Linda Loman] is the marriage vow -' For better or worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health' - made flesh, slight of body but strong of faith" (Miller 210). One could argue that she takes this vow to the extreme. Miller follows O'Neill's family structure but moves the characters a generation ahead, so the father and the mother are First Generation Americans who came of age at the turn of the twentieth century and their two sons are a part of the Greatest Generation who lived through two World Wars separated by a Great Depression (Carlson 3). Miller gives the audience a good look into husband Willy Loman's background, but writes absolutely nothing for Linda. This absence of information is one of many points of contention among scholarly criticism regarding the character of Linda.

Scholar Carol Billman, in her article, "Women and the Family in American Drama" blames Miller's weak characterization of Linda on the time period:

> The thirty years from 1930 to 1960 … was the period when earlier feminist gains were negated under the pressure of psychoanalytic theory and political reality, and when the twentieth-century version of the 'feminine mystique' was born. The social climate is clearly reflected in the work of the best-known American playwrights: female characters, who have no future outside their families… In each instance… there are two

> sons; and the guilt, familial and social responsibilities, and self-doubt of the men in the family are Miller's points of concern. The women the male characters abuse - their mothers – live in the shadow of their men. (38-39)

In "Women and the American Dream of *Death of a Salesman*" Kay Stanton perceives Millers portrayal of Linda as reductive and suppressive:

> Careful analysis reveals that the American Dream as presented in Death of a Salesman is male-oriented, but it requires unacknowledged dependence upon women as well as women's subjugation and exploitation… Linda, as Willy's wife, seems to have picked up where Mother left off, replacing her. Linda sings Willy to sleep with lullabies and "mothers" him in countless ways… she embodies the American Dream ideal of the model post-World War II wife, infinitely supportive of her man… Linda herself is like a mended stocking, torn and tattered by Willy but still serviceable. (122-123, 136-137)

It is true that Linda is beloved by her three men - her husband Willy, her elder son Biff, and younger son Happy. It is also true that she has a blind devotion to her husband and will do anything to make him happy, even if it might hurt her children. That is her flaw. What is not true is that she is a weak and broken woman who serves no purpose but service. Like Mary Tyrone before her, Linda is the element that draws these men home and she makes the big choices that create, and enable, their tribulations.

Both of her sons see her as the shining example of what they should look for in a wife, "BIFF: I'd like to find a girl- steady, someone with substance. HAPPY: That's what I long for...Somebody with character, with resistance! Like Mom, y'know" (25). However, the women they pursue are anything but substantial. Willy laments, if only to himself, that she is a woman deserving of better than she gets, "You're the best there is Linda, you're a pal, you know that?...There's so much I want to make up for… I'll make it up to you Linda" (38-39). All three men say that she is the force that has kept their family functioning for all this time and each of them is loath to let her down, or at least

they would loathe for her to find out that they have let her down, repeatedly. Linda is that force. She is the one who pays the bills. She is the one who can calculate Willy's weekly commission in her head and make each meager amount stretch to keep the family out of financial ruin. She is the keeper of many of her men's secrets and understands each of their true natures.

Perhaps her most significant task is maintaining Willy's self-esteem. So strong is her love for her husband that she forgives him all of his failings and supports him even when she knows him to be wrong. When these circumstances arise, she finds a graceful excuse to cover or a delicate workaround to protect her husband's fragile ego:

> WILLY: No, it's me, suddenly I'm going sixty miles an hour and I don't remember the last five minutes. I'm - I can't seem to - Keep my mind to it.
>
> LINDA: Maybe it's your glasses. You never went for your new glasses.
>
> WILLY: No, I see everything. I came back ten miles an hour. It took me nearly four hours from Yonkers.
>
> LINDA: Well you've just have to take a rest, Willy, you can't continue this way.
>
> WILLY: I just got back from Florida
>
> LINDA: But you didn't rest your mind. Your mind is overactive, and it's the mind is what counts, dear. (13)

Because of her determined efforts to stand by her man's flawed philosophy of life - even when she knows it to be wrong - she makes three specific choices in their marriage that set this family on the road the audience encounters them on.

The first of these choices is when Willy's older brother Ben offers her husband the opportunity to go to Alaska. Miller writes two moments where Linda encounters Ben, both within Willy's flashbacks. In Act One, when Ben first visits the family in Brooklyn,

it evident that Linda is made uncomfortable by her brother-in-law and his tall tales of how he made his supposed fortune:

> BEN: Why, boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. *He laughs* And by God. I was rich...never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way. *Taking Linda's hand and bowing*: It was an honor and a pleasure to meet you, Linda.
>
> LINDA: *withdrawing her hand coldly, frightened*: Have a nice - trip. (48-50)

In the Act Two encounter, Ben makes Willy an offer to join him in his Alaskan adventure. Whether Linda's understanding of Willy's true capabilities protectively motivates her to block Willy from this opportunity, or the circumstances take place early enough in their marriage that Linda still actually believes that Willy is up-and-coming with hope for their future is unclear. What is clear is that she does not trust Ben and appeals to Willy's ego to prevent the family from making such a dramatic change in their circumstances:

> *Linda enters as of old, with the wash*
>
> LINDA: Oh, you're back?
>
> BEN: I haven't much time.
>
> WILLY: No, wait! Linda, he's got a proposition for me in Alaska.
>
> LINDA: But you've got - *To Ben:* He's got a beautiful job here.
>
> WILLY: But in Alaska, kid, I could -
>
> LINDA: You're doing well enough, Willy!
>
> BEN: *to Linda* Enough for what, my dear?
>
> LINDA: *frightened of Ben and angry at him:* Don't say those things to him! Enough to be happy right here, right now. *To Willy, while Ben laughs:* Why must everybody conquer the world? You're well liked, and the boys love you, and someday - *to Ben* - why, old man Wagner told him

> just the other day that if he keeps it up, he'll be a member of the firm, didn't he Willy? (85)

The end of Linda's statement both feeds Willy's ego and builds his pride as he does not want to admit to any failure either to his wife or his big brother. By manipulating Willy's decision to stay where he is, it is actually Linda's choice that pivotally keeps the family continuing to live by the edict of Willy's flawed philosophy: to be well-liked is more important than to be hard-working.

The second choice that Linda makes, or rather does not make, is her inability to confront her husband about a length of tubing he has left by the gas pipe. This covert attempt to kill himself is Willy's warped attempt to provide for his family using the funds from his life insurance policy. Before Linda tells the boys about the tube, Linda appears to be a practical, realistic wife who is coping with her husband's aging decline. She tends to her family's needs and defers to her husband's wants:

> LINDA: Well, it makes seventy dollars and some pennies. That's very good.
>
> WILL: What do we owe?
>
> LINDA: Well, on the first there's sixteen dollars on the refrigerator -
>
> WILLY: Why sixteen?
>
> LINDA: Well, the fan belt broke, so it was a dollar eighty.
>
> WILLY: But it's brand new.
>
> LINDA: Well, the man said that's the way it is. 'Till they work themselves in, y'know.
>
> WILLY: I hope we didn't get stuck on that machine.
>
> LINDA: They got the biggest ads of any of them.... And odds and ends, comes to around a hundred and twenty dollars by the fifteenth
>
> WILLY: A hundred and twenty dollars! My God, if business don't pick up I don't know what I'm gonna do!

> LINDA: But you're doing wonderful, dear. You're making seventy to a hundred dollars a week... Willy darling, you are the handsomest man in the world... And the boys, Willy. Few men are idolized by their children the way you are. (36-37)

She is adept at adding a spoonful of sugar over bad financial news that Willy needs to swallow. She appears hopeful that the return of her sons will help stem the tide of Willy's adrift, aging mind. She tells the boys about finding the tubing, and her realization of her husband's ill intentions:

> Last month... *with great difficulty:* Oh, boys, it's so hard to say a thing like this! ... I was looking for a fuse. The lights blew out, and I went down the cellar. And behind the fuse box - it happened to fall out - was a length of rubber pipe just short... there's a little attachment on the end of it. I knew right away. And sure enough, on the bottom of the water heater there's a new little nipple on the gas pipe. (59)

The audience's expectation is that Willy's determined champion will find a way to gracefully right the wrong by enlisting her sons' help in intervening with her husband's choice. What she chooses instead is to protect her husband's pride rather than preventing his attempt at suicide:

> I'm - I'm ashamed to. How can I mention it to [Willy]? Every day I go down and take away That little rubber pipe. But, when he comes home, I put it back where it was. How can I insult him that way? I don't know what to do. I live from day to day. (60)

She then turns to her sons and places the blame squarely on their shoulders, what's more she demands they fix the situation:

> I tell you, I know every thought in his mind. It sounds so old-fashioned and silly, but I tell you he put his whole life into you and you turned your backs on him...I swear to God! Biff, his life is in your hands! (60)

Perhaps if she, with the help of her sons, had approached Willy in order to find some measure of honesty between them, they might have addressed many of the family's issues. Linda's choice to stay silent to maintain her husband's self-image instead

reinforces his philosophy of appearance being more important than facing reality and allows the circumstances of the play to come to pass.

Linda's third choice is to hold her husband together over holding her family together. Unlike Mary Tyrone, whose addiction tethers the family to the home, Linda does not summon the boys back for her own good, or for that of her family. The only thing she wants from her sons is to behave in a manner that will make Willy happy. However, when she sees that the boys are unwilling to follow along, or worse when they treat Willy with disrespect, she casts them out of the family home for their lack of filial piety:

> Get out of here, both of you, and don't come back! I don't want you tormenting him anymore. Go on now, get your things together...Pick up your stuff, I'm not your maid anymore. Pick it up, you bum, you! You're a pair of animals! Not one, not another living soul would have had the cruelty to walk out on that man in a restaurant... you didn't even go in to see if he was all right. (124)

Once Linda orders the boys out, she goes even further. She tries to prevent them from talking to their father out of fear they will shatter the illusion of Willy's imagined reality or, even worse, reveal the truth to her fragile and failing man:

> LINDA: Get out of here!
>
> BIFF: I gotta talk to the boss, mom. Where is he?
>
> LINDA: You're not going near him. Get out of this house!
>
> BIFF, *with absolute assurance, determination*: No. We are going to have an abrupt conversation him and me.
>
> LINDA: You're not talking to him... will you please leave him alone? (125)

Thus, she places her marriage before her motherhood. Had this choice happened earlier in the play, it is likely she would have lost all of her men in the end. However, as it

coincides with the climactic end of the second act, her lack of maternal care can be forgiven by her sons as an act of desperation to save their father, allowing for the events of the Requiem.

Like O'Neill, Miller sets his story in the small family home. When they first came to live in the house, it had a wide open, tree-filled yard. This unencumbered green space allowed for the family to spend time together. In Willy's flashbacks, he reflects on the times the boys would play, while Linda would hang laundry and Willy would do repairs on the house. As with Mary Tyrone and the fog, the house and its yard are symbolic of the secrets, lies and hurt feelings the Loman family has endured over the years. These have built walls around each Loman like the apartment complexes that have risen up around their home. They have cut off an avenue for the family's happiness and locked them into the conflicts they now find themselves in. Similarly, each new construction blocks the little house from nature until it can barely make out the sun.

Linda chooses not to go to Alaska. Willy's subsequent resentment of that choice, as evident in the resulting flashback, cuts off a road of communication between husband and wife. Another is destroyed by Willy's affair which creates a secret between him and Linda. Biff's discovery of that secret shatters the pathway between father and son. Biff's protection of Linda from that knowledge eliminates another. These choices add up and constrict the family. Like the apartment complexes that have choked off the oxygen supply so, "there isn't a breath of fresh air in the neighborhood" (17), so are the secrets, lies, and resentments choking the life from the family.

While Linda vehemently protects the illusion of reality Willy has constructed for the family, even to his detriment, there are other truths she is very willing to reveal in the

service of her personal cause. As a mother is sometimes want to do, she will hold up a mirror to her two sons and demand that they take a long hard look at where their choices have gotten them.

The charge against Happy is that he ignores his father and pays nominal service to his parents' needs. In her Act One confrontation with her boys, she uses sarcasm to illustrate Happy's failures:

> LINDA: a small man can be just as exhausted as a great man. He works for a company thirty-six years this March, opens up unheard-of territories to their trademark, and now in his old age they take his salary away.
>
> HAPPY, *indignantly*: I didn't know that, Mom.
>
> LINDA: you never asked, my dear! Now that you get your spending money someplace else you don't trouble your mind with him… And you tell me he has no character? The man who never worked a day but for your benefit? When does he get the medal for that? Is this his reward to turn around at the age of sixty-three and find his sons, who he loved better than his life, one a philandering bum -
>
> HAPPY: Mom!
>
> LINDA: That's all you are, my baby! (56-57)

She goes on to lay three charges at his feet: he's never around, he brings in little money for his family, and he has a predilection for philandering, all of which is ironically familiar. His father also has all of these qualities. Likewise, Happy puts a positive spin on his own negative behavior and often changes his story to suit the circumstances:

> HAPPY: You're going to call me a bastard when I tell you this. That girl Charlotte I was with tonight is engaged to be married in five weeks... the guys in line for the vice presidency of the store. I don't know what gets into Me, Maybe I just have an overdeveloped sense of competition or something, but I went and ruined her, and furthermore I can't get rid of her. And he's the third executive I've done that too. Isn't that a crummy characteristic? And to top it off, I go to their weddings... like I'm not supposed to take bribes. Manufacturers offer me a hundred dollar bill now and then to throw an order their way. You know how honest I am, but it's

> like this girl, see. I hate myself for it. Because I don't want the girl, and, still, I take it and- I love it! (25)

What makes these similarities notable is the fact that as a young man, Happy was constantly looking for his father's attention only to find it was focused on Biff. As a result, Happy has in essence formed himself in his father's image. The consequence of his father's earlier inattention is now, because Willy is less than "well-liked", Happy wants nothing to do with his father's failings At one point Happy even denies his parentage:

> HAPPY: Come on, girls, we'll catch up with him.
>
> MISS FORSYTHE, *as HAPPY pushes her out*: See, I don't like that temper of [Biff's].
>
> HAPPY: He's just a little overstrung, he'll be all right!
>
> LETTA: Don't you want to tell your father -
>
> HAPPY: no, that's not my father. He's just a guy. Come on, we'll catch Biff, and, honey, we are going to paint this town! Stanley, where's the check! Hey, Stanley! (115-116)

In protection of her beloved husband, Linda lashes out at her son for acting towards his father with the very same behavior as Willy has exibited throughout their marriage. While she will overlook the sins of the father, she will condemn them in her youngest son.

Linda takes another tack toward her son Biff. Since her husband sees Biff as The Golden Child, she will appeal to her eldest to live up to those expectations. She reminds Biff of how often Willy was there for him and of how close they were. She pleads with him to come home, claiming that repairing the father-son relationship would be the solution to all of the family's problems, When that appeal is unsuccessful, she hold the mirror up a little closer to show the damage his choices have caused both Willy and the family:

> When you write you're coming, he's all smiles, and talks about the future, and - he's just wonderful. And then the closer you seem to come, the more shaky he gets, and then, by the time you get here, he's arguing, and he seems angry at you. I think it's just that maybe he can't bring himself to - to open up to you. Why are you so hateful to each other? Why is that?" (54).

She chastises Biff that if he cannot change his ways he must be banished so as not to cause any more damage.

> He's the dearest man in the world to me, and I won't have anyone making him feel unwanted and low and blue. You've got to make up your mind now, darling, There's no leeway anymore. Either he's your father and you pay him that respect, or else you're not to come here. (55)

Nevertheless, she also demands to know the cause of the animosity between father and son, "And you! What happened to the love you had for him? You were such Pals! How you used to talk to him on the phone every night! How lonely he was 'till he could come home to you" (57). That truth, of course, is the one Biff cannot reveal to her: the fact that Willy cheated on Linda. Biff must know on some level that revealing this betrayal to Linda would destroy that by which Linda defines herself - her marriage. Therefore, Biff will protect his mother, even to his detriment, just as Linda would do for Willy:

> BIFF, *kissing her*: All right, well, alright. It's all settled now. I've been remiss. I know that, Mom. But now I'll stay, and I swear to you, I'll apply myself. *Kneeling in front of her, in a fever of self-reproach*: It's just - you see, Mom, I don't fit in the business. Not that I won't try. I'll try, and I'll make good.(60)

In the Requiem of the play, the audience gets a glimpse of whether the truths that Linda has laid out for her boys will bear any fruit. Happy cannot see the forest for the trees, and it is evident he will continue to follow his father's example, likely to his own oblivion. Biff, however, is made more self-aware by reflecting on Linda's words and what they

mean for his family. His thoughts allow for the possibility of Biff forging his own, different path, free from the yoke of his father's flawed philosophy:

> BIFF: He had all the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong.
>
> HAPPY, *almost ready to fight Biff*: Don't say that!
>
> BIFF: He never knew who he was… the man didn't know who he was.
>
> HAPPY, *infuriated*: Don't say that!
>
> BIFF: Why don't you come with me, Happy?
>
> HAPPY: I'm not licked that easily, I'm staying right here in this city, and I'm gonna beat this racket... The Loman Brothers.
>
> BIFF: I know who I am, Kid.
>
> HAPPY: All right, boy. I'm gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have - to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him.
>
> BIFF *with a hopeless glance at HAPPY, bends towards his mother*: Let's go, Mom. (138-139)

Even though Linda's last speech underpins her devotion to her husband, her final words belie a realization of the truth about her family's future, "We're free" (139).

Chapter IV.

Halie in *Buried Child*

More than thirty years after *Death of a Salesman*, actor-playwright Sam Shepard offered his entry into the American family drama genre heavily influenced by the Midwestern region where he grew up and the time in which he was writing. *Buried Child* contains a number of pivotal shifts in the family drama from the previously examined plays. Once again, there is a nuclear family: father, mother, and two sons. The setting of the play this time is a Middle American farm but no specific time is given. First produced in 1978, the production design was reflective of that time and in fact, the economic slowdown of the 1970's echoes Shepard's tone. Subsequent revivals in 1996 and 2016 also set the play in the late seventies. Shepard does give the ages of the characters and simple math reveals that he has advanced his family forward one generation. Mother and father are part of the Greatest Generation. Their sons are part of the Silent Generation who were born during the Great Depression, came of age during World War II, but were too young to fight, and were too old to be drafted into the Vietnam War. The grandson and his girlfriend are Baby Boomers, who were born after World War II, came of age during the Civil Rights Movement, and, although others of their generation were conscripted to Vietnam, Shepard's characters were too young (Carlton 3).

This generational shift creates a visceral difference in the characterization of the family from the previous plays discussed. This play focuses less on narrative detail and more on imagery and myth. For example, the family are given no last name. Dodge, the father, whose name alludes to the Everyman's car of the seventies, sees his purpose to be a provider for his family and feels he must stand alone to do so. Carla J. McDonough makes a similar claim in her article, "Sam Shepard: The Eternal Patriarch Returns":

> If *Death of a Salesman* records the demise of the masculine myth of the frontier, Sam Shepard's male characters are still not willing to abandon that myth. As we witnessed in *Salesman*, Shepard's theater also often presents the family as that which encroaches upon a man's individualism, upon his man-hood. (35)

The sons, Tilden and Bradley, like Biff and Happy, seem adrift and ineffectual. They essentially wait around to do their parents' bidding:

> Sons lose their own identities as they take on that of their fathers, an identity that is itself merely borrowed from previous fathers or ideas of fathers. Fatherhood becomes simply another one of the male mythologies that fails to give Shepard's men any stable identity, leading to confusion, violence, and destruction of self and others. (41)

The grandchildren, a new construct in the American Family Drama, serve a more utilitarian purpose than substantive, as Shepard needs them to get where he is going. However, having been born into the Baby Boomer generation, they possess a spirit of self-determination missing from the generation before and a sense of purpose that, unlike their grandparents, searches out for something greater than the concentric spheres of the domestic and public world (Carlson 3).

In Halie, we find a change in the traditional characterization of the mother. At first, she appears to be akin to Linda Loman in her position in the family. Mistress of the

domestic sphere, she is responsible for the care and well-being of her husband and children, but has no desire to enter the public sphere and the world of work. However, Halie's later years, the 1960's and 70's, have witnessed an era of extreme social upheaval in the area of civil rights and women's liberation. Though she may come to the party a little older, she will take advantage of it a little wiser. The family farm, like the Tyrone and Loman homes, is a cage in which Halie is being held. Unlike the mothers before her, however, it is a cage of her own making, and as such, she can leave it – but not escape.

Also unlike the *Long Day's Journey into Night* and the *Death of a Salesman*, whose narratives dramatize a crucial tipping point into the family's destruction; this farmland family has already been destroyed by a secret when the play begins. What the playwright presents his audience with are the ruined remains of the destruction and the question of how the characters got to this place. He even brings in a new voice - The Outsider - to make this inquiry for the audience. These structural changes do not reinvent the genre, but does allow it to evolve with a latter twentieth century point of view.

The point of view might be contemporary but the playwright is a throwback to an earlier time. Sam Shepard is a cowboy:

> Often photographed in cowboy hat and boots, Shepard himself is something of an American cultural icon representing the maverick, independent, modern-day cowboy, as well as the perpetual. In her *Esquire* profile of Shepard, Jennifer Allen tells her readers: "Think of Holden Caulfield's loathing of phonies, hypocrites, all the jerky grown-ups who compromise instead of dream, then cross Holden Caulfield with the cowboy ethic, and you get the idea of Shepard." (McDonough, "Sam Shepard: The Eternal Patriarch Returns" 37)

Consequently, his work is replete with masculine-centric characters and there are few female characters to be found. There is no shortage of commentary by feminist scholars

taking issue with, not only Shepard's lack of women, but his characterization of them as well.

Charles G. Whiting brings the familiar description of "trapped" and "absent" down on Halie in his article, "Images of Women in Shepard's Theater":

> Shepard's older women represent a surrender to stagnation... The play begins with a difficult conversation between … Halie who is upstairs and Dodge downstairs, and during much of the play, Halie is absent… Halie is even more remote; her detachment has become an absence of love for her only son who still lives at home, best seen when Tilden brings some mysterious corn into the house. "You're going to get kicked out of this house, Tilden, if you don't tell me where you got that corn!" (501-502)

Florence Falk continues her tirade, claiming that Halie descends to the level of prostitute in order to endure all for the sake of her man:

> Women in Shepard's plays are compelled to adapt themselves as best they can to the exigencies of the male world to survive… Halie (in Buried Child) [is a] whore-wife-mothers who [is a] grotesque parodies of the abused Emilia's sentiments in Othello: "But I do think it is their husband's faults/ If wives do fall." These women consent to enact the male fantasy of feminine perfidy that men feel they are right to fear. Women in Shepard's world are often victims, but… more skilled in survival strategies. (Falk 99-100)

Ann C. Hall gives Shepard's women no credit for agency asserting they are little more than objects:

> Shepard tends to present the action from a male perspective while ignoring female characterization… women are props for male performances… Moreover, the women in Shepard's early plays generally… remain in the background while wild cowboys take center stage, destroying everything in sight. (92-93)

Finally, Doris Auerbach claims:

> The feminist principle is powerless to intercede and stop the endless progression from one violent man to another…The powerless mother

> figure is not only unable to protect her children but has the violence of the father projected onto her: "You never saw a bitch eating her puppies?" (Auerbach 54, 56).

The critics have been particularly harsh on Shepard's characterization of women, and for good reason. Shepard's plays tend to be male-centric in nature. In *Buried Child*, the first of the cycle of Shepard's family plays, the playwright presents us with a mother who is little more than a voice in the first act, absent from the second act entirely and yet a pivotal presence in the third act. She seems hardly fit to occupy the same discussion as Mary Tyrone and Linda Lowman. Nevertheless, like the two mothers before her, it is her lack of words and lack of presence that drives the plot forward. Carla J McDonoghue concurs in her essay, "The Politics of Stage Space: Women and Male Identity in Sam Shepard's Family Plays" when she states:

> The mother's "withdrawal" is a refusal to collude in the male stories and their concomitant destruction. She chooses to leave because life on stage in Shepard's plays is usually a scene of destruction, violence, and death. Furthermore, unlike most of the men in the family plays, the women are often the only ones able to leave the destruction that engulfs Shepard's stage (69).

Also like Mary and Linda, Halie makes three pivotal choices, all before the play even begins, that have driven this family into the antithesis of the Norman Rockwell-like vision of the middle America. The first, contrary to Whiting and Hall's classifications, is that Halie chooses to subjugate her men to serve her own purposes. Moreover, because Shepard begins the play after the family apocalypse has occurred, Halie does not need to be present to be powerful. The mere knowledge that she is near is enough. When she does make an appearance, the audience can feel the influence of her destructive personality that has left this family a mere husk of its former self.

Halie makes quite a show of putting on appearances. Prior to the beginning of the play, Halie wanted to clean up her husband, Dodge, for a "house-social" (Shepard 15). This event caused their middle son Bradley nearly to scalp her husband as he gave his father an unwanted haircut, ordered by Halie. When she breaks out of her public persona, it becomes clear that Halie is the master of this decrepit plantation. When appearances do not live up to her reality, all of her men cower in fear:

> What's this in my house? (*Kicks husks*.) What's all this mess?
>
> (*TILDEN stops husking and stares at her. To DODGE,*)
>
> And you encourage him!
>
> (*DODGE pulls the blanket over himself again*) (28)

Their only hope is to distract her back to her fantasy world, to stave off the oncoming ire. Dodge attempts to do just that as he says, "you're going out in the rain for a little soiree?" (28). Whether the mens' obedience is born out of guilt or fear is not something the audience will learn until Act Three. It does appear, however, that Halie does not do her own dirty work regarding retribution. Rather, she enlists Bradley, and then blames the circumstances on his mental incapacity:

> It's your fault, you know! You're the one that's behind all of this! I suppose you thought it'd be funny! Some joke! Cover the house with corn husks. You better get this cleaned up before Bradley sees it... Bradley's going to be very upset when he sees this. He doesn't like to see the house in disarray. He can't stand it when one thing is out of place. The slightest thing. You know how he gets. (31-32)

Finally, if intimidation does not work, Halie will lean on the family secret to elicit the guilt she needs to get her way. As she exits in Act One, she reminds Dodge to keep a close eye on their eldest son, Tilden, "He never listens to me, Dodge. He's never listened

to me in the past...We don't want to lose him. I couldn't take another loss. Not at this late date" (34).

However, when one of her men rejects her, like when her youngest son Ansel commits the ultimate sin of getting married, thereby putting another woman before his mother, Halie's possessive side will not forgive him. That is until his premature death. After which, Halie reframes her memories of her son so that she remains first in his affections. In Halie's mind, Ansel will see his mistake:

> "Of course, he'd still be alive today if he hadn't married into the Catholics. The mob. How in the world he never opened his eyes to that is beyond me... The wedding was more like a funeral... When he gave her the ring, I knew he was a dead man. I knew it. Ansel could have been a great man. One of the greatest. I only regret that he didn't die in action. It's not fitting for a man like that to die in a motel room. A soldier. He could have won a medal. He could have been decorated for Valor. I've talked to father doing about putting up a plaque for Ansel. He thinks it's a good idea he even recommended to the city council that they put up a statue of Ansel. A big, tall statue with a basketball in one hand and a rifle in the other." (27-28)

Does the audience ever actually discover the truth about Ansel's death? No. All the play will reveal is the truth as Halie sees it because to contradict her is to bring out the dark side of her personality.

Halie's second choice is to replace her husband as a way out of the cage where she spends most of her time locked away upstairs. The cage is, in fact, one of her own making as it is the scene of the crime she committed which has become the family secret. Being the mid-century housewife that she is, she cannot escape entirely, however the play being set in the seventies allows Halie to use her "feminine mystique" to take the occasional furlough from this prison. This requires an unknowing accomplice be revealed to the audience – Father Dewis.

As the play opens, Halie is on her way to meet with Protestant Minister Father Dewis, but in one of her earliest speeches, we are already aware of the cracks in her intended show of Christian piety:

> I don't see why you just don't take a pill. Be done with it once and for all. Put a stop to it… It's not Christian, but it works. It's not necessarily Christian, that is. A pill. We don't know. We're not in a position to answer something like that. There's some things the minister can't even answer. I, personally, can't see anything wrong with it. A pill. Pain is pain. Pure and simple. Suffering is a different matter. That's entirely different. A pill seems as good an answer as any. (Shepard 9)

She is willing to embrace the show of Christian sacrifice, so long as it frames her in the correct light. *She* alone knows suffering; *other people* merely feel pain - and there is a pill for that. Halie goes off to her luncheon with the pastor, dressed from head to toe in clothes of mourning. She has designed her outfit to solicit both attention and sympathy as she goes to campaign for a public tribute, a plaque or statue, to the late Ansel - a soldier who saw no action. Father Dewis displaces the father of Halie's children, Dodge, and it is almost like she were seeking absolution for her crimes by claiming penance through good works of "charity."

By Act Three, the audience has a clear view of both sides of Halie's duplicitous nature. She arrives home the next day having shed her mourning attire for a bright yellow dress and white accessories. Since she did not leave with this outfit, nor has she been home since Act One, the audience is left to assume that the less than honorable Father Dewis has provided her ensemble, perhaps as a reward for her "penance". She enters all smiles and girlish giggles for her paramour, hardly noticing her surroundings or her family, who are either sleeping on the couch or hiding.

This is not the first time Halie has used a man to get away from the unhappiness of her life. Although little backstory is given about the family, we find out that Halie, before her marriage, spent some time with a horse breeder who shared his worldly wisdom and showered her with winnings. As she tells Dodge (while including some carefully constructed barbs at her husband):

> That's right. He knew everything there was to know ... we won bookoos of money that day... everything was dancing with life! Colors. There were all kinds of people from everywhere. Everyone was dressed to the nines…Not they dressed today. People had a sense of style...this was long before I knew you. (12-13)

Swinging from man to man, presumably, was Halie's strategy for success. Eventually, Halie settled down with Dodge and at one time, their farm was quite successful:

> See, we were a well-established family once. Well established. All the boys were grown. The farm was producing enough milk to fill Lake Michigan twice over. Me and Halie here were pointed toward what looked like the middle part of our life. Everything was settled with us. (108)

That, perhaps, was the problem. Halie is more ambitious than being "settled" will allow. Consequently, she looks for other men. However, the pickings are slim in middle American farm country, so she has to go with what's available, no matter how odd or unusual the choice maybe. She will wrap that choice up in whatever fantasy she needs to construct in order to meet her standards of comfort and gentility.

Finally, Halie's third choice, the one that is the impetus of the family secret, is that before the play began Halie had affair which resulted in an illegitimate child. While it is never directly stated, the implication is that she had the child with her eldest, and favorite son, Tilden. This act adds incest to the charge of infidelity and brings an understanding of why she cannot escape. She cannot be the "Domestic Angel" having

committed such sins. She is doomed for the rest of her days to be trapped with her fellow perpetrators because she is not the only one at fault. At the climactic moment of the play Dodge reveals:

> Then Halie got pregnant again. Out the middle a nowhere, she got pregnant. We weren't planning on havin' any more boys. We had enough boys already. In fact, we hadn't been sleepin' in the same bed for about six years… All the other boys I had had the best doctors, the best nurses, everything. This one I let her have by herself. This one hurt real bad. Almost killed her, but she had it anyway. It lived, see. It lived. It wanted to grow up in this family... All our boys knew. Tilden knew… Tilden was the one who knew. Better than any of us... We couldn't let a thing like that continue… Everything was canceled out by this one mistake. This one weakness… I killed it. I drowned it. Just like the runt of a litter. Just drowned it. There was no struggle. No noise. Life just left it. (109-110)

Dodge killed the child, but Halie created it in the first place. Both sons were complicit, in the child's inception and its murder. These are the sins that drive Shepard's dark, haunting look at a middle-American family destroyed by their own decisions, and it all begins with Halie's choice.

If Halie is the propagator of all that is wrong with the family, how can she then speak the truth that this family so desperately needs to hear? The answer is that she cannot. Shepard put these veracities not in the matriarch's mouth, but in that of the new construct - The Outsider, Shelly. Shelly is, in many ways, the voice of the audience in this play and she tries to find out, as she outright asks, "What's happened to this family anyway?" (90).

At first, Shelly's only access to the family is through their grandson, Vince. While analysts have referred to the women of the play as utilitarian, it is a better argument that Vince is the device Shepard uses to get his story told. First, the playwright muddles the

audience's first impression of Vince when no member of the family recognizes him, including his father, Tilden. Then, after half an act on the periphery of the action, Vince abandons Shelly to get his grandfather a bottle of alcohol that the old man has demanded since the beginning of Act Two. Shelley's subsequent appeal to Vince to help her discover what is going on is, therefore, useless.

Shelly then turns to Tilden for answers. She helps Tilden with his newly discovered cache of carrots. Her kindness to him, and her offer to cook and clean the vegetables allows Tilden to be comfortable with her. Her gentleness in allowing Tilden to wear her rabbit fur coat help him recall some events of his past that he evidently has not looked back on in a while:

> I had a car once! I had a white car! I drove. I went everywhere. I went to the mountains. I drove in the snow… (*Still moving, feeling the coat.*) I drove all day long sometimes. Across the desert. Way out across the desert. I drove past tiny towns. Anywhere. Past palm trees. Lightning. Anything. I would drive through it. I would drive through it and I would stop and I would look around and I would see things sometimes. I would see things I wasn't supposed to see. Like deer. Hawks. Owls. I would look them in the eye and they would look back and I could tell I wasn't supposed to be there by the way they looked at me. So I drive on. I would get back in and drive! I love to drive. There was nothing I love more. Nothing I dreamed of was better than driving. I was independent. (75-76)

The interest that Shelly shows in Tilden's memories encourages him to go even further. He begins to speak cryptically of a baby - the heart of the family secret, "We had a baby. Little baby. Could pick it up with one hand. Put it in the other... So small that nobody could find it. Just disappeared. We had no service. I know him. Nobody came" (77).

Dodge quickly intervenes before Tilden's revelation can be fully brought to life; however, the old man is very aware of the details this outsider has discovered. Then, at the top of the Third Act, Shelley exercises the same kindness on Dodge. Knowing he will

feel dehydrated after his night of alcohol withdrawal, she makes him some beef bouillon to drink in the morning. This act does not endear Shelly to Dodge outwardly, but he sees some value in her as he tells her, “You're a funny chicken, you know that? Full of hope. Faith. Faith and hope. You're all alike, you hopers” (85-86). Their conversation goes on to open Dodge up reluctantly about his circumstances. Shelly gently steers him into making another small reveal, this time concerning Halie as Shelly describes a picture she has seen:

> SHELLY: There's a baby. A baby in a woman's arms. The same woman with the red hair. She looks lost standing out there. She doesn't know how she got there.
>
> DODGE: She knows! I told her a hundred times it wasn't going to be the city! I gave her plenty of warning. (90)

With this inadvertent revelation, Dodge realizes he has said too much and will now be in trouble with Halie. It is at this moment, of course, Halie returns and Dodge turns to Shelly for protection, “Sit down! Sit back down!... Don't leave me alone now! Promise me? Don't go off and leave me alone. I need somebody here with me. Tilden's gone now and I need someone. Don't leave me! Promise!” (92).

It is hard to imagine why scholars refer to the women of the play as absent after sitting through Act Three. For fifteen pages, the women of the play own the stage in a feminine combat between a young usurper and the aging monarch. When Halie wrongly determines that this strange young woman in her parlor is nothing she cannot handle, she returns to her paramour and tries to gloss over the unpleasantness of the situation. She re-engages the reverend in a discussion of her grand plans for Ansel. However, the dent Shelly has put in Halie's armor, merely by being there, leaves the queen vulnerable. First, Bradley challenges Halie’s version of events when he corrects her in front of the

Reverend that Saint Ansel never played basketball. Halie shuts Bradley down and begins a beautifully venom-laced sermon on the sin and barbarity surrounding the sport. Each new premise containing a thinly veiled barb directed at Shelley:

> Of course, now it is they play a different brand of basketball. More vicious... much, much more vicious. They smash into each other. They knock each other's teeth out. There's blood all over the court... They don't train like they used to. They allow themselves to run amok. Drugs and women. Women mostly. Girls. Sad, pathetic little skinny girls. It's just a reflection of the times, don't you think, father? An indication of where we stand. (98)

Her homily climaxes when Halie turns her attention to Dodge, covertly placing the blame of their situation squarely on his shoulders, while subversively reminding him of what he stands to lose if he reveals the family secret, “we can't not believe in something. We can't stop believing. We end up dying if we stop. Just end up dead” (99).

It is at this moment where Shelly chooses to stand up and make her presence felt. She demands not only to be recognized but also to get an answer to the audience's question from the moment the lights came up in Act One. “What’s happened to this family anyway?” (900. As she pushes to find her answers, Halie throws everything she can to get in Shelley's way from a lack of acknowledgment of Vince to turning her attention away to Tilden. Shelly, though, will not stand for it, “I am here! I. I am breathing. I am speaking. I am alive! I exist. DO YOU SEE ME?” (102). Even Bradley attempts to intimidate Shelley off her course but misses and lands on Halie’s bad side when she learns how he metaphorically assaulted Shelly by sticking his fingers in her mouth. As a result, Bradley is forced to run for cover behind his mother's skirts:

> I never did anything, mom! I never touched her! She propositioned me! And I turned her down. I turned her down flat! She is. You know that Mom. (*SHELLY suddenly grabs her coat off the wooden leg and takes*

> *both the leg and cut down stage away from BRADLEY.*) Mom! She's got my leg! She's taking my leg! I never did anything to her! She's a devil, Mom. How did she get in our house? (103-104).

Halie's carefully constructed illusion gets away from her in the chaos created by the Outsider, encouraged by her husband, and exacerbated by her infantilized son screaming for his leg. When Halie turns for help from her paramour, he attempts to counsel Shelly but is shoved aside as the young visitor realizes exactly where her agency lies with this family, "That's right. Bradley's right…. I know you've got a secret. You all got a secret. It's so secret, in fact, you're all convinced it never happened" (106-107). This understanding both shuts down the "good" Reverend and emboldens the actual father, Dodge, to reveal the family secret finally. Halie threatens, cajoles, and finally tries to escape from the room. Halie flails after the revelation to reestablish her assumed persona by re-engaging her Ansel mythology and appealing to her aged knight in shining armor. These revelations are too much for the clergyman, however, and he abandons Halie leaving her without the help of any of her men.

Vince returns after the reveal of the family secret. He drunkenly "births" his way through the screen door and barrels into the stories resolution. His action creates an almost coda-like conclusion where he inherits everything, thereby ensuring the newfound rebirth of the farm will be likewise doomed. Shepard's postmodern sensibilities of the inevitable failure of life are expressed with enough ambiguity to allow the literati to posit some lofty theories such as Vince actually is the buried child. In fact, Vince is merely a device to insert Shelley among the family, and then a way to wrap up the narrative. Having finally learned the truth for both herself and the audience, Shelly is then able to disentangle herself from Vince and the family. She, like Biff, might be able to find some

happiness in the world having learned the lessons of the cautionary tale from which she just escaped.

Chapter V.

Violet Weston in *August: Osage County*

The American family drama all but disappears from Broadway stages at the end of the twentieth century in favor of issue plays like *Angels in America* or European works like *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Then in 2007, Tracey Letts debuts his play *August: Osage County*, first at the Steppenwolf Theater in Chicago where both he and Sam Shepard are members, then on Broadway where it would go on to win a number of awards including the Tony Award for best play as well as the Pulitzer Prize. Like Eugene O'Neill before him, Letts found his subject in his own family history. Based on the suicide of Letts' grandfather and his grandmother's resulting spiral into drug use, Letts spoke about his mother's reaction to the play:

> After I gave my mom the play to read, her first comment was, "You've been very kind to my mother." Which is true. Had I portrayed my grandmother as accurately horrible as she could be, it would be too tough to take (Witchell Online)

While not losing sight of what has come before in the genre, Letts does revamp his entry for a twenty-first-century audience. The piece has been referred to as, "the Big American Play"' and one with, "big sloppy American feelings and history in it" (Witchell Online). Instead of a small cast of five with a single through-line, he writes an ensemble piece for thirteen actors with multiple storylines that gives the play a layered depth as it develops through multiple character's eyes. The pace of the play, with numerous short

scenes, is much faster in order to accommodate all of the storylines, and, unlike the previous plays, includes a significant amount of humor. When asked about repeated comparisons between his play and *Long Day's Journey into Night* Letts responded:

> I'm not fit to lash Eugene O'Neill's shoelaces… At the same time, if you told me you have to go watch Long Day's Journey Into Night or August, Osage County, I'm going to go see August, Osage County. Because there are no laughs in Long Day's Journey Into Night – And I like a few laughs! The truth is, if you're not entertaining, what the hell's the point. (Hoby Online)

He does maintain Shepard's construct of three generations; however, he also includes aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws, and a fiancé.

Like those before him, Letts advances the generational timeline as well. The parents, both the primary set, Violet and Beverly, and the secondary, Maddie Fae and Charles (Violet's sister and brother-in-law) are, like Tilden and Bradley, from the silent generation with the independent "nose to the grindstone" stoicism that comes with it. The children, Barbara, Ivy, and Karen, their significant others: Bill (Barbara's husband) Steve (Karen's fiancé), and cousin Little Charles are, like Shelly and Vince, Baby Boomers with a larger worldview than their parents. The outsider, new housekeeper Johanna, is a member of Generation X and spends most of her time observing the family's world without making much contribution to it, a characterization typical of her peer group. Finally, the granddaughter, Barbara's daughter Jean, is a Millennial, easily bored and desperate for the family to pay attention to her.

As in other plays, Letts keeps the children relatively unsuccessful and unsatisfied with their lives, and he has one parent choosing suicide. Also like the fog surrounding the Tyrone's house, the apartment buildings flanking the Loman home, and the corn fields caging in Dodge and Halie's farm, the playwright gives the same air of stifling

confinement to the Weston house. The residents have sealed all the windows shut with tape so they cannot perceive the difference between night and day.

It would appear, at first, that Letts goes out of his way to write a mirror reflection of gender roles in his contribution to the genre. The husband Beverly, whose very name is feminine, spends his time isolated in the study where he mourns the loss of his talent and his one true brush with success, his published book of poems, Meadowlark. Although he maintains the family finances, he is marginalized from doing much of anything else as punishment for his role in the family secret. His sentence includes living with Violet's more dominant personality who Charles Isherwood describes in his review as, "an impressive new contender… in the tormenting-female sweepstakes of the American theater" (Online).

Violet, hardly resembles the small velvety flower she is named for. As her brother-in-law Charles says, "No one ever called her 'Shrinking Violet' –" (18). She commands the house and everyone in it complies, if they know what's good for them. If they don't agree with Violet, they shouldn't be there and as the play begins, Beverly and Violet have been alone for a good while now. Her primary concern, like that of James and Willy, is money, though she makes no effort to earn it, and her own comfor,. Getting the cash from the safety deposit box is the first thing she thinks of when Beverly dissapears. Elizabeth Fifer agrees when she writes:

> The past's hold on the present dictates the parents' fierce grasping for money and security, which erodes their emotional ties to their children. Tyrone and Violet share memories of brutal childhoods to let their children know they have had it easy. (Fifer 193)

Violet is constantly pushing her children to behave the way she wants and when they fail, she insults them in a manner so vicious that E. Teresa Choate, in her broadway review

noted, “The pill-addicted, viper-tongued matriarch Violet Weston caused not only characters, but also audience members, to flinch in self-defense” (106). Like Dodge, she has allowed everything around her to whither and die as she has self-indulgently given up hope for anything to change. As Fifer observes:

> In the Westons’ home, “all structural care ceased” around 1972 (9). The chandelier is described as “tatty,” the front lawn “strewn with dead grass,” the windows covered with “cheap plastic shades” that are taped shut to blot out light (9–10). Violet refers to her furniture as “this old shit” (92). They show little pride in surroundings or possessions. At the center of both families lies an absence of home. (Fifer 192)

However, upon closer examination, the thesis still holds that Violet’s choices have landed the Westons where they are, despite the family best efforts to isolate her in the house. She is the voice that reveals the truth about the family’s circumstances Also, the insight she gives her daughters, unpleasant as it is, allows them to make choices about their futures, both good and bad.

Her first choice was that she married Beverly. Violet’s sister, Mattie Fae and her husband, Charles, reveal that as a young woman, Violet was not self-assured. As a result, Her introduction to her future husband was a set up by her little sister:

> MATTIE FAE [*to IVY*]: No, I always liked your father, you know that. I introduced Vi and Bev, for God’s sake.
>
> CHARLIE: You did not introduce them.
>
> MATTIE FAE: The hell I didn’t.
>
> CHARLIE: You had a date with him and stood him up and sent your sister instead.
>
> MATTIE FAE: *That’s an introduction.* That’s what an introduction is. (Letts 18)

Violet apparently married her sister's cast-off, because she was not confident enough to get anyone else. The match could not be more uneven. Beverly Weston was a quiet, introspective man, as Violet tells her daughters, "What I first fell in love with… was his mystery. I thought it was sexy as hell. You knew he was the smartest one in the room, knew if he'd just say something… knock you out. But he'd just stand there, little smile on his face… not say a word" (36)

So the marriage is composed of a wife who cannot tell what her husband is thinking and a husband who doesn't communicate much. While the mystery of the man might have been enticing going into their vows, it could not sustain them. The communication breakdown results in the shattered marriage revealed in the prologue. Rather than solve their problems by talking, both parties have drowned their problems in pills, for Violet, and alcohol, for Beverly.

Violet's second choice is that even though she knows the family secret, she chooses never to say anything about it. Shortly after publishing *Meadowlark*, Beverly and Mattie Fae had an affair, the result of which is Mattie Fae's son Little Charles. It never suited Violet to upset the status quo until the Third Act of the play where she bluntly reveals to Ivy and Barbara:

> VIOLET: Little Charles and you are brother and sister. I know that.
>
> BARBARA: Oh…Mom.
>
> IVY: What? *No*, listen to me, Little Charles –
>
> VIOLET: I've always known that. I told you, no one slips anything by me… I knew the whole time Bev and Mattie Fae were carrying on. Charlie shoulda known too, if he wasn't smoking all that grass… Your father tore himself up over it, for thirty-something years, but Beverly wouldn't have been Beverly if he didn't have plenty to brood about…Oh, sure. I never

> told them I knew. But your father knew. He knew I knew. He always knew I knew. But we never talked about it. I chose the higher ground (133-135)

Violet's high road leads to Ivy's heartbreak. As the two children who remained to care for their aging parents, Ivy and Little Charles took refuge from the verbal abuse of their respective mothers in each other. Little Charles is the only person Ivy believes can support her during a cancer scare, and that care has developed into a relationship:

> IVY: I'm almost forty-five, Karen, I put those thoughts behind me a long time ago. Anyway, I had a hysterectomy year before last…I didn't tell anyone except Charles. That's where it started between him and me…This isn't whimsy. This isn't fleeting. This is unlike anything else I've felt, for anybody. Charles and I have something rare, and extraordinary, something very few people ever have.
>
> KAREN: What's that?
>
> IVY: Understanding. (102-103)

With her mother's belated revelation, a relationship between Ivy and Little Charles, the only couple in the play who might have a chance at healthy partnership, is no longer possible. Her mother's reason for finally making the revelation? "Never know when someone might need a kidney" (188)

Violets third choice is to not forgive her husband for the affair. She chooses instead to cope with his betrayal by self-medicating using cigarettes, alchol and pills. Beverly himself recognizes this behavior and freely comments on it when hiring a new housekeeper:

> My wife takes pills, sometimes a great many. And the effect… among other things, her equilibrium. Fortunately, the pills she takes eliminate the need for equilibrium. So she falls when she rambles… but she doesn't ramble much. My wife takes pills and I drink. That's the bargain we've struck… one of the bargains, just one paragraph of our marriage

> contract… cruel covenant… As to whether she takes pills because I drink…I learned long ago not to speak for my wife. (Letts 11)

However, he will not take responsibility for these behaviors publically, "The reasons why we partake are inconsequential" (11).

Elizabet Fifer makes the following observations about this strategy:

> Violet… takes … "little blue babies," prescribed for her by a number of physicians (16). [She] fiercely oppose anyone who tries to take [her] drugs away...Violet warns, "Try to get 'em away from me and I'll eat you alive" (96). [She] use a variety of doctors to get [her] supply of medication. [She] appears onstage in a drugged haze… Violet combative, slurring her words. [Fifer 186]

The taking of the pills results in an oversensitivity to light. Violet's solution to this problem: close all of the blinds and tape all of the windows shut. The effect of this action is the house becomes a prison where light, symbolic of truth and redemption, is kept away and the prisoner, Beverly, is locked inside. His only chance of reprieve is death and Violet probably won't forgive him even then.

Violet also uses her words to punish Beverly, as in her "Madwomen in the attic" -like first entrance:

> VIOLET (*Still to Johanna*): You're the house now, I'm sorry, I…I took some medicine for my mussss…muscular.
> BEVERLY: Why don't you go back to bed, sweetheart?
> VIOLET: Why don't you go fuck a fucking sow's ass?
> BEVERLY: All right. (15)

Her anger continues after his suicide, barreling over everyone else who enters the house:

> Violet screams where Mary grieves, and her anger is always directed outward, making her more selfish, bitter, insensitive, and openly hostile to her family. She has suffered like Mary, and like her has become critical and unforgiving…While Beverly does not openly criticize Violet, his unanswered call speaks to her lack of empathy and makes her a less

> appealing victim. Did she know his call was a cry for help? Violet suffers out loud, with curses and insults, hurting others. (Fifer 188)

Having the man she chose betray her, and holding that betrayal over her husband's head likely had a large part in driving all but the weakest members of her family away. And while Beverly's suicide is the action that brings them all back, Violet's inability to be left alone, given her addiction, is reason they become tethered to the house. And like each of the mothers in the genre before her, Violet will lay down a truth that she strongly believes her children need to hear.

When asked to define the generational conflict in August: Osage County, the playwright answered, "Those Who Have Nothing have willed their pride and guilt to Those Who Have Wanted for Nothing" ("Ensemble member Tracy Letts on writing *August: Osage County*" Online). This statement is the truth that Violet imparts to her daughters, whether they want to hear it or not. She resents the fact that all that she and her husband have struggled to obtain, her daughters have taken for granted as their birthright. As she pronounces to her children at the dinner following the funeral:

> What do you know about hard times?...None of you know, 'cept this woman right here [Mattie Fae] and that man we buried today! Sweet girl, sweet Barbara, my heart breaks for every time you felt pain. I wish I coulda shielded you from it. But if you think for a solitary second you can fathom the pain that man endured in his natural life, you got another thing coming…we lived too hard, and rose too high. We sacrificed everything and we did it all for you. Your father and I were the first in our families to finish high school and he wound up an award-winning poet. You girls, given a college education, taken for granted no doubt, and where'd you wind up?...Jesus, you worked as hard as us, you'd all be president. You never had real problems so you got to make all your problems yourselves. (94-95)

At the end of the play, when Barbara holds her mother accountable for her father's death, Violet reminds her that after all their parent's hard work to provide for their family, the girls just took what they wanted and then walked away:

> You better understand this, you smug little ingrate, there is at least one reason Beverly killed himself and that's *you*. Think there's any way he would have done what he did if you were still here? No, just him and me, here in this house, in the dark, abandoned, wasted lifetimes devoted to your care and comfort. So stick that knife of judgment in me, go ahead, but make no mistake, his blood is just as much on your hands as it is on mine. (136).

The wisdom that Violet imparts is both harsh and in some ways selfish. However, her words make an impression on each of the daughters that, for better or for worse, affect the course their lives will take.

The youngest, Karen, is most like her father. She is, "a self-absorbed nincompoop who can bore your ear off, but the quiet way she endures her mother's obvious favouritism towards Ivy and Barb establishes a person as pitiable as she is unbearable" (Roby Online). She will follow her mother's example and excuse the faults of her fiancee, specifically the fact that he attempted to sleep with Barbara's 15-year-old daughter, as it doesn't suit her circumstances to acknowledge the revulsion of it:

> I'm not defending him, He's not perfect. Just like all the rest of us, down here in the muck. I've done some things I'm not proud of. Things you'll never know about. Know what? I may need to do some things I'm not proud of *again*. 'Cause sometimes life puts you in a corner that way. And I am a human being after all.Anyway you have your own hash to settle. Before you start making speeches to the rest of us. (123)

Karen puts the blame, not on fiancee Steve or even herself. Rather she blames the fact that life is hard, which is a regularly used strategy for Violet as well. Karen returns to her life in Miami with this knowledge of this transgression festering beneath the surface of

her marriage. It is unlikely that the "higher ground" (135) will serve Karen any better than it did Violet.

Eldest daughter Barbara must be careful to control the tendencies that she has inherited from Violet. Like her mother, her husband has had an affair with a younger woman. Unlike Violet, however, Barbara has ended her marriage as a result. Also like her mother, she has a sharp tongue, which has done her marriage no favors:

> BILL: What are you attacking me for? I haven't done anything.
>
> BARBARA: I'm sure that's what you tell *Sissy*, too, so she can comfort you, reassure you, "No Billy, you haven't done anything."
>
> BILL: What does that have to do – why are you bringing that up?... And her name is Cindy.
>
> BARBARA: I know her stupid name. At least do me the courtesy of recognizing when I'm demeaning you.
>
> BILL: Violet really has a way of putting you in attack mode, you know it?
>
> BARBARA: She doesn't have anything to do with it.
>
> BILL: Don't you believe it. You feel such rage for her that you can't help dishing it in my direction. (46-47)

Despite Barbara's enormous dislike for Violet, she is her mother's favorite, likely because they are so much alike. The comparison is most apparent when Barbara and Bill catch Steve with Jean, and her daughter plays the situation off as if it were nothing:

> JEAN: Look at you two, you're both so ridiculous. It's no big deal, nothing happened.
>
> BILL: We're concerned about you.
>
> JEAN: No you're not. You just want to know who to punish…You can't tell the difference between the good guys and the bad guys, so you want me to sort it all out for you… he didn't do anything! Even if he did, what's the big deal?

BILL: The big deal, Jean, is that you're fourteen years old.

JEAN: Which is only a few years younger than you like ‘em.

(*Barbara slaps Jean; Jean bursts into tears*)

I hate you!

BARBARA: Yeah, I hate you too, you little freak! (120)

Like her mother Barbara becomes both physically and verbally abusive when she fails to get control of the situation. At the end of the play, Barbara is the only daughter remaining with Violet, and it seems the two women will spend their lifetime locked in battle. However, the revelation that Violet could have prevented her father’s death, and her mother’s subsequent efforts to place the blame on Barbara serve as a mirror through which she can see what she is becoming. As a result Barbara, like Biff Loman, might learn not to follow her mother’s example and find some joy and happiness in her life.

Violet’s truth has the opposite effect on her middle daughter than what she had intended. For Ivy, escape was always the plan as she looked to travel to New York with Little Charles. She believed that she had done her time looking after her parents, and she would no longer be responsible for their care and the abuse that went with it as a consequence. When Violet makes the backhanded disclosure about Little Charles’ parentage, Ivy must choose whether she will allow it to shatter her dreams or if she, like her mother, will close her eyes to the given circumstances and put her happiness above all else:

IVY: Why did you tell me? Why in God’s name did you tell me this?
VIOLET: Hey, what do you care?
IVY: You’re monsters…Picking at the bones of the rest of us…
BARBARA: Ivy, listen
IVY: Leave me alone…I won’t let you do this to me… I won’t let you change my story.(134)

Ivy then decides to go with denial and she and Little Charles head off to find their long-sought, albeit incestuous, happily ever after.

Tracy Letts flips the gender pattern, expands the cast size, and speeds up the tempo to accommodate a twenty first century attention span in his contribution to the American Family Drama. He presents the audience with Violet, a mother figure described as a, "cancer-ridden, drug-addled, venom-spewing matriarch… a 'what will she say next?' monster whose gleeful evisceration of her nearest and dearest" leaves her family more broken then when they arrived (Isherwood Online). However, he still puts the activating choices in her hands and the thematic truth in her mouth. Rather than powerful because of her pain and rage, her agency comes from being a mother.

Chapter VI.

Conclusion

Television still holds the family in reverence. In a TV family drama, a member of the family often finds themself in difficulty. Outside forces conspire against them or an element of their own nature works against them one too many times. The family unit rallies around them and, shoulder to shoulder, whatever the trouble is, they best it. The family then returns to a stasis of contentment and happiness. In a theatrical family drama, that would never happen.

Television is in our homes and always on. As a result, we could not tolerate a level of drama without a happy conclusion on such a perpetual basis. However, theater is an event, a special occasion without the interference of modern media, when you turn off your cell phone and allow yourself to experience whatever is happening onstage in person. There is no glass separating you from the action and you breathe the same air as the characters onstage. You sit in silence in the dark, uninterrupted by commercials as we, the collective audience, indulge our voyeuristic tendencies. The emotional power comes because quality drama is driven by conflict and the worst conflicts happen between people joined not by choice, but by blood. E. Theresa Choate concurs when she says:

> What all of these plays have in common… is that they are about family—the conflicts that occur between husbands and wives, between parents and children, among siblings, and the devastation that only family members can visit on one another. It is all there and more—a roller-coaster ride of the familiar that suddenly careens into the unexpected, the hysterical, or the horrifying… because family is the leitmotif of American theatre. (106)

Theater will explore subjects that would rarely, if ever, be spoken of on network television: extended suicide, filicide, incest, etc. Moreover, they do it to each other with no possible rescue from the outside world or a consolidated family unit. Consequently, these stories provoke us to ask the question, "What has happened to this family?"

The answer lies in the common elements that all American Family dramas have. There is a family secret of which no one speaks. The family returns to the family home which usually has some symbolic element that makes it feel prison-like. E. Theresa Choate observes that each play:

> is about truth and lies—the lies we tell ourselves, and the lies we tell each other to survive the cruelty of the truth about ourselves and about those we are supposed to love no matter what, our family. (105)

Elizabeth Fifer notices that:

> Each play heralds the passing of the last generation, seen with rueful affection and a distinct lack of respect by the present one. The patriarchs and matriarchs have let their homes deteriorate along with their lives" (192) and "the patriarchs fail themselves and their families, while thinking that their families fail them. They are absent, whether through work or drink" (189).

However, as I have argued here, the mother makes the choices that are the basis for the family's crucible in the first place.

The choices make these women who they are. They, along with the truths they tell, are what make these women powerful characters. Now that power might manifest

itself differently from mother to mother. It could be a passive power, like Mary Tyrone or Linda Loman. It could be passive-aggressive like Halie or it could be outright aggressive, like Violet Weston. Regardless, the truths that they deliver are harsh realities that the children must hear if they hope to escape their parental prison.

So Mary Tyrone can ascend the stairs into her drug-induced fog rather than face the disappointments her life choices have brought her. Linda Loman must endure the "freedom" her husband's suicide provides because she chose to support his flawed philosophy of life. Halie will remain trapped surrounded by decaying corn because she put her happiness and physical satisfaction before the needs of her family and then held them accountable for it. Violet will remain alone and indignant because none of her daughters will thank her for their upbringing, even though she feels she is due. And these are not the only mothers out there. Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, August Wilson's *Fences*, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Rasin in the Sun* and many others dramatize the power of the mother. And as a result of these women, Biff Loman might find and follow his passion in both hard work and a women her respects. Edmund Tyrone may survive because his brother Jamie looked out for him. Ivy might find her happily ever after living in New York with her half-brother/cousin Little Charles. All because of their mother's revealed what would happen if they followed in her example.

These women do not need be present to be powerful – whether they are upstairs, or in town, or offstage in the other room. These mothers meddle. These mothers interfere. These mothers judge. How can that be labelled weak or marginal? The act of being a mother is in itself powerful, and, in these plays, with that power comes a natural agency.

Mothers bring us into the world, and, in the American Family Drama, if you do not listen to her, she will take you out.

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