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Kate Soules

Waste, Wasting, Wasted: Repercussions of Simulations on the American Family in Tracy Letts's

August: Osage County

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America and Americans was published in 1966, John Steinbeck's final book before his death. Composed of both photographs and essays, *America and Americans* uses both of these elements to work together to display Steinbeck's unique understanding of life in America, a compilation which Richard Peterson describes as "a picture-book commentary on American life" (5). Steinbeck's photographs included in *America and Americans* capture people all ages, from children to adults and group photographs that display a "shared feeling or purpose whether the group is united by joy or sorrow" (Peterson 5). Yet the collection of essays that accompany the photographs berate the American way of life. Steinbeck calls the American dream to task, saying "the dream has little to do with reality in American life" (Steinbeck 332). Steinbeck uses the example of a home, as he explains the ultimate American dream includes owning a home, yet the reality is that an American family does not stay settled and is more likely to move every few years (332-333). Despite the paradox between the American dream and the reality of life in America, Americans fail to recognize this paradox and continue to strive after the unrealistic notion of the ideal American dream.

Steinbeck's observations may serve as only the beginning of a critique of the American family. While the American family as a unit strives to obtain the American dream and the American ideal, it rarely succeeds. In fact, Steinbeck claims that the failed dreams create a "sullen despair and growing anger and cynicism" in America (391). Steinbeck wrote generously about the family—one of his most famous novels *The Grapes of Wrath* (winner of the Pulitzer Prize in Literature in 1940) centers on an American family struggling through the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. Steinbeck paints a sad picture as the Joad family uproots from their home and migrates west to look for work. Published in 1939, *The Grapes of Wrath* provides a commentary on a family "and the struggle of its members to assert their separate identities

without breaking up as a family” (Britch and Lewis 98). In his novel, Steinbeck sought to combat the destructive mode of American individualism and relay the necessity of a “we” mentality—a mentality essential for the survival of the migrants (Britch and Lewis 98).

Unfortunately, Steinbeck’s concerns over the American dream and the failure of an American individualistic attitude have yet to be resolved. Rather, they continue to manifest themselves in American identity. Similarly, the failure of the American dream to accurately represent American life and the failure of American individualism to promote healthy relationships and community also persist. Over fifty years removed from *America and Americans*, little has changed. In fact, the question of relationships between people in the American family consumes American drama.

In his master’s thesis *The Fragility of Family: Dysfunctional Dynamics in Modern American Drama*, Corie Ricketson explores modern dysfunctional American families as seen in *Glass Menagerie*, *Long Day’s Journey into the Night*, and *August: Osage County*. Ricketson notes that the families in these dramas suffer from multiple types of stressors which ultimately lead to confusing bonds and a lack of support between the members of the family (1). Roles become difficult to identify as the family size grows and with the addition of dysfunction, such a “delicate equilibrium” quickly fails (3). Ricketson attributes the ensuing destruction to a conjunction of multiple stressors in the lives of the family members (iv). In a critique of the play, Mollie O’Reilly asserts that the family should work towards “some resolution,” but unfortunately, “every attempt at reconciliation across the play’s three acts withers” (23). One must then ask the question of the impossibility of reconciliation. O’Reilly attributes the impossibility of reconciliation to a violent matriarch figure (in fact most reviewers of the play focus mainly on Violet as the center of the action). However, in a strain similar to Steinbeck’s

unease concerning the American dream and Ricketson's thorough exploration of dysfunctional families, this essay seeks to promote a new possibility for dysfunction: that of attempted simulations of an unattainable ideal. As American families latch onto a dangerous American dream, they may attempt to imitate and simulate an ideal American family. Dangerous repercussions accompany this simulation, as evidenced through the Weston family of *August: Osage County*. While O'Reilly maintains that "*August* [...] is [not] a groundbreaking study of human nature," this essay will show that *August: Osage County* in fact *does* prove a groundbreaking study of human nature as studied through the context of simulations (23).

In 2007, Tracy Letts' drama *August: Osage County* enraptured audiences in the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago. In 2008, *August: Osage County* received both a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award. Interestingly enough, this highly successful play deals with some of the darkest and most depressing familial issues imaginable ranging from suicide, alcohol abuse, and pill popping to illegal drug use, divorce, incest, and pedophilia. Yet within this hard play, a family lives and operates. The movements of the Weston family in *August: Osage County* expose their attempts to model themselves after an ideal American family and the repercussions of such an attempt.

August Osage County runs at approximately three and a half hours long, adequate time to disclose what Misha Berson terms the "Great American Dysfunctional Family" (Berson). In the Prologue to the drama, the audience meets Beverly and Violet Weston, husband and wife who partake in their own particular pleasures of drinking and taking pills respectively. Beverly interviews Johnna (a young woman from the Cheyenne tribe) in hopes of hiring a housekeeper and a caretaker for Violet. In the opening of Act One, Beverly has disappeared, and the rest of the family pours into the house in Pawhuska, Oklahoma first for consolation upon Beverly's

disappearance, and later to attend his funeral when authorities find Beverly dead. Over the course of the play each member of the family participates in an attempted simulation of a traditional American family to try to erase some of the relational difficulties presented at the end of each scene.

An understanding of the Westons' attempt to simulate a traditional American family may be found in the work of French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard begins his exploration of simulations with a conversation concerning reality. According to Baudrillard's theories, "the distinction between reality and unreality itself has been erased, that technology and media and consumer culture totally control our lives" (Best and Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn*, 80). Instead of individuals controlling their own lives, other beyond-reality factors take control.

Critics Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno comment on these extra factors, namely the control of the media which they adequately term the "culture industry." The rise of the culture industry stems from American prosperity which led to mass commodification and a "desire for gadgetry" (Peterson 13). The culture industry, then, is a conglomeration of businesses that specialize in media production, such as "film, television, radio, magazines, and popular music" (Horkheimer and Adorno Introduction 1107). Horkheimer and Adorno note that everything we see in contemporary culture passes through the culture industry (1113). Relationships, personal values, self-image, diet and exercise habits all pass through the filter of the culture industry. Horkheimer and Adorno also claim that often people may mistake the events on the screen for being a continuation of the world outside the theater through film's realistic and "flawless" representation (1113). Instead of leaving the fantasy of the screen behind in the movie theatre, people may continue to walk around as if living in the world they just witnessed on the screen. Another example presented by Steven Best and Douglas Kellner in their

book *Postmodern Theory* speaks of the confusion of the model for the real that television often instigates. They note that “the image or model of the Doctor (the simulated Doctor) is sometimes taken for the Real Doctor,” and hence the following situation: an actor, Robert Young, received letters in the mail inquiring about medical concerns (Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, 119). Yet the culture industry is even more dangerous than simply promoting a world that confuses a movie for reality. The culture industry also “tends to make itself the embodiment of authoritative pronouncements, and thus the irrefutable prophet of the prevailing order” (1121). As the “embodiment of authoritative pronouncements,” the culture industry tells the individual how to live from who they ought to be, what they ought to watch, and even how they ought to dress. Steinbeck proffers an example of this in his chapter of *America and Americans* “Americans and the World,” as he explains that “any night of television commercials can convince a plain and lonely girl that a hair rinse, along with false eyelashes and protuberances, can magically transform her [...] and guarantee her entrance into the garden of happiness” (391). The culture industry further dictates how people should define institutions surrounding them. For the purpose of this argument, the institution of the family is most prevalent. The culture industry dictates what a family should look like and how that ideal family should behave.

Through the claims of the culture industry to know the truth about the operations of the world and familial institutions in particular, people begin to try to simulate the idea of the family they see on the screen. Contemporary portrayals of the ‘traditional American family’ may be found everywhere: in television shows, movies, and even insurance advertisements. Families in these insurance advertisements are at least middle class with no obvious drug problems, unlike the Westons in *August: Osage County*. Both parents live together and smile nonstop while their children are happy and carefree as the family leaves their home in the hands of the insurance

company to enjoy a well-earned family vacation. The biggest worry or struggle a family may face in the next thirty seconds is a sixteen-year-old learning to drive. Even then, the insurance company swoops in to save the day and quickly quenches the family's worries. The emphasis on this concept of the ideal American family is even perpetuated by the United States Census Bureau, as Kreider and Elliott write in their report "The family is a vital institution in American society and often serves as the major source of support for the individual" (8). Unfortunately, the idea of the family as a major source of support for the individual does not apply to the Westons. In fact, the Westons tear each other apart and provide a type of anti-support. The Weston family has very little in common with the ideal families presented by advertising and the US Census Bureau—but images of these types of families hold true of examples that would bombard the Westons via the media. Everything surrounding the Westons screams that they have to conform to the likeness of these families or there will be consequences.

In the same strain as Horkheimer and Adorno, Baudrillard also comments on the effects of the media on reality. Simulations run rampant as expressed through computers, the media, and the effects of cyberspace. These electronically controlled pieces, all included in Horkheimer and Adorno's definition of the culture industry, serve as the "organizing principle of society" (Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, 118). Society rallies around the media and the culture industry as a source of authority. This media-driven culture then becomes the victim of hyperreality, a state in which notions of the real emanate from a simulation rather than from the real itself (Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, 119). Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal addresses a condition in which reality is replaced by a model; further simulations are then based on that *model* rather than on actual reality. In a discussion of drama, this is of particular interest, as theatre brings simulations to a new level. The stage transforms into a "third-order simulacra"

where “simulation is so widespread as to create a ‘hyper-reality’ which has subsumed the place of nature and the real” (Fortier 177). Because the stage transcends reality to represent yet another order of simulation, perhaps theatre serves as the ultimate hyperreality, and therefore the optimal space for the Westons to act out their own simulations.

In addition, one final extra “beyond reality” factor may be considered—that of the individualism inherent in American society. Laura Pappano, in her book *The Connection Gap*, indirectly mentions the culture industry as the instigator of the mass individualism that permeates American culture. Many mediums preach individualism “from the pages of magazines and academic journals, the voice-overs of television commercials, [to] the surveys of pollsters” (133). Yet within this sphere and notion of individualism, families are also expected to maintain the ideal structure presented by the media. The ideal American family is one which can perfectly juggle individualism with community.

The messages presented to society through the culture industry leads to attempts to mirror these presented messages. However, a more thorough exploration of Baudrillard’s ideas concerning the precession of simulacra will reveal that these attempts at mimicry lead down a dangerous road of simulations.

The first important piece of Baudrillard’s theory to note is the three states of society: commodity, spectacle, and simulation. The states of spectacle and simulation are most important for this discussion. In the society of the spectacle, “individuals consume a world fabricated by others rather than producing one of their own” (Best and Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn*, 82). The society of the spectacle also incorporates Marxist conceptions of economic power and control, as it may refer to “the vast institutional and technical apparatus of contemporary capitalism, to all means and methods power employs, outside of direct force, which subject

individuals to societal manipulation, while obscuring the nature and effects of capitalism's power and deprivations" (Best and Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn*, 84). While an economic analysis of *August: Osage County* is not the primary concern of this discussion, this definition of the spectacle emphasizes culture's obsession with societal manipulation. And because this wider definition of the society of the spectacle incorporates Marxist views of power and capitalism, it also incorporates Marxist notions of the power of the institution to influence individuals and "indoctrinate [them with] dominant ideologies and practices" (Best and Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn*, 84). As already explored, dominant ideologies that stem from Horkheimer and Adorno's culture industry as well as the Baudrillardian concept of hyperreality presented as ideal from the media both permeate everyday life. However, the state that follows the spectacle is the society of simulation. While the society of the spectacle operates on a plane crafted and constructed by others, the society of simulation goes beyond the spectacle and actually replaces reality with simulations.

Often considered the epitome of postmodernism, the crux of Baudrillard's theory is based on the idea that what is 'real' or 'true' cannot be known. According to Baudrillard, "there has never been any unmediated reality," and so the realities that people cling to in society are tinted completely by simulations (Hegarty 49). The real cannot be grasped in any true sense. Therefore, "instead of true reality, we get various types of simulacra, which present themselves as the real" (Hegarty 49). From this ideology, then, follows Baudrillard's four stages of the sign in his precession of the simulacra where objects increasingly move away from any notion of the real and further into pure simulation. These four stages, according to Niall Lucy, "have to do with the sign or image's successive distancing from the object of representation (or referent), so that the sign moves through [...] the stages of signification" (*An Introduction*, 39). The stages of the sign

indicate that “it is the reflection of a basic reality,” “it masks and perverts a basic reality,” “it masks the *absence* of a basic reality,” and finally “it bears no relation to any reality whatever, it is its own pure simulacrum” (Lucy, *An Introduction*, 39).

As the precession of the simulacra occurs, more and more simulations substitute parts of the real until eventually nothing of the real remains. Baudrillard describes this process as “a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes” (1157). Paul Hegarty explains Baudrillard’s meaning more clearly by simply stating that “simulation is not an imitation, but a replacement” (50). When the real is no longer present, nothing remains except simulations; simulations replace the real. While the Weston family’s simulations in *August: Osage County* do not go so far as to completely replace any essence of the real, the family does emulate so far as the second stage of the sign, where they “mask and pervert a basic reality” (Lucy, *An Introduction*, 39). The Westons clearly pretend to be unaffected by difficult circumstances.

The Weston family appears in gesture to be the ideal American family and strives to obtain that ideal. Yet their attempts and representations serve only as simulations of an ideal American family. A thorough exploration of characters in *August: Osage County* will reveal this to be true. The first instance of simulations appears in Act One, Scene One, as Barbara and Bill attempt to simulate a normal marriage despite their current state of separation and looming divorce. As they try to mask the reality of their broken marriage in an attempt to simulate the traditional American family, Barbara and Bill play down the fact that they are looking ahead to a divorce. As Bill and Barbara stand on the front steps of the house bracing for entry, they try to

portray the ideal marriage by sharing a joke between husband and wife. Bill makes the mistake of calling Oklahoma the Midwest. Barbara scoffs and says “Hey. Please. This is not the Midwest. All right? *Michigan* is the Midwest, God knows why. This is the Plains: a state of mind, right, some spiritual affliction, like the Blues” (Letts 26). Bill jokingly replies: “Are you okay?” “I’m fine. Just got the Plains.” (Letts 26). While Barbara and Bill laugh together, Letts writes an uncomfortable moment into the script to cue the audience into the fact that there is something wrong with their relationship. Letts instructs the actor portraying Bill; in the moment of their laughter “*he reaches up and touches her neck tenderly*” (Letts 26). Barbara distinctly says “Don’t” and pulls away from Bill. Even though Barbara and Bill should enjoy this joke together, the stage direction clearly indicates discomfort. In this instance Barbara and Bill try to maintain some semblance of the media’s notion of a happy husband and wife, yet somehow are unable to make it work.

The Westons also simulate normality in dealing with Violet. Violet’s pill-popping addiction is an apparent problem, but the family leaves ignore the problem until they can do so no longer. Instead of addressing the drug issue, in Act Two, Scene Two the family sits down to a funeral dinner and tries to maintain a normal conversation. The conversation quickly turns sour, however, as Violet openly admits to her drug problem. Barbara outwardly confronts Violet, telling her “You’re a drug addict,” and Violet hides nothing as she admits “That is the truth!” (Letts 72). Violet exclaims that the pills are her “best fucking friends” and that they “never let [her] down” (Letts 72). Barbara then rallies the family together to arrest the pills from Violet, instigating a pseudo-reenactment of a scene one might expect from WWE Smackdown. A portion of the stage directions describes the ruckus as “*Pandemonium*” (Letts 73). After Mattie Fae (Violet’s sister) and Johnna subdue Violet, Barbara begins handing out orders: “Okay. Pill

raid. Johnna, help me in the kitchen. Bill, take Jean upstairs. (*To Ivy.*) You remember how to do this, right?" (Letts 73). Barbara expertly delivers instructions to quickly and efficiently clean Violet out of pills. Barbara and Ivy know the drill of ridding their mother of pills—they have had to do it before. Yet to perpetuate the simulation of the ideal American family, Barbara and the family, despite their familiarity with Violet's difficulties concerning downers, fail to address the situation until Violet herself admits to her addiction. Nothing was done about Violet's problem prior to this moment. Even though Violet has struggled throughout the play with speech and other basic functions due to her abuse of pills, none of her family members own up to a sense of responsibility or duty concerning Violet until it becomes an open and violent problem. In this instance, as in the instance with Barbara and Bill, the family tries desperately to simulate the traditional American family, a family that does not have separation and divorce and a family that does not host a matriarch who struggles with a pill addiction.

A further example of the Weston family's participation in simulations is exhibited through the relationship of Karen and Steve. Karen and Steve seem to have a perfect, happy relationship even though Steve divorced three wives previous to his engagement to Karen. However, beyond just his previous three wives, Steve also displays sexual interest in Jean. One would think if the fifty-year-old man in the relationship displays sexual interest in his fiancée's fourteen-year-old niece then it would indicate an unhealthy relationship. By ignoring any irregularities in their relationship along with the rest of the Westons in the house in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, Karen and Steve fully participate in the simulation of a traditional American family.

The Weston family's simulations of an ideal family attempt to mask the reality that the family is highly dysfunctional and falling apart at the seams. Simulation in this instance is not only an imitation of a preconceived notion of an ideal, but is also a replacement of that idea.

What, then, are the repercussions of this failed simulation? The repercussions of failed simulations appear to be isolation, loneliness, and a lack of intimacy.

The Weston's attempt to simulate the model of a traditional American family as provided by the culture industry leads ultimately to the repercussion of isolation. In her book *The Connection Gap: Why Americans Feel so Alone*, Laura Pappano explores the difficulties Americans face with solid human interaction. Human isolation is a large problem in American society, a problem which Pappano attributes to shopping, screens, mobility, the changing home, instability relationships, and the disappearing "us" mentality inherent in the disappearance of community. The character of Jean Fordham shows a perfect example of the screen as dictator of her choices and a catalyst in detracting from her relationships with the family members around her. After Jean returns home from the funeral and the grocery store, she promptly moves towards the television. Her mother asks her "What the hell is on TV that's so important you can't—?" and Jean smartly replies "*Phantom of the Opera*, 1925. Lon Chaney" (Letts 53). Barbara becomes visibly upset with Jean and exclaims at Jean's lack of concern for the family and especially for her grandfather, as Barbara pointedly asks Jean: "Let me make sure I've got this: when you threw a fit about going to the store with your father [...] [a]nd you were so very distraught over the start time of your grandpa's funeral. Was this your concern? Getting back here in time to watch the *Phantom of the Fucking Opera*?" (Letts 53). Jean does not care enough for her grandfather's funeral or for her family to miss a show on television. Consequently, Jean is unavailable for her mother struggling through the loss of her father. Jean concerns herself more with the television than with the community of her family.

Loneliness also serves as a repercussion of failed simulations as a sense of community disintegrates. Through the effects of Horkheimer and Adorno's culture industry and Pappano's

disappearing “us,” while communities fall apart, loneliness comes as the next logical repercussion. Individuality pushes people away from one another, as Hacker claims “individuals are indeed very much alone and on their own” (34). Loneliness, as defined by Barry Hancock, is “a feeling, real or perceived, of deprivation in social and intimate relations, with unfulfilled material expectations or existential feelings, resulting from the conflict between the real and the ideal” (6). The Westons are often deprived of social and intimate relationships within their own family because of the ideal they constantly try to portray. The family obviously confuses the real and the ideal as they constantly deny the truth of their brokenness as a unit. Part of the brokenness stems from Beverly’s death after the Prologue. A disruption of that magnitude often has serious detrimental effects on relationships (Lynch 328). The family struggles to incorporate the death of the patriarch of their family into their simulations of the ‘traditional American family,’ and the results prove disastrous.

This severe lack of family community also contributes to loneliness. Hancock points out that “modern Western man does not seem to enjoy nor is he able to enjoy companionship, support, and protection from his neighbors” (2). The sense of companionate support that may have been available under past institutions is no longer available to the American family, as “seeing others like us does not spur community, merely a sense of validation” (Pappano 133). This dynamic, in addition to the others, also serves to promote a sense of loneliness. Separateness is the main factor that contributes to loneliness, and the individuality inherent in American society may be the main source of separateness. An achievement of the type of autonomy idealized in American culture and through the contemporary culture industry is actually undesirable, and a trait that “tends to make persons self-centered” (Schmitt 50). As in

the example with Jean, autonomy and self-centeredness detracts from community, which ultimately promotes loneliness.

Self-centeredness contributes to yet another possible definition of loneliness that fits the Weston family—loneliness anxiety. Loneliness anxiety “contains a fear of losing companions and of being powerless to build satisfactory levels of new relations. It is the inability to create desirable relations which seems to underlie the problem so glibly called the alienation of man in modern society” (Lopata 251). Violet in particular demonstrates loneliness anxiety through her inability to maintain healthy relationships with her children. A *New York Times* article concerning the play notes Violet’s “will to endure” as “inextricably tied up with the desire to fight and the need to wound. She can keep the blood in her own veins flowing only by drawing blood from others” (Isherwood). Her emotionally vampiric acts against her family members stems from her loneliness anxiety. Lopata notes this type of negative behavior and reactions often arises in instances of the loss of a loved one, especially a husband (252).

Not only do isolation and loneliness serve as repercussions to failed simulations, but perhaps most significantly all characters who participate in the simulations suffer from a lack of intimacy. Some form of intimacy is necessary to healthy relationships with other people, especially within a family dynamic. However, every single member of the Weston family fails at this. In their book *Between Public and Private: The Lost Boundaries of the Self*, Joseph Bensman and Robert Lilienfeld examine the different dynamics to intimacy, presenting multiple approaches to achieving the same end. For instance, intimacy may be imposed upon someone, “a kind of intimacy that individuals may not want and may resist but for which they have little choice” (93). Intimacy may also manifest itself as pseudo-intimacy in situations where people are given free reign of their biological desires, such as during Mardi Gras (Bensman and Lilienfeld

93). In addition marriage often ushers in a deep form of intimacy, because while one individual is weak, the other must be strong (such as when a spouse is sick) (Bensman and Lilienfeld 93). Karen Prager contributes a working definition of intimacy using three indicators of a healthy, intimate relationship: “(1) persistence/stability (functional relationships tend to resist dissolution); (2) reward value (the partners in the relationship tend to resist dissolution); and (3) harmony or freedom from discord (partners in functional relationships do not engage in destructive or dysfunctional conflict)” (219). Individualism inherent within American society may yet again be to blame for the rampant lack of intimacy on display in both *August: Osage County* and the parallel culture industry. Individualism promotes autonomy and demotes community (Prager 245). Further, by engaging with these few definitions of intimacy, the Weston family obviously fails in this area, and so suffers the repercussions that a lack of healthy intimacy brings.

Beverly and Violet lack intimacy as they lack communication in their marriage. Whereas “late adulthood” is expected to be “a time of renewed marital satisfaction,” Violet and Beverly clearly do not engage in intimate communication (Prager 155). As Beverly interviews Johnna for the housekeeping position in the Prologue, he describes for her the family dynamic in the house: “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. She takes pills and I drink” (Letts 11). Beverly does not discuss this situation with his wife, he comments that “the reasons [...] are anymore inconsequential” (Letts 11). At this point Beverly and Violet’s marriage has been reduced (under Beverly’s understanding) to nothing more than a coexistence where they each have their separate substance problems. Beverly and Violet do not view those difficulties as community problems, and so cannot be addressed together. Rather, as husband and wife they

simply cohabit the same house and prove unable to engage in intimate relations. Beverly and Violet engage in an “empty-shell” marriage, where neither is content in the relationship, yet neither leaves (Prager 219). While marriage is supposed to promote a co-dependent sense of intimacy, Beverly and Violet’s marriage does nothing to foster that intimacy, and so leaves both spouses wanting. Further, even though late adulthood is supposed to be a time of renewed marital satisfaction, this does not prove true in the case of Beverly, as he sees fit to commit suicide shortly after his interview with Johnna.

Barbara and Bill also lack intimacy, clearly evidenced through their separation and looming divorce. In Act Two, Scene Three, Barbara and Bill are about to go to bed in the living room, but Bill insists on discussing Beverly’s writing career. Their conversation instantly reveals the difficulty in their marriage. Beverly’s book of poems fascinates Bill and he insists on discussing it with Barbara, but Barbara becomes upset as Bill makes inferences about her father’s motives concerning the book and concerning his later writing career. Barbara attacks Bill: “I’m sure that’s what you tell *Sissy* too,” referring to the woman who is the object of Bill’s affair (Letts 38). Bill tries to reassure Barbara that he is in Oklahoma to support her, but the fact of Bill’s infidelity remains. Similar to Beverly and Violet, Barbara and Bill display a lack of intimacy in their marriage. Except where Beverly and Violet suffer from an “empty-shell” marriage, Barbara and Bill suffer from separation which may be the ultimate reason they so desperately lack intimacy in their marriage. One of the best ways to promote healthy, intimate relationships is through “frequent intimate interactions” which “contribute to the satisfaction, harmony, and stability” (Prager 251-252). Due to their separation, Barbara and Bill cannot engage in these frequent intimate interactions and so never experience or foster their intimacy as husband and wife.

Ivy is another member of the Weston family who lacks intimacy and yearns for an intimate relationship. Ivy eventually finds an intimate relationship, yet fails to realize her intimate relationship with her half-brother, Little Charles, is perverse. Even after Violet tells Ivy that Little Charles is her half-brother, Ivy so desperately wants her relationship that she runs out of the house exclaiming “I won’t let you change my story!” (Letts 99).

Karen also lacks intimacy in her relationship with Steve, despite the show Karen and Steve put on for the family; Steve exhibits Bensman and Lilienfeld’s “Mardi Gras” or ‘fun’ type of intimacy with Karen’s fourteen-year-old niece, Jean. Karen and Steve pretend to have a normal, gooey relationship in Act Two, Scene Two as Karen, Steve, and Jean sit in the family room and watch television together. Karen coos lovingly at Steve “Hi doodle,” and snuggles up to Steve (Letts 55). Steve responds, and they eventually leave the living room to go explore Karen’s childhood home together (Letts 56). However, later in the play, this puppy romance is revealed for the simulation it is—in Act Two, Scene Two Steve comes on to Jean sexually, despite her age. Steve makes remarks such as “Stop talking about your bush, all right? You’re gonna get me hot and bothered—” and “You got a great set. *How* old are you?” (Letts 85-86). Luckily, Johnna steps in to save Jean from the sexually intense Steve. Even after Johnna catches him in the kitchen with Jean, “clothes [in] disarray,” Karen still refuses to accept her lack of intimacy with Steve and their relationship as simulation (Letts 87). Rather than showing anger or confusion over Johnna’s confrontation via skillet, Karen shows only concern that Steve is hurt. After the incident, Karen and Steve pack their bags to leave. Karen is unwilling to believe Johnna’s accusations. Karen and Steve clearly lack intimacy, but Karen chooses to remain caught in her simulation of a perfect relationship.

While isolation, loneliness, and a lack of intimacy may be the repercussions of failed simulations, they all stem from the same portion of culture—individualism. In addition to the media and consumer culture, individualism prevents the family unit from operating the way it should. This concept and focus on the individual not only manifests itself through the three repercussions of failed simulations but also manifests itself in the scenes where multiple characters talk over one another. The house often engages in cacophony rather than coherent dialogue amongst one another. When this dialogue is presented in the text, characters are not given their own line on which to speak, but rather lines weave in between and over each other, making it impossible for readers or audience members to focus on the community of the family:

STEVE. I told	MATTIE FAE. Well,	IVY. I'm serious,
you, smoke a	look who decided	if you say
cigarette and	to show up. I'm	anything—
the food comes—	sorry we woke	VIOLET. You
KAREN. (<i>To Barbara</i>)	you, sweetheart.	didn't say I couldn't
When's the last time	LITTLE CHARLES.	tell people—
someone mowed the	Mom, I'm so	IVY. I'm telling
yard around here?	sorry—	you now.
BARBARA. Hm?	MATTIE FAE. I'm	VIOLET. Why
KAREN. I just	sure you are—	are you so worked
showed Steve	CHARLIE. He's	up? You're
our old fort,	here now and that's	seeing someone,
have you been	all that matters.	I think that's
out there?	MATTIE FAE. It's	great—

BARBARA. No, really not all that IVY. Don't you
 I haven't— matters— dare—

(Letts 59)

The family blurs into itself as the lines are delivered rapidly and simultaneously. It is all an audience member can do to hone in on one voice or one conversation. The family relationships no longer focus on the family as a unit but rather on individual interactions. In contemporary American society, the individual comes first so much to the point that others are pushed to the side. The individual in this form of dialogue takes ultimate importance and precedence.

When people adhere strictly to individualistic dogma the results are isolation, loneliness, and a lack of intimacy. Again, Hancock defines loneliness as “a feeling, real or perceived of deprivation of social and intimate relations, with unfulfilled material expectations or existential feelings, resulting from the conflict between the real and the ideal” (6). The conflict between the real and the ideal clearly plays out in this drama as the family struggles to become the ideal family but fails miserably. Beverly mentions this struggle right off in the Prologue, how the facts of the ‘real’ Weston family (where Violet takes pills and Beverly himself drinks) clashes with the ‘ideal’ American family: “The facts are: My wife takes pills and I drink. And these facts have over time made burdensome the maintenance of traditional American routine: paying of bills, purchase of goods, claiming of clothes or carpets or crappers” (Letts 11). While culture calls for individualism as an ideal, this play ultimately speaks against the messages from the culture industry and reveals the truth—that individualism moves people away from a relational state.

The primary example of individualism moving people away from a relational, human state is found in the person and character of Violet Weston. Violet clings to the individualistic ideal of strength and power over those around her—which results in isolation as a repercussion.

Violet rejects help from her daughter Barbara and claims she can manage circumstances all on her own. Violet assures Barbara: “If the pills are gone, I’ll be fine. Just take me a few days to get my feet under me” (Letts 81). Barbara offers Violet further help, but Violet rejects it. Barbara offers again, insisting that she wants to help, but again Violet rejects any assistance from Barbara concerning her medical condition. Violet finally explains to Barbara: “I don’t need your *help*. I’ve gotten myself through some...(*Stops, collects herself.*) I know how this goes: Once all the talking’s through, people go back to their own nonsense. I know that. So don’t you worry about me. I’ll manage. I get by” (Letts 81). Violet separates herself from her daughter, rejecting the community and help Barbara offers in favor of relying on her individual strength.

The difficulty with Violet’s reliance on her individual strength however, is that she slowly breaks down the relationships around her until she is left utterly alone. At the end of the play, Violet admits to Barbara that she might have done something differently about her relationship with Beverly, but Barbara finishes her mother’s sentence and confirms that her mother and father “were both fucked up” (Letts 100). This commentary from Barbara makes Violet angry. Even though Barbara may have a legitimate point, Violet has a difficult time hearing that the troubles in her relationship may be, in fact, be partly her own fault. Instead of calmly discussing her difficulties and sharing her hurt in an expression of healthy intimacy, Violet shifts the blame to Barbara. Violet tells Barbara: “there is at least one reason Beverly killed himself, and that’s *you*” (Letts 101). Violet had the option to display a healthy sense of intimacy and discuss her relational problems with her daughter but did not choose that option. However, Violet does more than simply shift blame, she names her loneliness and her feelings of abandonment: “just him and me, here in this house, in the dark, left to just ourselves, abandoned, wasted lifetimes devoted to your care and comfort” (Letts 101). Here the repercussion of

loneliness not only operates in failed simulations, but also results as a byproduct of individualism. While Violet and Beverly seemed to attain the ideal of autonomy by being left to themselves, the true result is loneliness and a feeling of abandonment. Violet further separates herself from Barbara in their last interaction: “Nobody is stronger than me, goddamn it. When nothing is left, when everything is gone and disappeared, I’ll be here” (Letts 101). As Violet describes her strength as an individual to her daughter, Barbara softly replies “No, you’re right, Mom,” (Letts 101). Barbara quickly agrees with her mother and then walks out of the house and drives away, leaving her mother alone in the house. Violet becomes violently upset and frantic, wandering the house calling out the names of her children, her dead husband, and finally her housekeeper. Johnna meets Violet on the stairs to the attic and the play ends with Johnna holding Violet’s head singing softly “This is the way the world ends, this is the way the world ends” and Violet repeating “and then you’re gone, and then you’re gone, and then you’re gone” (Letts 101). Violet is left devoid of family and devoid of meaningful relationships. The only person left to comfort Violet is the recently hired housekeeper.

Does *August: Osage County* present any solutions to the problem of simulations of the real, individualism and subsequent isolation, loneliness, and a lack of intimacy? As Violet and Beverly isolate themselves from one another (not just in his death, but even through their unfulfilled marriage where they refuse to speak to each other), as Barbara and Bill face separation and divorce, as Ivy engages in a perverse relationship with her half-brother—are there any solutions to the problems suggested? *August: Osage County* does provide some solutions, but they are never implemented in the play. Rather, their lack of existence is simply pointed out. The two solutions to failed simulations and the repercussions are physical presence and time.

However, as found with Barbra and Bill, physical presence and time cannot operate successfully if separated from one another. Bill tries to appeal to Barbara by assuring her that he is available while she undergoes the current struggles with her family. But Barbara points out to Bill that his current physical presence for her at this particular point in time is not enough to make up for the many past times that he was not present, namely throughout their separation. The current time does not serve as adequate atonement. Barbara and Bill fight and spat, which upsets Bill as he claims “You call me a narcissist! And when I try to talk about you, you accuse me of psychoanalyzing you--!” (Letts 39). Barbara tries to explain to Bill the difficulties of the separation, sleeping together in the same bed for twenty-three years of marriage to the drastic change of sleeping by herself. Bill consoles Barbara and assures her “I’m here now,” but Barbara quickly cuts him down, saying “Men always say shit like that, as if the past and future don’t exist” (Letts 39). Barbara shows her incredulity at Bill’s ignorance: “Do men really believe that the here and now is enough? It’s just horseshit, to avoid talking about the things they’re afraid to say” (Letts 39). Even though Bill tries to use his presence in Oklahoma as a salve for Barbara to make up for his past absences, it simply is not enough. Physical presence and time must go together in order to be an effective solution to the repercussions of failed simulations.

Time also contributes as a solution, and as displayed through the character Ivy, a lack of time leads to an increased lack of intimacy. Ivy struggled with cervical cancer yet failed to tell any of her sisters her medical problems. As the three sisters sit and talk together, they come up on the topic of Ivy having children. Ivy reassures her sister Karen that she has “put those thoughts behind [her] a long time ago,” and then continues to reveal the fact of her hysterectomy procedure (Letts 76). Karen expresses disbelief, but Ivy calmly explains that she was diagnosed with a case of cervical cancer, thereby making the hysterectomy absolutely necessary. Neither

Barbara nor Karen knew of Ivy's medical problems. In fact, the only person Ivy did mention her cancer to was Little Charles, her lover. Barbara expresses confusion and asks "Why not? Why wouldn't you tell anyone?" (Letts 76). Despite Barbara and Karen's incredulity at Ivy's failure to tell them of her hysterectomy, Ivy confirms it was the right course of action. Barbara tries to assure Ivy that both she and Karen would have afforded some comfort, but Ivy maintains her original point: lack of physical presence and time between the three of them ultimately led to an utter lack of intimacy. Ivy tells her sisters that she does not feel a connection intimate enough where it would be appropriate to share with them her medical problems. But Karen, seeming to misunderstand how connections occur, claims "I feel very connected to both of you" (Letts 76). This statement is almost comical, as Ivy responds amusedly "We never see you, you're never around, you haven't been around for—" and then Karen interrupts and again claims "But I still feel that connection!" (Letts 76). Ivy tells her sisters (Karen in particular) that maintaining a connection in mind only is not enough for a true connection. Actual appearances must take place. Ivy shares her disillusionment of that "connection" Karen feels so keenly: "I can't perpetuate these myths of family or sisterhood anymore. We're all just people, some of us accidentally connected by genetics, a random selection of cells. Nothing more" (Letts 77). While Ivy's diagnosis of their relationship may be overtly cynical, the point Ivy makes is clear—Barbara and Karen's lack of physical presence and lack of time do not translate into a close, intimate relationship. Without those factors, Ivy's relationships with her sisters dwindled into almost nothing, so she did not even feel comfortable sharing important medical information with them.

Ultimately, these simulations, repercussions, and potential solutions ultimately play out to achieve a state closer to the real than perhaps any other course of action would provide. Even though the Westons fail in their simulations of an ideal traditional American family, it is through

these failed simulations that they receive glimpses of the truth of their condition as a family. While it may be accidental, the failed simulations leave in their wake only harsh reality. And while there are repercussions, there also seems to be an accompanying awareness of the struggles and of the lack of connection.

Despite the explicit content, vulgar language, drug abuse and other such misdemeanors, these elements that may be considered offensive are essential in order to solidly communicate the effects of simulations that ravage and destroy. To ignore the social difficulties and travesties culture impregnates individuals with only serves to perpetuate the simulations of a false ideal. Erasure of harsh content does not lead a society to a better understanding of the truth of the culture that surrounds them.

Steinbeck's own novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, suffered under the hands of an unnecessary boycott. In California in August of 1939, the Kern County Board of Supervisors moved to ban the circulation of the novel from their libraries and schools (Wartzman 9). Public displays of book-burnings and outspoken moves to keep the novel out of circulation became the primary concern of the public administration in Bakersfield, California. Subsequently, such protests and disdain for the novel remained small and isolated, while across the country readers enjoyed the blasting poignancy the Joad family provided. While spats concerning Steinbeck's accuracy about the disenfranchised migrants continued, the book remained extremely popular in library circulation polls (Shockley 118-119). Steinbeck's novel, because of its insightful declarations about the state of American identity and the American family, withstood its societal beatings and stands one of the most important American novels.

August: Osage County is necessary and beneficial because it provides an alternative to the false and simulated Hallmark displays of family stories promoted by the culture industry

through television. A synopsis for a Hallmark Hall of Fame movie released in 2003 expertly reveals the essential nature of a drama such as *August: Osage County*. *Fallen Angel* is a film which displays a “Christian worldview with some discouraged moments as well as emotional healing dealing with the past and being open and honest; no foul language; car accident, two men brave freezing water, and cutting hand with knife in accident; no sexual content, some kissing; no nudity; no alcohol, no smoking; and, nothing else objectionable” (Hallmark Hall of Fame). This definition sits as the exact opposite of the content Tracy Letts presents in *August: Osage County*, where foul language, sexual content, alcohol, and smoking abundantly abound. The content and stories of these Hallmark sorts of films strives to do anything but offend and offers a world where redemption is always possible. Letts however, in *August: Osage County*, tries to do no such thing. He attests to the acute difficulties many families actually face, and offers a version of the world that is not filtered through the suited for television lens.

Tracy Letts’ *August: Osage County* is a dark drama that proves beneficial because it exposes problems inherent within the workings of American culture. While Letts does not provide an exact answer as to how to fix these problems, perhaps the end of the play can serve as warning enough. If the world ends with a mother left sobbing on a staircase abandoned by her children, this drama may be read as the worst-case scenario. If people live their lives like the characters in the play live their lives, then the world will end for them just as the world ended for Violet Weston. From this, viewers and readers should be incited to change, and thus Tracy Letts, through an exemplary display of ravished family relationships, promotes a healthier model for the American family.

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