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When Sorrows Come: Death in the Contemporary American Drama

A Thesis Presented

by

Becky Leigh Goldberg

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Dramaturgy

Stony Brook University

December 2011

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2011

Stony Brook University

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This paper is a study of Contemporary American Family Drama of the past ten years. In looking at *Proof* by David Auburn, *Rabbit Hole* by David Lindsay-Abaire, *August: Osage County* by Tracy Letts, and *Next to Normal* by Brian Yorkey (music by Tom Kitt), and holding them in reference to Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, this paper explores the death that occurs before the action in each play, and how the women of the plays cope with the loss. This paper argues that the contemporary women, unlike their literary ancestor Mary Tyrone, have the means to handle their situations and experience the anagnorisis or self-discovery that will open up the path to healing. Unlike Mary, these women realize that hiding behind vice and idealism does nothing but prevent them from escaping the endless grief that comes with losing a loved one. This paper first explores the history of death in drama, with regard to the audience's interaction with the material, then moves on to discuss both the daughters of the dead parents and the mothers of the dead children.

Dedication Page

Dedicated with everything I have to Antonio J. Ronga.
In so many ways, this is for and because of you.

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Acknowledgments

I am lucky to have so many people to thank and acknowledge for contributing to the creation of this thesis. I would like to express my gratitude to John Lutterbie, for shaking his head “no” when my ideas were all over the place, and for his honest and critical support in getting these ideas out of my head and onto the page.

I want to thank, with all of my heart, the incredible cast and collaborators of my MFA Project, “Like a Brick in Your Pocket.” In addition to your drive and undeniable talent, you gave me the chance to see all of the ideas and theory on a stage, and helped me further understand what it truly was I wanted to say. Thanks to Dee Duygu Baydur, Gareth Burghes, Eileen Casterline, Rachael Doukas, Lukas Kürten, Liz Sager, Susie Suh, Erin Treat, Nikki Tschinkel, Molly Walsh Warren, Cate Cammarata, Christina Lydy-Mills, Nancee Moes, and Michael and Sandy Ronga. A special thanks to my wonderful family, who gave me the motivation and encouragement to keep going and going. Also, a thank you to my Christopher, without your support, and the obscene number of dishes you’ve done in the past few months, I don’t think this would be what it is today.

I would also like to acknowledge the following people for laying the bricks in the path to where I am: Larry Carr, Tom Olsen, Steve Marsh, Michael Zelenak, and The Cry Havoc Company.

Chapter 1

When Sorrows Come: Death in the Contemporary American Drama

Grief can awaken us to new values and new and deeper appreciations. Grief can cause us to reprioritize things in our lives, to recognize what's really important and put it first. Grief can heighten our gratitude as we cease taking the gifts life bestows on us for granted. Grief can give us the wisdom of being with death. Grief can make death the companion on our left who guides us and gives us advice. None of this growth makes the loss good and worthwhile, but it is the good that comes out of the bad.

- Roger Bertschausen

Four times in the past ten years, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama was awarded to plays that portray distinctly American families in a state of emotional dysfunction that has been triggered by a death. The family in crisis has permeated every genre of theatre and is of interest and discovery for contemporary playwrights. *Proof* by David Auburn, *Rabbit Hole* by David Lindsay-Abaire, *August: Osage County* by Tracy Letts, and *Next to Normal* by Brian Yorkey (music by Tom Kitt), are plays that reveal the inner workings of families that are struggling with both their inherent structure and their identity after experiencing a major loss. While the connective topic of these pieces is not unprecedented, the manner in which the playwrights handle the situations, specifically those of the women in the plays, has evolved from what it was in their thematic predecessors. Despite the fact that the plays of O'Neill, Miller, and Williams, whose works have become an iconic part of the American canon, handle some of the same subject matter as these contemporary plays, the characters in the older pieces do not reach the level of self-realization that the contemporary ones do.

The American obsession with the domestic tragedy is not one that surfaced only in a post 9/11 world. Every decade in our history boasts plays that focus on the topic of the dysfunctional family, many of them circling around a death that has occurred. From

O'Neill in the early 1900s to Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams in the 1940s and 50s, and all the way to Wendy Wasserstein, August Wilson, and Marsha Norman, the family has remained a strong force in the world of the theatre. Exploring the dysfunction of the American family has become a coping method for the American audience: something with which they can relate and understand, but don't necessarily have to fully immerse themselves in. Aesthetic distance allows an audience the freedom of only getting involved as much as they feel they are capable of, and because of this, the dysfunctional family drama is something that will continue to draw in audiences, no matter what decade. In his book *Get the Guests*, Walter A. Davis explores the connection that an audience might have in seeing a representation of themselves on stage. Despite the fact that the issues addressed in a play may not be an exact depiction of the problems in someone's life, Davis argues that showing conflict on stage almost forces a connection between the audience and the characters:

Drama...creates a unique public sphere in which an audience gathers to hear, witness, and suggest the public airing of secrets—about themselves. Implicit in every drama, by reason of its form and the concreteness of the experience it represents, are the conditions of a group psychology in which the audience is exposed and put on trial. When that process works, the audience finds itself in a mousetrap in which the supposedly “pathological” characters on the stage reveal, even as they undergo, the conflicts which the audience wants to keep hidden from itself. Theatre is dangerous because it publicly stages the truths about society which that society wants to conceal.

(Davis 9)

The danger that Davis speaks of here, while relevant, is far more benign to the audience than if they were to take on the presented challenges themselves. While theatre may be dangerous, and quite likely cause some sort of emotional strife in the audience, it also

promotes a poignant understanding between the characters and the spectators. When an emotional release or self-discovery is achieved on stage, it aids in allowing the audience to act as a mirror to the characters, and discover the reprieve right along with them. In an exploration of catharsis in psychodrama, David A. Garrick discusses the struggle to overcome an emotional barrier and the way in which the audience and the characters in the play take this journey together:

In a cathartic performance of theatrical drama, both character and spectator may be simultaneously aware that a major emotional barrier of some kind stands in the way of the character's relational goal—and both may feel suspense about whether the barrier can be overcome. Until this barrier is definitively overcome, the character cannot finish her or his emotional business and complete the relational change. When suspense is created by the character's confrontation with a barrier to the fulfillment of the character's goal, it increases the spectators' yearning for the character's fulfillment. Furthermore, the presence of a barrier can suggest to dramatists, directors, actors and other theatre practitioners a specific "cathartic moment" at which the spectators may be especially moved—namely, the moment when the barrier is overcome. (Garrick 119)

This relationship between the audience and the characters is strong in contemporary theatre, but in the four plays that will be explored in this paper, the concept of catharsis does not quite satisfy. *Proof*, *August: Osage County*, *Rabbit Hole*, and *Next to Normal* are not traditional tragedies, and hence do not end with catharsis, but with another concept that Aristotle mentions in his *Poetics*. The concept of anagnorisis is defined in the *Poetics* as a "recognition," or "a shift from ignorance to awareness...of people who have previously been in a clearly marked state of happiness or unhappiness" (Aristotle 36) The critical discoveries that the characters in these four plays make provide for an audience a similar release as catharsis. In looking at the transition from O'Neill to the contemporary

drama, it can be assumed that audiences need a sense of emotional release at the end of a play, and since these plays do not fall into the category of traditional tragedy, anagnorisis and the self-discovery or recognition does just that.

In the time of O'Neill and Miller, audiences were more receptive to a lack of catharsis than they are now; outlook was generally bleak as after effects of a depression and a war were waning. The families portrayed in the drama of this day were lost and stagnant, unable to find their way out of a maze of hopelessness. In a post 9/11 world, however, hope is something an audience needs; they crave the knowledge that there is some sort of escape from a downward spiral. In addition to this being an obvious after-effect of 9/11, the desire for closure may also be attributed to the one-hour television drama. Viewers turn on a show at eight o'clock and expect catharsis by nine. Audiences of the 1940s-50s did not have the access to television that we do today, and because of this, their attention spans and emotional reactions were more receptive of theatrical convention than people are today.

Eugene O'Neill, arguably the father of the contemporary American family drama, conceived raw and honest characters, each of whom struggled with surviving in a world where everything seemed to have gone wrong. In his autobiographical work, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, O'Neill confronts the audience with four characters that have lost any connection to each other because they are all so overwhelmed with their own physical and psychological ailments. A mother who is addicted to morphine, an alcoholic father and son, and another son slowly dying from tuberculosis, are facts that none of the family will outwardly recognize. Each of character is so caught up in their own issues and their poor coping methods further remove them from each other and eliminate any ability to solve

their problems. “The Tyrones’ nostalgically deny their complicity in the dysfunction by believing it can be traced to a static cause—the problem individual... their focus on Mary’s addiction is a constitutive part of the family’s dysfunctional relationship. The family “scapegoat” becomes the site that fuels the family’s collective denial of its dysfunction” (Cline 21). The isolation and self-concern here, as well as the relinquishing of blame onto Mary prevents her from doing anything that will allow her to achieve anagnorisis or catharsis and break away from her destructive situation. In his book, *Eugene O’Neill’s America*, John Patrick Diggins explores O’Neill’s plays and how they function as a strong juxtaposition to major aspects of American culture and society. In his introduction, Diggins talks about O’Neill’s desire to “reveal to [ourselves] who we are,” and how this happens (or doesn’t) in many of O’Neill’s works:

When O’Neill wrote his more mature scripts, many of his characters remain inert, passive, incapable of changing and opening up to experience. As we follow them on the stage, we know what Nietzsche meant when he said that we are “strangers to ourselves.” If O’Neill aimed to give us “a better understanding of ourselves,” it seemed that he wanted to show Americans how tempting it was to flee from one’s self rather than face the challenge of self-realization. (Diggins 2)

Mary Tyrone is led into this temptation, as it is easier for her to cope using vice and blissful ignorance, than to actually handle her life. She does whatever is within her means to remain a stranger to herself and hide from her problems, while the women presented in the plays of the last decade have found a way to face the fear of their demons and thus attain a state of anagnorisis. These characters are by no means alleviated of the emotional distress that their loss has imbued upon them, but they are much better equipped to move forward in life. It is the realization of the fact that they have to wake up each day and

continue living that allows these contemporary female characters to begin the healing process. Unlike their literary ancestor, this next generation of women is able to open up to the experience that Diggins talks about, and even though their situation is unchanged, their ability and desire to reach for something beyond their sadness is what allows them to transcend the void of losing a loved one.

For these reasons, namely the vast contrast in how the characters end up in both O'Neill's plays and the plays of Auburn, Abaie, Letts, and Yorkey, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, and specifically the character of Mary Tyrone, seems the best model for contrast. While a direct comparison does not serve to further the argument that characters in the contemporary play are better suited to escape their respective situations, using *Long Day's Journey* as a point of reference will highlight the growth and inner strength of the characters in the plays of the last decade. The stagnant nature of the characters in O'Neill's play serves as an established point of comparison for the plays of the 21st century. While Miller's and Williams' plays also depict characters in a similar psychological state, the figures in *Long Day's Journey* have become quintessential characters in this genre of theatre and consequently are the strongest reference points in considering the contemporary plays.

Proof, *Rabbit Hole*, *August: Osage County*, and *Next to Normal*, all contain female characters that go beyond the passivity that Diggins describes, and are able to connect to something enabling them to break away from the repetitive depression of their situations. These characters achieve their own type of anagnorisis: one that is then bestowed upon the contemporary American audience. In contrast, the search for emotional release and self-discovery proves much more difficult in the plays of the

previous generation because the characters on stage never reach that point. The audience ends up stuck in the dark maze of Mary Tyrone's and because the character herself never finds a way out, the audience cannot do so either.

The focus on death in the American family drama stems from Aristotle's belief that tragedy acts as the purest art form in the theatre. The evolution from the classical tragedy to the modern one has furthered this idea and as such, the contemporary tragedy acts as the truest representation of life on stage. Our lives are, in essence, tragedies, and drama provides a mirror for the audience to peer into. In making the transition from Oedipus to Willie Loman, tragic drama is now capable of forging a connection with almost anyone, and not just the high figures in society. The tragic hero has come down to a common level, and an audience will always find something to relate to in the honest portrayal of a family that is not so different than their own. Playwrights use death in drama in order to reach the dark depths of their audience's emotions. The concept of loss brings out an intense visceral reaction in a spectator, as it is something we have all experienced and something that we have all struggled to get past.

In all of these plays, both contemporary and not, the characters have found some means of dealing with the respective losses they've had. Not unlike reality, some of the methods prove much healthier than the rest. O'Neill's character turns to substance abuse and at times religion, in order to cope; and the next generation of characters have found ways to get around what they deem to be useless or destructive methods. Mary Tyrone of *Long Day's Journey* finds her solace in morphine and uses the substance to fill the void in her life. The drugs allow her to escape for brief moments at a time, and fills the need to do something about her situation. Bennett Simon writes:

Alcohol and morphine seem to be the only ways to satisfy, even briefly, these deep cravings and the sense of deprivation. There is also reference to the father's habit of giving whiskey to the children when they were having nightmares—nightmares clearly induced by the highly traumatizing nature of the parental relationship. Insofar as merging, fog, and drowning have an oral component, these recurrent images help “thicken” the atmosphere of oral craving and deprivation. (Simon 181)

As Simon suggests, the craving and subsequent usage of these substances is a temporary thing, each time used to hide from something the characters do not want to face, and each time digging the characters further into the hole they've created for themselves. The younger generation of characters seems to want to break out of this cycle and find other, healthier ways to handle their situations. The exception to this is found in Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County*, in that the patriarch and matriarch of the family have turned solely to drugs and alcohol to deal with their problems. Although this play was written in 2008, Beverly and Violet Weston are representative of “The Greatest Generation,” the same generation as the Tyrone family. Despite being in the same contemporary play as their younger counterparts, the older members of the Weston family provide for a stark comparison with their children. Beverly, we find out, drowns himself, and Violet continues to take her pills until she is left alone and with nothing at the end of the play. Her children, however, who recognize the damaging effects of the substances, avoid them, and use other means to escape. This concept is also reflected in Brian Yorkey's *Next to Normal*, in which Diana realizes that her reliance on prescribed medication is doing nothing for her psyche or mental health, and so she decides to flush all of her meds down the toilet. She gives up on the conventional method of drowning out her problems and instead finds another way to cope.

Religion is also something that plays of the past have used as an approach to healing after a death. God has a strong place in some of these older plays, and Mary Tyrone is the perfect example of that. When she is lost in her morphine induced stupors, she returns to her childhood and convent education, at the end of the play praying to God because she has met James Tyrone. When Mary reaches an emotional peak, she begins reciting prayers to help calm herself down and like the morphine she is addicted to, the prayer allows her to lose herself in something bigger than her problems. While O'Neill's thoughts on religion are not apparent in the text, what is present is an exploration of religion in regards to the healing process, and Diggins surmises that O'Neill's losses led him to questions whether religion was an effective means of accepting the death of a loved one:

Within the brief span of three years O'Neill lost his entire family. Stephen Black has shown how this experience of loss weighted his plays with the gloom of grief and mourning, yet such painful experiences can lead a sensitive mind to philosophical speculation as well as personal sorrow. Consider Saint Augustine. When his closest friend died, Augustine said that he became a "great riddle" to himself, questioning his own identity and fate. Religion was of little help, and hope in God was useless, "because the dearest friend my soul had lost was an actual man, both truer and better than the imagined deity" in which we are ordered to place our hopes. (Diggins 198)

Regardless of O'Neill's thoughts on religion in these situations, the contemporary plays have a tendency to hold true to this idea that St. Augustine presents: that faith in God in no way serves to balance out the grief that is felt by the characters. Instead, the focus of the characters within these pieces lays in the realm of something much more practical and pragmatic. Instead of placing their emotional and psychological stability in the hands of faith, they turn instead to the straight knowledge that they are going to wake up each

morning. Their lives become something they live one day at a time, and in treating things in this manner, they are able to make gradual discoveries that hiding behind religion would have prevented them from making. It is the evolution from the religious obligation that (in some cases) sparks the self-realization necessary to start the healing process. For Becca, of *Rabbit Hole*, denouncing religion is her way of saying that she is going to deal with her son's death in her own way, without the influence of the support group that is filled with "God-freaks":

NAT. What's wrong with the people? They've lost children, too.

They understand what you're going through.

BECCA. No they don't. They understand what *they're* going through.

NAT. Still, you must have things in common.

BECCA. You would think so, Mother, but actually we don't. Other than that dead kid thing, of course.

NAT. It can't hurt to give it another try, Becca.

BECCA. Actually, it *can*. You haven't met that room full of God-freaks.

HOWIE. They're not God-freaks.

BECCA. Most of them *are*, Howie. That's all they talk about.

God's plan. "At least he's in a better place...My favorite is: "God needed another angel." What is *that*? He's *God!* Why can't he just *make* another angel? These people...

NAT. Maybe God gives them comfort.

BECCA. Well it pisses me off. Trying to find some ridiculous meaning in—"Hey look, I stepped in shit, it must be part of God's plan."
(Lindsay-Abaire 72-73)

Becca's insistence that this is not the way that she intends to deal with the death of her son, while seemingly argumentative, is her way of expressing that she knows she needs to find another coping method. The self-awareness here is something that the younger generation of plays and of characters is equipped to fight for. The emotional and psychological tools that the playwrights of the past decade have bestowed upon their characters make self-realization something that has to happen in a play. The characters

are more than capable of finding their way towards anagnorisis and thus taking the audience with them.

The women of *Proof*, *Rabbit Hole*, *August: Osage County*, and *Next to Normal*, will be further examined in this paper as examples of works with characters that have discovered ways of dealing with their losses that actually allow them to begin the healing process, unlike that of characters in the earlier American family dramas. Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* acts as a strong reference point when discussing these figures, as the characters in his play are established as quintessential personages in this type of drama. This paper will first look at the characters, with a focus on the daughters that are forced to handle the death of a parent, and at how the generational gap affects one's ability to move on and heal. In this section, David Auburn's *Proof* and Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County* will serve to prove that the women of the contemporary age are better equipped to handle what life throws at them than their older family members. Next, the paper will explore how the characters, particularly the mothers, in David Lindsay-Abaire's *Rabbit Hole* and Brian Yorkey's *Next to Normal* overcome the familial power struggle that will allow them to escape from the depression and void of losing a child at a young age. These contemporary characters prove to us as readers and audience that in confronting their situation and making an effort to better themselves, they are able to achieve far more in their lives than their thematic predecessors:

...although the family is the site that conflicts, denies, and numbs individual desire, it nevertheless contains the possibility for the individual to acknowledge, confront, transform the oppressive social and familial structure that binds him or her. Thus, while the individual must first create and confront his or her familial impasse, the family

can become the site for the individual's regression and courageous self-overcoming. (Cline 9)

The ability to open up to experience and face the hardship that is presented to them allows the characters in these four plays the opportunity to transcend the stagnancy that Mary Tyrone displayed. The people have the means to confront the impasse, recognize what they need to begin the healing process, and thus bring an audience along on the journey towards anagnorisis.

Chapter 2

When the Apple Does Fall Far: The Daughters of *Proof* and *August: Osage County*

While both *August: Osage County* and *Proof* were written in the past decade, each play has at least one character that acts as a representation of the “Greatest Generation” and all that it stood for. Despite the fact that these characters are proud of where and when they come from, their inability to escape their old fashioned mindset prevents them from achieving any sort of self-discovery in a world where their younger counterparts (often their children), are much more able to move forward in life. In each of these plays, the death of the patriarch sets off a series of events that serve to prove that it is the younger generations who are more suited to reaching a level of self-realization at which they can move on. The ability to reach some sort of self-realization allows the children of the “Greatest Generation” (as it is often called in *August: Osage County*) to cope with whatever life throws at them in a much more productive way than their parents.

Proof, by David Auburn, was published in 2001 and follows the story of Catherine, daughter of the recently deceased Robert, both mathematical geniuses. She is dealing not only with the lose of her father, but also with the fact that she has inherited the gift of his mathematical ability as well as the possible curse of his mental instability. Robert’s former student, Hal, in going through his mentor’s books, comes across a proof that could alter the field of mathematics. After kindling a relationship with Hal, Catherine reveals that it is she that wrote the proof, and then has to fight for her integrity as Hal and her sister Claire have doubts as to her mathematical skill and trustworthiness. Eventually, she convinces Hal that she did in fact write the proof.

August: Osage County, was written by Tracy Letts in 2008 and first performed by The Steppenwolf Company in Chicago. It begins just before Beverly, the patriarch of the Weston family disappears, causing his pill-popping wife, Violet, three daughters, Barbara, Ivy, and Karen, in-laws, and extended relatives to come together at the family home in Osage County, Oklahoma. When Beverly's body is discovered drowned in a nearby lake, it is assumed that it was a suicide, and from this point on, the family begins to fall apart as they reveal the Pandora's Box of secrets that they had kept from each other for years. In addition to the myriad of dysfunction and conflict, both of these plays specifically handle the death of the family patriarch and the way in which the characters surrounding that person deal with the loss.

Facing the death of a parent, particularly that of a father, presents a character with the question of who they are and what they should do without their parent. In his book *The Absent Father in Modern Drama*, Paul Rosefeldt discusses the implications of the loss of a patriarch on the children. Rosefeldt states that the characters that he is looking at in his text are those "who never actually appear on stage." More simply put, these characters are ones "who exist in story but not in plot...in discourse but not in presentation. (Rosefeldt 3)" Rosefeldt goes on to say that these characters also never speak on stage, even in flashbacks, dreams, or hallucinations. While this is not the case in either *August: Osage County*, in which Beverly appears in the prologue to set up the situation for the audience or in *Proof*, where Robert appears not only in Catherine's hallucinations, but also in flashbacks that are provided for back-story, the characters left without their fathers still experience much of what Rosefeldt talks about and the

application of his ideas to these cases functions to promote an understanding of why the younger generation of characters is able to escape from the past.

In looking at how the death and subsequent absence of the father affects the daughters in these plays, it is necessary to take into consideration the way in which the children try and maintain some sort of relationship with their dead parent:

...the dramas of the absent father pull together the mythic structure of drama and its ritual base along with psychological theories of the absent father to show how one phase of modern drama is haunted by the presence of the absent father. In this type of drama, the absent father not only controls the dynamics of the plot but also influences the trajectory of the other characters. Through multiple reconstructions of the absent father in the discourse of the other characters, he is projected onto all aspects of the dramatic milieu. Also through various reference and surrogates, the main structure of the dramatic action focuses on trying to represent him or bringing him into presence. (Rosefeldt 10)

Both Barbara Weston of *August: Osage County*, and Catherine of *Proof*, deal with their fathers' death's in the way that Rosefeldt describes. While there is not an active attempt to "replace" the deceased father (which is something we will see happening in the plays that handle the death of a child), there is still something in each of these women that acts as a way to keep their respective patriarchs alive in some way. Barbara's internal struggle throughout *August: Osage County* is centered around balancing the traits that she has from both of her parents, and figuring out which are helpful to her emotional survival, and which were the things that led to the downfall of both of her parents. In the following passage, Barbara tells the housekeeper, Johnna, about a conversation she had with her father:

One of the last times I spoke with my father, we were talking about...I don't know, the state of the world,

something...and he said, "You know, this country was always pretty much a whorehouse, but at least it used to have some promise. Now it's just a shithole." And I think now maybe he was talking about something else, something more specific, something more personal to him... this house? This family? His marriage? Himself? I don't know. But there was something sad in his voice—or no, not sad, he always sounded sad—something more hapless than that. As if it had already happened. As if whatever was disappearing had already disappeared. As if it was too late. As if it was already over. And no one saw it go. This country, this experiment, America, this hubris: what a lament, if no one saw it go. Here today, gone tomorrow. Dissipation is actually much worse than cataclysm. (Letts 123-24)

It is at this point that Barbara realizes that she can no longer hold onto what was because clinging to the past only allows for the dissipation she talks about. In order to get past this and create the cataclysm, she needs to break away from the conflicts of the past, instead of letting them hover over her until she cannot take it anymore. Similarly, Catherine's struggle in *Proof* is focused on the fact that she seems to have inherited both her father's gift of brilliance as well as the curse of mental instability. In the opening scene of the play, Catherine envisions a conversation with her dead father in which she worries that her sanity might take the same downward spiral that his did:

CATHERINE. How old were you? When it started.
ROBERT. Mid-twenties. Twenty-three, four. Is that what you're worried about?
CATHERINE. I've thought about it...
ROBERT. Listen to me. Life changes fast in your early twenties and it shakes you up. You're feeling down...The simple fact that we can talk about this together is a good sign.
CATHERINE. A good sign?...How could it be a good sign?
ROBERT. Because! Crazy people don't sit around wondering if they're nuts.
CATHERINE. They don't? (Auburn 11-12)

Catherine's concern that as she gets older she will start to go down the same path as her father is what she has to overcome throughout the play. Her insanity lets her hang on to her father for a bit longer, but letting him go allows her to escape and move forward in her life. For both of these characters, there is conflict between the struggle that Rosefeldt mentioned, to keep some part of the deceased parent alive, and the struggle to escape the negative situation completely. Barbara and Catherine's objectives throughout their respective plays is to break away from the conflict within their families, and it is because of this desire that they learn how to separate themselves from the negative aspects of the past and thus reach a point of self-realization and discovery.

The inability of the older generation to properly deal with the present is caused, in part, by their connection with the past and in shared part by an intent physical removal of their minds from real life. These characters are fixated on what was, and so obsessed by the glory that they associate with the past, that they have no direct relation to present reality. When Violet is accused of being mean to each of her family members, instead of apologizing she uses her past experience to justify her treatment of her family members:

That's the crux of the biscuit: we lived too hard, then 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? Whadda you do? Whadda you do? Who're you? 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. (Letts 95)

In Violet's mind, and this is something that comes up several times throughout the play, because she survived her hardship, she firmly believes that no one else in the family has any right to complain or be upset about anything. She is so focused on the problems of

the past that she has no means of handling what is currently happening. She has no desire to listen to what her daughters have to say or to take appropriate action in regards to her husband's suicide.

This fixation aside, the physical displacement of their minds, caused by both a decline in mental stability and substance abuse, further disables any method of relating to their younger family members and thus coming to terms with what happens over the course of the play. "My wife takes pills and I drink," Beverly Weston reveals in the prologue of *August: Osage County*. "That's the bargain we've struck...one of the bargains, just one paragraph of our marriage contract... I don't drink because she takes pills. As to whether she takes pills because I drink... I learned long ago not to speak for my wife" (Letts 11). This addiction, on the parts of both Beverly and Violet, keeps them in a daze that establishes a comforting distance between themselves and their lives. In the same vein, despite his insanity being an involuntary affliction, Robert is revealed to have fallen into the delusion of a perfect past when he cannot face the present. In the following moment, Robert reveals that his mathematical mind is working again:

I am working! I say "I"—The machinery. The machinery is working. Catherine, it's on full-blast. All the cylinders are firing, I'm on fire. That's why I came out here, to cool off. I haven't felt like this for years... It started about a week ago. I woke up, came downstairs, made a cup of coffee, and before I could pour in the milk it was like someone turned the *light* on in my head... I'm back in touch with the source—the font, the—whatever the source of my creativity was all those years ago. I'm in contact with it again. (Auburn 70)

At this point, Robert believes that he has fallen back into what he was in his youth, a brilliant mathematician. It is revealed later in this scene that he has not, in fact, regained his brilliance, but is falling into madness. However, he has such a strong desire to be

what he was in his youth that even though what he produces in the present is totally nonsensical, he still deludes himself into thinking that he still has the same mental capability that he used to. What is interesting, however, is that even in Robert's delusional writing, there is still a strong reverence of the past as a better place than the future:

Let X equal the quantity of all quantities of X. Let C equal the cold. It is cold in December. The months of cold equal November through February. There are four months of cold and four of heat, leaving four months of indeterminate temperature. In February it snows. In March the lake is a lake of ice... I will never be as cold now as I will in the future. The future of cold is infinite. (Auburn 74)

In this writing, Robert looks to the future with fear that things will only get worse as time goes on. He is obviously uncomfortable in his situation, but accurately predicts that the future does not hold anything better for him. This fear of the future is something that holds both Robert and Violet back, more-so in some ways than the reverence they each have for the past.

While Robert's mental decline may not be a conscious choice, it still functions in the same way as the Westons' addictions. His condition renders him unable to assist in taking care of his household, and the responsibility of his well-being falls on his daughter. This transfer of responsibility forces the children to make a conscious shift from the roles that are dictated by their ages. Catherine establishes her role as the caretaker for her father and takes on the responsibility of the household: paying bills, cooking, cleaning, etc. In the same way, Barbara takes charge of the situation at her parents' house: raiding her mother's pill stash and organizing everything that needs to be taken care of in the wake of her father's death. In this process, we see a sort of transfer of

responsibility from the parent to the child and the weight of that responsibility on the daughters is what grounds them, while the lifting of that weight from the parents allows them to fall further into their own worlds.

Getting to the point of self-realization and breakthrough is still a process for these characters: they each struggle with the journey from subjectivity to objectivity, and even then, their eventual freedom is only something that comes with a final moment of realization. Catherine's journey begins long before the play starts, when she gives up her life and drops out of school in order to take care of her rapidly worsening father. The moment in which she makes this decision is shown via flashback in the play, and it acts as the moment that the rest of the story is set into action. When the play opens, and the audience is made aware of the fact that Catherine is alone and talking to her dead father, we see a character lost in her own mind and unable to connect properly with the rest of the world. From the moment he steps on the stage halfway through the first scene, Hal acts as a grounding force for Catherine: someone that helps her stay in the world of reality and not slip back into her mind. Hal's presence on stage creates a slew of emotions for Catherine, everything from anger to frustration to connection and compassion. His ability to expose her to all of these emotions helps her character stay in touch with reality and the fact that life has ups and downs. This connection that Hal has helped Catherine forge then provides her with what she needs to move forward past the obstacles that she has set for herself and the ones that are set by her sister Claire.

Upon returning to Chicago to help arrange her father's funeral, Claire has also made plans to arrange for Catherine's assumed move to New York, where Claire can take care of her. Catherine originally fights her sister on this, as she wants to stay in Chicago

and in her father's house. Claire has other plans however, in that she intends to sell her father's house to the university at which he worked and set her sister up in an apartment in New York City. Catherine also expresses concern that Claire's intent is to set her up in a mental institution once they get to New York. Catherine once again, is losing control of her own situation when her sister comes in and tries to take over her life.

Catherine is able to gain the control back through the leverage of the notebook. She gives the notebook that contains her mathematical proof to Hal, and once again loses a bit of control when neither he nor Claire believes that she is the one who wrote it. From its first appearance on stage until the end of the play, the notebook acts as a representation of Catherine's control over her situation. Her sense of worth and ability to break free from the situation is lost when Hal leaves with the notebook and thinking that her father wrote the proof. It is Catherine's resentment here that causes her to agree to follow Claire back to New York and start a new life. She feels betrayed by Hal and does not have control over what is rightfully hers, so at that point she just gives up.

When Hal then returns with the notebook and believes that Catherine did in fact write the proof, he gives her back a sense of empowerment that she had previously lost. The new found confidence gives Catherine the ability to escape the confines of her mind and move forward on her path to self-discovery. As he has helped her experience many emotions, Hal also helps her on this journey: "You'll have to deal with it eventually, you know. You can't ignore it, you'll have to get [the proof] published. You'll have to talk to someone" (Auburn 80). While he is directly talking about the proof, he is also talking about the reconciliation that Catherine has to do with the memory of her father. He is telling her to leave her father behind and move on in her life, and she does. By agreeing

to explain the proof to him, she has ceased sitting in the misery that the past would dictate. She is breaking free from her father and the burden of his care and is able to find release in the fact that she can now live life for herself.

In the same way, Barbara has to experience her own journey to self-realization. In the beginning of *August: Osage County* Barbara is weighed down by the grief of her father dying, the sadness of her marriage falling apart, the annoyance of a pot-smoking, disobedient child, and the frustration of her mother's drug addiction. Throughout the play, her struggle is between handling her own emotions and dealing with everyone else's problems, something that she does not reconcile until the final moments of the play. As she is making the journey, she is conflicted by her emotional connection versus what her logic is telling her. In the early parts of the play, she is as enamored by the past as her mother is, something that can be seen in a story she tells her daughter:

BARBARA. I used to go out with that boy. With that man... The sheriff...in high school. He was my prom date...The day of the prom, his father got drunk and stole his car. Stole his own son's car and went somewhere. Mexico. Deon showed up at the door, wearing this awful tuxedo. He'd be crying, I could tell. And he confessed he didn't have a way to take me to the prom. I just felt awful for him so I told him we'd walk. About three miles. I busted a heel and we both got so sweaty and dirty. We gave up...got a six-pack and broke into the chapel, stayed up all night talking and kissing...And now he's here telling me [my father's dead]...Thank God we can't tell the future. We'd never get out of bed. (Letts 53-54)

At this point, Barbara is as interested in the past as her parents, and along with that comes the same fear of the future that the older generation has. However, as the play goes on, Barbara is faced with more than she can handle, and she has to break away, not only from the past, but also from her own emotions and situation, to deal with her mother.

Barbara's connections with her family members begin to dwindle as the play goes on. She pushes her husband even further away than he already is, gets angry at one sister, alienates the other, and ends up having "physically attacked Mom and Jean (her daughter) in the space of about nine hours" (Letts 122). The disintegration of these relationships is in the end what allows her to look at the situation in an objective manner and realize what it means to take responsibility for her actions. Directly after the aforementioned section where she explains the last conversation she has with her father, Barbara explains herself to Johnna, the hired housekeeper: "...I'm owning up to my own shitty behavior... after all, I'm here. Look around. No one else is here. I mean, am I here, or am I here?...I'm still here, goddamn it" (Letts 124). Not only does Barbara realize at this point that she was part of the problem and now has to focus on truly being the solution, but she also recognizes she has to be "here," as in the present time and situation. Her journey then culminates when she finds out that her mother knew that her father was going to kill himself and did nothing about it. This final act of betrayal, which ironically functions in a similar manner to Hal's final act of loyalty to Catherine, gives Barbara the fuel she needs to escape the situation and head towards her freedom and self-discovery.

It is the recognition of the situation as well as their determination that grants both Barbara and Catherine the ability to truly face the present and thus to meet the challenges of handling their situations. In growing up around people who are losing a grasp on reality, the focus of these women is on maintaining a strong grasp on their situations. To do this, they both remove themselves from their own issues and immerse their attention on making sure that their parents' situations are being handled. Catherine drops out of school to take care of her father and his household, and Barbara sacrifices a possible

reconciliation of her marriage as well as her relationship with her daughter to ensure that her mother is being properly taken care of. Becoming an objective enforcer allows Catherine and Barbara to forge a barrier between themselves and the various factors that have eliminated their parents' ability to take the steps towards an escape. When they make the transition from looking out from the inside to looking in from the outside, something that their parents are incapable of doing, they are able to see past themselves and figure out that there is a way to escape from their situations.

Chapter 3

When the Bough Breaks: The Mothers of *Rabbit Hole* and *Next to Normal*

In David Lindsay-Abaire's *Rabbit Hole* and Brian Yorkey's *Next to Normal*, families are struggle with the death of a child. In both cases, the parents have lost a child due to unforeseen, accidental circumstance, and the plays detail the journey from the depths of that pain to escape from it. While the fathers of these children play a pivotal role in the world of the plays, it is the mothers who experience the greatest self-realization. The women each find their own ways of coping, and their methods fall between futile attempts keep the child alive, and removing all physical reminders of the child from their home and life. Despite the differences in the way they handle the loss, one thing remains constant in the dealings of both characters: they each seek a physical escape from their homes and husbands that leads these grieving mothers to the moment of self-recognition that allows them to move on in life.

Losing a child is a far different cry than losing a parent, and the drama written on the topic in the past ten years presents audiences with the pain that parents might go through in this sort of experience. The characters in these works strive to achieve the same escape that their aforementioned counterparts want, but have the additional struggle of dealing with a situation that is completely out of the natural order. Gill Rye explores this concept in his article about the death of children in contemporary French literature:

In the family and in society more generally, a child's death is almost always perceived as a 'wrongful death'. For the parents, the experience of losing a child is a 'limit experience', an irreparable loss. All too fearfully imaginable, such a loss nonetheless proves unimaginable even in the face of its stark and tragic reality. In the wider

socio-cultural sphere, the death of a child is so shocking – and, we might add, given its coverage in the popular media, so compelling – because it is felt to be a reversal of the natural order of things. (Rye)

Parents are supposed to die before their children, Barbara Weston even orders her daughter to “die after me, all right? I don’t care what else you do, where you go, how you screw up your life, just... survive. Outlive me, please” (Letts 54) In this moment, Barbara realizes that while the experience of grief and pain that she is feeling regarding her father’s death is horrible, that it could never touch the pain that comes with losing a child.

The parents of *Rabbit Hole* and *Next to Normal* do face this worst of pains. In *Rabbit Hole*, Becca and Howie have lost their son Danny eight months before the play begins, when he was hit by a car driven by seventeen year old Jason. The play starts with Becca’s younger and much more irresponsible sister, Izzy, revealing that she is pregnant. We continue to follow the story of Becca, Howie, Izzy, and their mother Nat (who also lost her son Arthur, albeit to a heroin influenced suicide and not an accident), as they all grieve in their separate ways. Eventually, Becca meets up with Jason and in the end, and through talking with him, she starts to heal. The play presents a very realistic view of an American family coping with the most tragic of accidents.

Next to Normal takes a more unrealistic view at the death of a child. The play is a musical and its operatic structure does not detract from the emotions; it simply allows the play to move at a quicker pace in the way it explores the characters’ emotions and objectives. The music brings the audience into each characters’ mind, something that a more realistic play cannot do without altering its theatrical contract with the audience. *Next to Normal* revolves around Diana, mother of two, and wife to Dan, who has tried to hold her family together despite her mental illness and loss of touch with reality. We

eventually learn that the son she has been talking to and interacting with is a hallucination of her deceased eight-month old son. The family struggles with the decision to give Diana electro-shock therapy to try and eliminate the hallucination, which only works temporarily. Eventually, Diana realizes that the only way she can escape the burden of her loss is to leave her husband and daughter.

Much of the conflict in *Rabbit Hole* is due to the different ways that Becca and Howie Corbett deal with the death of their son. Becca mentally separates herself by withdrawing, while Howie remains engaged, not necessarily to keep his son alive, but certainly trying to keep the memories alive. The play opens with Becca talking to her sister and folding her son's clothing in order to box it up and give it to charity. Throughout the rest of the play, we learn that she has given away their dog, Taz, whom Danny had chased into the street where he was hit by a car. Becca also decides she wants to sell the house, and she is the one the audience witnesses boxing up Danny's toys, and cleaning his room of his things. For Howie, the worst of these things is that Becca "accidentally" tapes over the most recent home movie of Danny, one that Howie continues to watch every night. "You're trying to get rid of him," Howie declares during a fight, "I'm sorry, but that's how it feels to me sometimes. Every day, it's something else. It feels like you're trying to get rid of any evidence he was ever here" (Lindsay-Abaire 83).

This accusation of Howie's is not entirely untrue. Throughout the play, Becca realizes that the easiest way for her to cope with her son's death is to remove herself from her life. She makes a strong effort to distance herself from what happened, and is antagonistic towards anyone that reminds her that she is no longer normal. At various points in the play, her hostility is aimed at her husband for trying to get her to attend

support groups, or at old friends who are uncomfortable calling her because they do not know what to say. Becca is faced with the fear of her disrupted equilibrium and so she attempts to rid herself of the people and things that remind her of her son. While this may not be the best way to cope, the decision to escape her life every now and then is eventually what leads to reconciliation with her husband. In the following, Becca relishes in the feeling of relief she gets from attending an adult education course in another town:

Did Izzy tell you I was taking a continuing ed. Class?
We're reading *Bleak House*. Isn't that hilarious? He handed out the syllabus and I just laughed. *Bleak House*. Of course no one knew what I was laughing at, which was *great*. It's in Bronxville so no one knows me. I'm normal there. That's what I like best about it. I don't get "the face" every time someone looks at me...And you know what's nice? These ladies, don't even *talk* about their kids or their husbands or any of it...Anyway, I like it. I like that I'm just a lady taking a class.
(Lindsay-Abaire 118-20)

Becca uses the escape of the college course to forget about her life and responsibilities, and the freedom of this experience actually makes her home life a bit brighter. She is able to have something to look forward to and enjoy, and even if escaping the problem is not the solution, it certainly functions to allow Becca to reshape her identity and come to terms with her life.

This sort of realization recurs when Becca talks to Jason, the seventeen year old driver of the car that killed Danny. Jason has written a story for his school's literary magazine about a boy who travels through wormholes to try and find his missing scientist father. He then asks if he can dedicate the story to Danny's memory and if he can come and talk to Becca and Howie. Howie has no interest. But Becca sits down with Jason and listens to his story as well as about science and theoretical wormholes:

JASON. ...Then there are tons of you's out there, and tons

of me's.
BECCA. And so this is just the sad version of us.
JASON. I guess.
BECCA. But there are other versions where everything goes our way.
JASON. Right.
BECCA. And those other versions *exist*. They're not hypothetical, they're actual *real* people.
JASON. Yeah, assuming you believe in science.
BECCA. Well that's a nice thought. That somewhere out there I'm having a good time. (Lindsay-Abaire 144-45)

Once again, the fact that Becca realizes that there is another “version” of her out there somewhere frees her to redefine herself. Like her continuing education course, this information permits Becca to see herself as more than just “the dead boy’s mother.” She is offered a chance as escape, and even though the escape is purely cerebral, it still allows her to experience some sort of a distancing from her present self. She is able to see beyond what she is and into what she could be had the situation played out different, and this offers her the opportunity to redefine herself in terms of her loss. Once Becca starts using this method to cope, and is able to escape when she needs to, it becomes easier for her to deal Danny’s death.

This clash of coping methods is the main obstacle that Howie and Becca have to work through in order to heal, and even then, the playwright outwardly states in his “Author’s Note” that, “[he doesn’t] ever want a moment (not even the very end) where the audience sighs and says, ‘Oh good, they’re gonna be okay now’” (Lindsay-Abaire). Lindsay-Abaire wants his audience to know that these people will constantly struggle to live their lives normally. This sentiment is most strongly detailed by Nat’s description of how she feels about losing her own son eleven years ago:

BECCA. This feeling, Does it ever go away?
NAT. No, I don't think it does. Not for me it hasn't. And

that's goin' on eleven years. It changes though...The weight of it... At some point it becomes bearable. It turns into something you can crawl out from under. And carry around—like a brick in your pocket. And you forget it every once and a while, but then you reach in for whatever reason and there it is: “Oh right. *That.*” Which can be awful. But not all the time. Sometimes it's kinda...Not that you *like* it exactly, but it's what you have instead of your son, so you don't wanna let go of it either. So you carry it around. And it doesn't go away, which is ... Fine... actually. (Lindsay-Abaire 129-30)

This moment exemplifies the emotion that is at the core of the play, and the realization that carrying around this brick is “fine” is what will bring the characters to a healthy place. Religion will not help, support groups will not necessarily help, but what will help is the realization that they will experience pain, and if they make it a part of themselves they will be able to move forward.

Becca’s escape happens when each takes a step in the other’s direction and realizes that the other is carrying around the same weighted brick, they are simply holding it differently. With this realization they are better able to cope with their situation and compromise with each other. Becca realizes that living in the house in which she raised her child might not be the worst thing in the world, and her escapism has helped remove herself from the situation for a while, and thus realize that she can be herself as well as Howie’s wife and Danny’s mother. Her desire to escape hence leads her closer to her husband and her home. This step towards each other serves as a sort of collective discovery for Becca and Howie, and allows the audience to assume that although these people are probably never going to fully heal, that they might be able to continue living their lives.

While Becca’s self-realization brings her closer to Howie and the rest of her

family, the opposite occurs to Dan and Diana of *Next to Normal*. Through escapism, Becca is able to redefine herself, which in the end brings her closer to her husband while Diana's same sort of redefinition and recognition lead her to leave her husband Dan. While Dan and Diana both start out wanting to stabilize the family in the end, Diana realizes she needs to focus on stabilizing herself, and so she walks out on her husband and leaves him alone with his demons. Her self-discovery also her to reach a point at which she can offer herself the freedom that she needs to heal.

At the start of *Next to Normal*, we are introduced to what appears to be the "perfect, loving fam[ily]" (Yorkey 8) of four: Diana, Dan, and their children Gabe and Natalie. We soon learn that Diana is not mentally stable and is experiencing symptoms of manic depression and schizophrenia. As the moves forward, we learn that the eighteen-year-old son that Diana has talks to and interacts with is a hallucination. At first, Diana and Dan are battling her mental instability together; he drives her to therapy and makes sure that all is going well in her treatment. Dan seems to be at a point where he can handle day-to-day life, despite the fact that his son is dead. Diana, however lives with her grief, and is so affected by it that she cannot escape the image of her dead son.

Diana's therapy and care is provided in several different ways throughout the play, and each time they try something, it fails and they are forced to move on to something else. In the end, it takes her self-realization to push her forward towards the healing process, and lead her to the freedom she achieves in leaving her husband. When the play opens, Diana is being treated with a variety of prescribed medications, although half-way into the first act, she decides that she no longer wants to be medicated and flushes all of her pills down the toilet. Next, they take is to bring her to a new therapist

who first tries just talk therapy, then moves onto hypnosis. Eventually, Diana decides that this is not the way to handle things, and she attempts suicide. At this point, her doctor and husband decide that she should have electro-shock therapy. The ECT works to make her happier, but it also eliminates any memory that she has of her son.

While suicide and memory loss seem like fruitless ways to escape from pathological grief, they are in fact the stepping-stones that Diana uses to achieve her self-discovery. Without the negative experiences, she would have never been able to cross them off the list of things that might help her move forward in life. She has to struggle to put the pieces together in order to figure out how exactly she needs to cope:

DIANA. It's been four weeks since the treatment,/and my mind is still a mess./And what's left to be remembered,/well it's anybody's guess./'Cause my past is like the weather--/It will come and it will go. I don't know./Even know/what it is that I don't know./I'm some Christopher Columbus/sailing out into my mind.../With no map of where I'm going,/or of what I've left behind...
DOCTOR MADDEN. Are you talking with your husband?
DIANA. Well he hasn't much to say.
DOCTOR MADDEN. Is it helping you remember?
DIANA. I remember that's his way.
DOCTOR MADDEN. Does the puzzle come together/piece by piece and row by row?
DIANA. I don't know/I don't know/Where the fucking pieces go. (Yorkey 78-79)

Piecing her life together after losing her memory acts as a way for the character to reset herself and start afresh. Eventually, she does get her memory of her son back, but is almost forced to look at it with a new outlook, and use that new point of view to figure out how to move forward in a positive way. Eventually she realizes that the only way she is going to escape her grief is to reconcile with her slightly estranged daughter and then leave her husband. She realizes that she has to stop pretending that her family has a

perfect life and face the fact that there is far too much wrong to be fixed. Diana begins by telling Natalie about how her brother died: “Seventeen years ago your brother died of an intestinal obstruction. He was eight months old. I'm sorry we never talked about that. We wanted to give you a normal life, but I realize I have no clue what that is. (Yorkey 94)” By coming clean to Natalie, Diana is puts everything out in the open: there is nothing to hide anymore, and because she is ridding herself of a façade, she is able to come to terms with what happened to her son.

Diana makes the same strong decision when it comes to leaving her husband. She realizes that staying with him means that she will never be able to experience the pain in the way she needs to experience it in order to move on:

With you always beside me/to catch me when I fall,/I'd
never get to know the feeling of solid ground at all./With
you always believing/That we could still come through,/It
makes me feel the fool to know that it's not true./What
doctors call dysfunction,/we tried to call romance./And
true, it's quite a trick to tell/the dancers from the dance--
/but rather than let chance take me,/I'll take a chance.../I'll
take a chance on leaving./It's that, or stay and die./ I loved
you once, and though/You love me still, I know/It's time
for me to fly... (Yorkey 98)

Diana’s honesty to herself and her husband, and the subsequent choice to move back to her parents’ house allows her to face everything that has happened to her and gives her the freedom to figure out how best to handle it for herself. Her freedom comes from letting go of trying to create a perfect life for those around her and starting to focus solely on bettering herself. In doing this, Diana functions as her own method of escape and discovery.

Becca and Diana, through internal and external as well as physical and cerebral exploration are able to make the discovery that an escape from their lives will lead them

to heal. Despite the fact that Becca uses escape as a means to an end, while Diana's escape is the end to the means, both women find their freedom from grief in removing themselves from their own lives. Becca makes use of her continuing education class and Jason's explanation of wormholes to step back and appreciate what her life is without her sadness. Doing so allows her to return to her situation with a fresh perspective and thus become closer to her husband and more able to cope with her grief. Diana's journey is a process of elimination of sorts, in that she attempts to help herself through every method possible: therapy, drugs, shock-therapy, etc. In the end, she has not come as far as Becca has in her healing process, but she has made the discovery that escaping her current situation is what will allow her to heal. Regardless of the extent of the healing, each of these mothers realize that in seeking a physical escape of some sort they are both able to find a way to come to terms with their situations and start the path to healing.

Chapter 4

When We Meet Again: Escaping the Grief and Becoming Whole Again

The American drama of the past ten years takes a new and therapeutic look at death and the way that families are forced to deal with the loss of a family member. While *Proof*, *August: Osage County*, *Rabbit Hole*, and *Next to Normal* function as quintessential examples of this genre in this decade, they are certainly not the only pieces that explore the topic. Plays and other literature dealing with this major family issue have become ubiquitous in our society. These plays allow us as an audience to experience the grief that the characters are feeling and to try and find our own way through the dark maze that is the path to self-discovery:

Texts that deal with tragic loss and overwhelming grief are particularly challenging to the reader. For what is out place here? How or where are we situated by the text? Where should we place ourselves in relation to it? The critical reader of such texts faces a particular dilemma. To what extent is it unacceptably invasive to take a critical position on personal accounts of loss? How can we ethically negotiate the tension between reading as bearing witness to a testimony of traumatic loss and reading as interpreting a published text, when the very act of publication render a text open to interpretation, interrogation, criticism and even possibly skepticism and/or suspicion. (Rye)

Although Rye is talking specifically about French literature, the same holds true for the American drama. The audience has to figure out where they fit into the action that is

happening on the stage and only when they do can they experience the discovery along with the characters.

What makes the characters in these four plays so easy to relate to as an audience member is that they are all able to find something in themselves that allows them to push forward in life and achieve some sort of self-realization at the end of their stories. After losing their fathers, Catherine and Barbara both assert their individuality in regards to the rest of their families. Catherine verbally defends herself against her sister's insistence that things be done a certain way, and she finds a sense of comfort and authority in revealing the proof to Hal and then in the end having him convinced that she did in fact write it. These things are what allow her to separate herself from the grief surrounding her father's death and from the anxiety of thinking she was going crazy. In a similar way, Barbara struggles with the connection she has to her family and is only able to objectively deal with the situation when she lets go of her own issues. She has to place her marital problems, her issues with her sisters, and a physical altercation she had with her daughter on the side burners, and use her energy to instead focus on her mother. In all of this, Barbara escapes what was, and when she realizes that she could get lost in the past, she gets up and leaves her mother, going off to do what is best for her.

In a similar way, Becca and Diana also have to struggle for a way to escape their situations. They each have their moments of realization with regard to the fact that if they are going to get through the grief and move forward from the death of their sons, they are going to have to seek both a physical and emotional escape from their lives and husbands. Becca finds solace in the college course that she is taking, and in experiencing herself as something other than the mother of a dead child. Leaving her home life for short periods

of time is what allows her to return to it, and make the discovery that she can move on. Through all of Diana's treatments, and all of the family issues that the couple faces, she realizes that the only way she will be able to heal is through separating from her husband so that she can focus on her own issues in the way that is healthiest. This then leads her forward in her self-discovery and towards anagnorisis.

While the paths of each of these aforementioned characters are all extremely different and riddled with specific and individual struggle, the modern environment that these characters are in has provided them with the tools they need to move forward and seek an escape from their grief. They are not stuck in the past, nor are they overly dependent on substance or façade to make them happy. In this way, they've taken a huge step forward from the literary ancestors that O'Neill wrote about:

In O'Neill's modern American theater, characters rarely progress toward self-realization or even to the beginnings of a higher order of understanding... the stories end with neither resolution nor revelation as the audience realizes that the characters will continue their lives in the compulsive repetition and repression. The characters are too overcome with discord to achieve a state of being where they are free of the need for others. Hence they can never be sure who they are or where they belong, or what is it that they want or what it is that obstructs them from getting it. (Diggins 262)

O'Neill's characters, particularly in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, are stuck in their situations and because of their reverence for the past, substance abuse, and the way they have deluded themselves into hiding from their problems, they are doomed to continue living in the repetitive drone in which they are trapped. Unlike the contemporary characters, who can break away from all of this long enough to have a moment of self-realization, O'Neill's characters will continue on their cyclical paths until they die. The

characters in the plays of the past decade are able to figure out exactly who they are and where they fit into their worlds, and because of their ability to do so, they are able to move forward from the death of their loved one.

The audience also shares the anagnorisis that is experienced by these characters. Death in the American drama provides an outlet for dealing with the most intense and painful of emotions, all the while allowing the audience to maintain their aesthetic distance and appreciation of the art. The theme and genre of death in the family is one that almost anyone can relate to and one that has proven timeless in the stories that our culture tells:

...great tragic drama is fueled by the problematic of the birth and death of the family. The begetting of children within a family is the only sure way open to mortals to gain immortality. At the same time, the passions, rivalries, conflicts, and consequent ambivalence of relationships within the family engender a destructiveness that threatens extinction as much as does the “natural” fact of death. Epic heroic tales are centered around cheating death, achieving immortality by performing great deeds, and begetting children who will remember and retell such deeds. Tragic drama is centered around the dilemma arising from the painful realization that striving for immortality by the creation of a union, a family by bearing and rearing children, is fraught with enormous and ineluctable difficulties. (Simon 3)

The families in the four plays discussed all fit into this idea that conflict stems from the human desire to create and uphold a legacy. In the plays in which children lose parents, the characters have to struggle with identifying and upholding (or choosing not to uphold) the legacy that their parents left; and in the plays that deal with parents losing children, the struggle is focused on wondering who will then uphold the legacy now that the younger generation is mortally damaged. All four of these plays, *Proof* by David

Auburn, *Rabbit Hole* by David Lindsay-Abaire, *August: Osage County* by Tracy Letts, and *Next to Normal* by Brian Yorkey examine just what it means to break away from all of this struggle and pain in order to reach a healthy level of anagnorisis.

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