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## How to Get from Here to There: Poetic Connections in Tracy Letts's "Man from Nebraska," "August: Osage County," and "Superior Donuts."

Deborah Ann Kochman  
University of South Florida, Debkochman@gmail.com

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How to Get from Here to There: Poetic Connections in Tracy Letts's  
*Man from Nebraska, August: Osage County, and Superior Donuts*

by

Deborah Ann Kochman

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of English  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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Major Professor: Sara Munson Deats, Ph.D.  
Lagretta Lenker, Ph.D.  
Susan Mooney, Ph.D.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my children, Kristina and Michael, in apology for teaching too much narrative and not enough poetry.

## Acknowledgments

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To all, I wish a poetic life.

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## Abstract

In this thesis, I examine the textual references to poetry in contemporary playwright Tracy Letts's *Man from Nebraska*, *August: Osage County*, and *Superior Donuts* and explore how specific references function as a "poetic exchange" between the protagonists and the respective agents of change or moral touchstones in the plays, and how they suggest a diminishment or elevation of the intrinsic value of art -- specifically, poetry -- as a force for personal and cultural renewal. While Letts's writing is hardly "poetic" and his structure closer to "narrative," he focuses on "the repressed" -- both emotionally and socially -- and the redeeming qualities of poetry. Thus, I argue that Letts's dramatic works do not merely challenge the gaps, ruptures, and contradictions in the "master narratives" of Western culture, but also suggest an alternative to the traditional American "narrative" focused on the individual by advocating a "poetic perspective" centered on the community. This perspective urges a shift from a rigid, linear, individual-goal oriented principle (as depicted in *August: Osage County*) toward a principle of flexibility, unity, and synthesis (as advocated in *Man from Nebraska* and *Superior Donuts*).

## Introduction

### The Playwright and His Body of Work

Over the past 10 years, 46 year old Tracy Letts transformed his identity from a struggling actor and unknown playwright to one of the most popular and critically acclaimed members of the Steppenwolf Theatre ensemble, as well as an esteemed Pulitzer prize-winning author. Letts was born in Oklahoma to a literary family that includes his mother, novelist Billie Letts, and his late father, English professor and actor Dennis Letts;<sup>1</sup> he left Oklahoma and university life (after what he refers to as a “drug-addled semester”) to pursue an acting career that eventually landed him in Chicago (Adler 2). In the early 1990s, while struggling to find work as a stage actor, Letts penned his first play titled *Killer Joe*. This play pre-dates the works examined in this study; however, it provides a foundation for understanding the evolution of Letts’s dramatic voice and body of work.

*Killer Joe*, a trailer-park thriller, which *Current Biography Yearbook* characterizes as “Harold Pinter meets Quentin Tarantino,” tells the ugly and discomfoting story of the Smith family living on the outskirts of Dallas not far from the Red River bordering Texas and Oklahoma (310). A twenty-two year old self-proclaimed loser, Chris Smith convinces his father and step-mother to collude in a murder-for-hire plot to collect his mother’s \$50,000 life insurance policy using his “damaged,” yet innocent, sister as sexual collateral. Despite its current stage popularity, *Killer Joe* did not

initially find an audience in the United States but was well received in the London fringe theatre scene and won the Scotsman Fringe First Award in 1995. Three years later, *New Playwrights: the Best Plays of 1998* recognized *Killer Joe* in their publication, and over the past ten years, a few small theaters in the United States have produced this play (Thompson 309). Since the success of *August: Osage County*, there is renewed interest in *Killer Joe* from regional theaters, and a movie adaptation, scripted by Letts, directed by William Friedkin, and starring Matthew McConaughey as Killer Joe, was filmed in November 2010 and premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2011.

Shortly after *Killer Joe*, Letts penned *Bug* (1996), which employs characteristics of the trailer-trash thriller (i.e. offensive language, nudity, sex, and violence) and interweaves these with dark humor and sci-fi elements to create a quirky psychological horror film about love and paranoia. *Bug* achieved moderate success on the London stage in the late 90's and later in the United States. In 2006, Friedkin directed a film version, which was unsuccessful at the box office but continues to have a cult following. As with *Killer Joe*, since *August's* success, regional and local theaters have shown a renewed interest in producing *Bug*.

In 2003, the Chicago-based Steppenwolf Theatre extended Letts an invitation to join their esteemed ensemble of actors, and later that year the theater produced his third play titled *Man from Nebraska*. Dramatically different in style and tone from his previous work and perhaps a harbinger for Letts and his successful association with Steppenwolf Theatre, *Man from Nebraska* earned a finalist position for the 2004 Pulitzer for Drama. This quiet story of a middle-aged, middle class insurance man in search of his spiritual



identity reaches an audience that Letts admittedly sought to engage. In a 2008 interview with Teresa Miller, Letts discusses the dramatic departure in style. He explains that *Killer Joe* and *Bug* were “strong cups of coffee –dark, violent, gritty” -- and perhaps because of “their darkness they weren’t really reaching the audience [middle America] they were intended for in some ways . . . *Man from Nebraska* was an attempt to find that audience. . .” -- an arguable point, considering that it is the least produced of all Letts’s plays (“Interview by Teresa Miller”).

Three years after *Man from Nebraska*, Letts penned his *tour de force* -- *August: Osage County*. This Shakespearean length play opened at Steppenwolf in June 2007, and it later enjoyed an 18-month run on Broadway, a United Kingdom debut at the National Theatre in late 2008, a U.S. National Tour in 2009, and a limited run at the Sydney Theatre (Australia), starring the original cast. Set in Pawhuska, Oklahoma -- situated approximately 300 miles from the geographic center of the United States -- *August: Osage County* explores the fallout out after a mid-western family discovers its father missing and later learns of his suicide. As the Weston family returns home to bury its patriarch, a violent unraveling begins as the family transitions from its patriarchal past to its matriarchal future. Presenting the Native American housekeeper as a moral touchstone,<sup>2</sup> Letts develops numerous, multifaceted themes as he challenges American cultural myths and dramatizes a dysfunctional American family emblematic of the “unwell” Western world (*August* 13). In addition to the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for drama, *August* collected both the 2008 Tony for Best Play and the New York Drama Critics Circle award, making it one of six plays in history to secure this “triple crown of American playwriting” (Choate 105).<sup>3</sup> It also garnered Chicago Jeff awards, Drama Desk,

Drama League, and numerous other Tony awards including Best Scenic Design of a Play. As testament to its critical and commercial appeal, Weinstein Company recently announced that a film version is slated for production next year.

The year following *August*'s Chicago debut, Letts wrote *Superior Donuts*, which Steppenwolf Theatre's artistic director Martha Lavey affectionately refers to as Letts's "love letter to Chicago." More comic than tragic, stylistically *Donuts* seemingly bears little resemblance to Letts's previous work. However, beneath the surface of what Hilton Als refers to as a "Chico and the man' aesthetic," one can discern remnants of Letts's confrontational style as well as his recurring social-political themes and challenges to cultural myths. *Donuts* exposes a Polish-American "child of the '60s" wrestling with a crisis of social consciousness as a gentrified neighborhood and ebullient young black employee challenge his beliefs and financial future. Bonded by personal crisis and a "racist test" to name ten black poets, Arthur Przybyszewski and Franco Wicks form an unlikely friendship that transcends class, race, and generation. Perhaps because of its Chicago setting, *Superior Donuts* enjoyed a successful run at Steppenwolf during the summer of 2008 and quickly moved to Broadway the following year. Unfortunately, the Broadway run was limited and the play only received one Tony nomination; nonetheless, regional theaters across the U. S. continue to find it worth producing. In fact, *Theatre Communications Group* reports that *Donuts* was produced 9 times to *August*'s 10, and, excluding productions of Shakespeare, these combined productions make Letts the second most produced playwright for the 2010-2011 theater season.

## Letts's Place in American Drama

Despite the commercial success and critical acclaim of *August* and E. Teresa Choate's assertion that the play has "joined the [American] canon," the value of Letts's work continues to arouse debate among critics (106). Many theater critics compare his plays to those of Sam Shepard, Edward Albee, and Eugene O'Neill (specifically, noting *August's* similarities to *Long Day's Journey into Night*), and Choate notes that many critics find *August* "blatantly derivative" (105). Letts readily acknowledges the similarities. In a 2010 interview, he admitted that the thematic focus of his work, like that of Shepard, is the family, observing, "As Sam Shepard – still to this day Steppenwolf's most produced playwright – said when asked why he writes so much about family: 'What else is there?'" ("On Writing *August*"). Likewise, Letts has commented on the overlap in his work with that of O'Neill and recognizes his indebtedness to literary tradition: "O'Neill wrote great masterworks that I doubt seriously I will ever approach. . . . I'm sure I've been influenced, if, in fact, I've not stolen outright from him . . . to be compared is very flattering but not necessarily appropriate" ("Interview by Teresa Miller").

Yet critics remain uncertain. Chris Jones of the *Chicago Tribune* seems to speak for the theater community when he questions whether Letts is "heir to the O'Neill model," or simply the writer of "over-praised melodrama" (60). Jones contends that with *August*, Letts has "thrown down the gauntlet by challenging one of the most sacred traditions in American theater: the ambitious epic on the horror of family life" (59). Nonetheless, some critics insist that Letts "cheapened the form," while others, like Choate, maintain that *August* is the "first great American play of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Jones 60).

Perhaps then, the dispute about the value of Letts's work derives from the tendency among critics to oversimplify and assign a ready-made category to an artist and his or her work, rather than undertake the daunting task, particularly in the case of Letts, of critically examining that work – especially when the object of examination blasphemes a “sacred tradition” (Jones 60). Rather, scholarly inquiry might be served by heeding the observation and advice of playwright Edward Albee, who, when presenting Letts with the 2008 New York Theatre Critics Circle Award for Best Play, advised Letts: “Don't listen to any of that [comparisons to Albee and O'Neill], Tracy; your work is very much your own. It's a danger to listen to too many comparisons.” (Letts, “Interview by Teresa Miller”). To that end, this study examines the work of Tracy Letts without drawing comparisons to previous playwrights, instead exploring and analyzing it based on its own merits, in particular the idea that Letts's style, themes, and structure achieve a synthesis of masculine and feminine principles and characteristics.

In Hélène Cixous's “feminist manifesto” *The Laugh of the Medusa*, she repudiates men and “male writing” or “*marked* writing,” claiming that “far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural, hence, politically, typically masculine – economy”; a “self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory” phallogocentric tradition silencing the repressed in culture (1944-1946). Cixous cites few exceptions and observes that “there has not yet been any writing that inscribes femininity” (1945). In fact, she criticizes female writers who have simply reinforced classic representations. However, she reserves an honor for the poets: “only the poets--- not the novelists, allies of representationalism. Because poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other

limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive. . ." (1946). While Letts's writing is hardly "poetic" and his structure closer to "narrative," he focuses on "the repressed" – both emotionally and socially --and the redeeming qualities of poetry. Thus, I argue that Letts's dramatic works, specifically *Man from Nebraska*, *August: Osage County*, and *Superior Donuts*, do not merely challenge the gaps, ruptures, and contradictions in the "master narratives" of Western culture, but also suggest an alternative to the traditional American "narrative" focusing on the individual by advocating a "poetic perspective" focused on the community. This perspective urges a shift from a rigid, linear, individual-goal oriented principle (as depicted in *August: Osage County*) toward a principle of flexibility, unity, and synthesis (as advocated in *Man from Nebraska* and *Superior Donuts*).

#### Overview of Chapters

Accordingly, this study consists of an analysis of Letts's plays both as literature and as performance, accomplished through the examination of his published scripts, a survey of performance reviews, and attendance at productions of *August: Osage County* and *Superior Donuts*.<sup>4</sup> Chapter 1 discusses the scholarly attention, albeit limited, to Letts's work and presents a brief overview of postmodernism to provide the theoretical background and foundation for my analysis. Chapter 2 focuses on the numerous textual references to poets and poetry in *August: Osage County*, including a brief discussion of the significance of the patriarchal figure's book of poetry, *Meadowlark*, to demonstrate that the Weston family – the allegorical representation of the "unwell" Western world – have diminished if not completely dismissed the value of poetry in their lives with tragic results. Chapter 3 examines Letts's earlier work, *Man from Nebraska*, and the textual

references to the poetry of Pablo Neruda that operate as a “poetic exchange” between the protagonist and his agent of change. These references support the idea that art, specifically poetry and sculpture, evokes a transformation that results in the protagonist’s emotional evolution and reconciliation with his family. Completing my argument that these three works create a dramatic montage that depicts Western culture’s “un-evolved” and “unwell” patriarchal ideology as suffering from lack of poetic thought, Chapter 4 examines Letts’s most recent play, *Superior Donuts*. Here, I highlight the references to African American poets, specifically the poetry of Langston Hughes, and argue that “poetic exchanges” elevate the community over the individual and reveal a feminine quality in Letts’s writing that is open to the “other” without essentializing the female or minority characters.

## Chapter One: Critical Background

Despite the commercial success of *August: Osage County*, scholarly treatment of Letts's work is scant.<sup>5</sup> In 2000, Aleks Sierz's *In-Yer-Face Theatre British Drama Today* identified *Killer Joe* as one of the plays written in the mid-to-late 1990s that characterizes what he refers to as "in-yer-face" theater. Generally speaking, Sierz characterizes "in-yer-face" theater as "an aesthetic of extremism" with features such as offensive language, unmentionable subjects, extreme violence, humiliation, and explicit sex (including incest) – the theater equivalent of military "shock and awe" – as a "deliberate attack on the audience and their prejudices" (3-5, 9). Richard Alan Bryan relies on Sierz's definition of "in-yer-face" theater in his 2006 dissertation in which he analyzes *Killer Joe* as part of his study of public language, verbal aggression, and violent subcultures to determine the connection between "language's effects on personal and social identity" and the "otherwise unaccountable violence" of "in-yer-face" theater (191, 201). Remnants of this "in-yer-face" style remain in all of Letts's later plays as demonstrated by his use of physical and verbal violence, humiliation, and explicit sexual scenarios including incest.

However, in his 2008 thesis, Gregory Stuart Thorson maintains that Letts's style is more than "just shocking effect after alarming situation" and categorizes Letts's work as an example of the "new grotesque" (5). Thorson provides a comprehensive overview of Letts as an emerging playwright and dedicates one section of his study to an analysis of *Killer Joe*, *Bug*, and *August: Osage County*. Thorson defines the "new grotesque" as a

“fusion of contradicting elements” and “disparate styles” such as horror and comedy as well as “acts of naturalistic violence to remind the audience of the play’s realism and create a visceral reaction” (23). Thorson explains that *August: Osage County* is not as “overtly grotesque” as Letts’s earlier work because it “fully integrates tragedy and comedy” (69-70); however, he maintains that Letts “blur[s] the notion of tragedy and comedy, often, within moments of each other” and “seeks to present our world as fragmented and confusing, and notions of contemporary life are not presented in black and white, but rather in shades of gray” (7). Thorson offers an interesting analysis, yet he neglects to consider the major characteristics of postmodernism evident in Letts’s work.

Generally speaking, postmodern works, such as Letts’s *Man from Nebraska*, *August: Osage County*, and *Superior Donuts*, rebel against modernism by revealing the gaps, ruptures, and contradictions in the “master narratives” of Western culture. According to Linda Hutcheon, these contradictions materialize through a “critical revisiting: an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society” (4). For the exceedingly literary Letts, this “dialogue with the past” emerges through intertextual references to various poets and their poetry. In this study, I explore these intertextual references examining how they operate as “poetic exchanges” or “poetic moments” between past and present to see “what, if anything is of value in that past experience” (Hutcheon 14, 39).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, although Letts is a middle-class white American male and his plays, contrary to postmodern aesthetics, follow a linear or narrative structure, a number of qualities in his work -- the value placed on poetry, the emphasis on reforming patriarchal ideology, the challenge to liberal humanism, and the elevation of the community over the individual – suggest a feminine quality in his writing that offers a



“poetic” open to the “other” without essentializing the female or minority characters (Hutcheon 14).<sup>7</sup> Lastly, I examine how these three plays seemingly connect, whether by accident or by design, to create a contemporary dramatic trilogy that challenges “the social, aesthetic, philosophical, and ideological constructs” – the received knowledge – of the individual, the family, and the community and “makes possible a ideological and social intervention” (Hutcheon 33). Thus, in this thesis, I explore the intertextual references to poetry in *Man from Nebraska*, *August: Osage County*, and *Superior Donuts* and focus on how specific references function as a “poetic exchange” between the protagonists and the respective agents of change or moral touchstones in the plays, and how they suggest a diminishment or elevation of the intrinsic value of art -- specifically, poetry -- as a force for personal and cultural renewal.

#### Overview of Postmodernism

While Letts’s work dramatizes “contemporary life” – specifically contemporary America life -- Linda Hutcheon reminds us that “contemporary” is not synonymous with “postmodern” because postmodernism is primarily (but not exclusively) an Anglo-American concept. Hutcheon also explains that postmodernism is both “over- and under-defined” as well as confusing and vague, and here she is not alone (3).<sup>8</sup> For over 20 years, scholars have debated the concept of postmodernism and the characteristics of “postmodern” work. In 1979, Jean-François Lyotard commented on “problems surrounding the term” because of “confusions and ambiguities” (1465). Around the same time, Fredric Jameson stated that postmodernism was “not widely accepted or even understood” and, in fact, met with resistance due to the “unfamiliarity of the works it covered” (Jameson 1846). Nonetheless, before venturing into my discussion of *Man from*

*Nebraska, August: Osage County, and Superior Donuts*, I will attempt to provide a brief overview of the key characteristics of postmodernism to help situate Letts's work as well as to provide a foundation for my analysis.

Liotard identifies three features of postmodernism which help classify contemporary works. First, he theorizes that the idea of a "universal" landscape is replaced by *bricolage*, which can be defined, albeit simply, as combining "forms of thought" or "elements taken from various sources" (Lyotard 1466). He explains that the modernist claim to "make it new" meant to break with the past -- to break from tradition - - to begin a new way of thinking and a new way of life (1466). For postmodernists, according to Lyotard, "this 'breaking,' is a manner of forgetting or repressing the past. That is to say repeating it. Not overcoming it" (1466). These fragmented references to the past (either a "repetition" or "quotation") can be ironic, whether cynical or not (Lyotard 1466). Second, Lyotard contends that, for postmodernism, development does not signify progress nor does it result from or meet human needs. Rather, postmodernism tends to view technology as a site of "decay," expressing "sorrow" at the development of "technoscience" as a "destabilizing disease" that contributes to "the condition of man running after the process of accumulating new objects" as opposed to finding "emancipation" (1467). Lastly, and perhaps most significantly for an analysis of Letts's work, Lyotard maintains that "the question of postmodernism is also the question of the expression of thought through art, literature, philosophy" (1468). He explains that postmodernism must remain attached to modernism to effect "*anamnesis*" – that is, "remembering" the past

through art and integrating it with our thinking, specifically our “current troubles,” so that humans might “discover hidden meaning” in life (1468). If not, Lyotard believes that humans are doomed to repeat past failures.

Jameson identifies two fundamental connections in his attempt to define or categorize postmodern work: 1) it reacts against the high modernism that evolved from the post WWII culture of mass consumerism, and 2) it attempts to erase the “boundaries or separation” between high culture (such as Eliot, Joyce, et al.) and low or popular culture (1846-1848). Thus, Jameson maintains that there “will be as many different forms of postmodernism as were high modernism in place” (1847). However, he is clear that postmodernism is not a “particular style,” but rather a “periodizing concept” that functions in correlation with the emergence of “consumer society” (1848).

Jameson also identifies three other interconnected features of postmodernism: the “death of the subject” (“end of individualism”), the use of “pastiche,” and “the nostalgia mode” (1848-1851). Briefly, the “end of individualism” includes the notion that “personal identity is a thing of the past” - that the concept of “individualism” is “ideological” -- and that the “bourgeois subject” is “a myth that never really existed” other than as a cultural construct (Jameson 1850). This “death of the subject” directly connects to “pastiche” since Jameson describes pastiche as “parody without a sense of humor” (or “blank parody”) (1849). Without the ability to capitalize on “the uniqueness of style” and seize on “idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to produce an imitation which mocks the original,” satire is lost and parody ceases to exist (1848). In turn, pastiche – that is imitation or “mimicry” of a particular style but “without the satirical impulse” -- emerges and contributes to the nostalgic mode. Jameson offers *Star Wars* as an example

of how, through pastiche, the film harkens back to “cultural experiences” from a time long past (specifically, “Buck Rogers types” with “villains, true American heroes, heroines in distress”) (1851-1852). He claims that through “*metonymically*” (that is “association” rather than “resemblance”), the film can be categorized as a “historical or nostalgia” film that “reawakens a sense of the past,” which we seem to continually need to revisit through “pop images” and “stereotypes” (1852). Thus, Jameson insists that present day artistry is not “able to invent anything new”; it is all simply pastiche --parody without humor/satire – which declares the “modernist aesthetic tradition” dead (1851).

In part, Jameson begins to unravel the inherently perplexing and paradoxical features of postmodernism. It is helpful here to return to Hutcheon since she attempts to simplify a definition of postmodernism yet avoids reductiveness and elaborates on the sense of nostalgia that is an important feature of the works studied in this thesis. Hutcheon defines postmodernism as “fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political” (4). She explains that the contradictions emerge through “critical revisiting: an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society,” which is inherently self-reflective and simultaneously paradoxical in its “claim to historical events and personages” (5). Furthermore, postmodern works do not attempt to “escape” the “historical, social, ideological contexts in which they exist”; rather, they foreground “political and historical realities” (Hutcheon 4, 5). However, this return to the historical past is not a warm-fuzzy nostalgic revisiting; rather, similar to Lyotard’s *anamnesis*, the “presence of the past” in postmodern works is a critical “rethinking,” which demonstrates the “governing role of irony in postmodernism” (Hutcheon 4). Larry McCaffery explains: “It has become a kind of model for the contemporary writer, being self-conscious about

its literary heritage” and its ability to “connect its readers to the world outside the page” (264). Thus, in postmodern works, this self-conscious rethinking becomes, as Hutcheon explains:

[T]he dialogue of past and present, old and new is what gives formal expression to a belief in change within continuity. The obscurity and hermeticism of modernism are abandoned for a direct engagement of the view in the processes of signification through re-contextualized social and historical references. (32)

In other words, postmodernism challenges received knowledge, such as hegemonic master narratives, while simultaneously acknowledging and exploiting their power.

Recently, in her article, “Nostalgia, Irony, and the Re-Emergence of the Reified American Indian Other in *August: Osage County*,” Courtney Elkin Mohler examined *August: Osage County* from a postmodern perspective and observed that it “displays the poignant coupling of irony and nostalgia” while challenging ‘the myth of the American family’ (140). Mohler’s analysis focuses on the character Johnna whose presence as “caretaker” and “spiritual anchor” creates a sense of “counter-nostalgia” (138). Mohler relies on Jennifer Ladino’s definition of “counter-nostalgia,” which “envisions the ‘home’ as fractured, fragmented, complicated and layered; to ‘return’ to this sort of home is to revisit a dynamic past and to invert or exploit official narratives in ways that challenge dominant histories” (Ladino 2). As the only “sane person” in the play, the “Native woman” who “never really fit into (white) American ideals” is set against the Westons and their home to create a sense of “counter-nostalgia” (Mohler 137). Mohler also points out that the play’s “structural and thematic similarities to the canon of

American drama” provide one of the many reasons that it elicits a “strong emotional response of nostalgia from its audience” (136). She offers a number of additional reasons for *August*’s marked sense of nostalgia: for example, its exploration of the “myth of the American family” (in fact, Mohler opines that audiences may “be nostalgic for such productions”), nostalgic representations about “the origin of nation, polity, and national character,” and “the myth of the sanctity of the American family, values of domesticity, fidelity, independence, and progress” (136, 137). Mohler suggests that Letts “seduces the audience” to “remember the past (their childhood, the idealized family units of 1950s sitcom, American family dramas, the settling of the west) while effectively exposing the “fragility” of cultural myths and proving them “unobtainable” (137, 140).

While Mohler’s focuses on how the image of the “reified American Indian,” embodied in the character Johnna, evokes a sense of counter-nostalgia and supports the challenge to the “myth of the American family,” she does not discuss the numerous intertextual references to poets and poetry, which not only structure *August* but provide insight into its multifaceted themes (131). Similar to *August*, *Man from Nebraska* and *Superior Donuts* contain numerous textual references to poets and poetry that likewise structure and inform the text and are worthy of inquiry. As Julia Kristeva explains, “. . . every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of the other discourses which impose a discourse upon it” (qtd, in Culler 116). Kristeva, who first introduced the term “intertextuality,”<sup>9</sup> maintains that texts have two types of connections: a “horizontal axis” that connects the author and the reader and a “vertical axis” that connects the text and other texts (Kristeva 36-38). This study explores how Tracy Letts’s *Man from Nebraska*, *August: Osage County*, and *Superior Donuts* challenge the “master narrative” through

their intertextual references to poets and poetry, such as Pablo Neruda, T.S. Eliot, and Langston Hughes, creating a poetic alternative to the traditional American "narrative" focusing on the individual while suggesting reconstruction through a "poetic perspective" focused on community. For purposes of this discussion, I would define "poetic perspective" as akin to Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of *la mestiza*, which she explains as follows:

[A] shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationally to move forward to a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. (2100)

This perspective urges a shift from a rigid, linear, individual, goal-oriented principle toward a principle of flexibility, unity, and synthesis. I intend to demonstrate that, in these three plays, poetry is offered as the material thing of value that socially, culturally, and economically dissimilar people exchange, which ultimately enriches their lives and offers a sense of hope.

## Chapter Two: *August: Osage County*

As homage to his late mentor Howard Starks, Tracy Letts titled his play set in Pawhuska, Oklahoma after Starks's poem "August: Osage County." The poem, published in the Oklahoman poet's book of poetry titled *Family Album: A Collection of Poetry* (1997), touches on themes of ageing, the passage of time, and the simple, yet poignant, words and actions of loved ones while waiting, sometimes expectantly, for death. Letts's play delves into similar themes, but the poetic references extend beyond *August: Osage County*'s thematic commonalities with its progenitor. Throughout the play -- but most significantly in the prologue -- more than a dozen references to poets and poetry create a strong sense of the nostalgia and irony characteristic of postmodern works. As Courtney Elkin Mohler explains, the play "articulates a kind of 'ironized nostalgia'" and "can be read as a postmodern rumination on the American identity and family in the 2000s" (131). Not surprisingly, some theater critics, such as Chris Jones, Charles Isherwood, and Teresa Choate, describe *August* as a postmodern portrait of a dysfunctional contemporary American family replete with alcoholism, drug-addiction, suicide, infidelity, child-molestation, and incest. However, I assert that in this Shakespearean length tragicomedy the numerous references to poets and poetry are more than mere intertextual references challenging a "master narrative" or criticizing liberal humanism. Rather, in *August: Osage County* the allusions and references to poets and their poetry, including framing



the play with quotes from Eliot's "The Hollow Men," point to the diminishment or dismissal of the intrinsic value of poetry in the lives of the Westons -- the allegorical representation of Western ideology's "master narrative."

To narrow my focus on this play (written for an ensemble cast of thirteen with extensive dialogue and a three hour performance time), in this chapter I center on the intertextual references to poetry in *August: Osage County* and various moments that best illustrate the Weston family's devaluation or dismissal of poetry. These include the following: in the Prologue, Beverly's references to Hart Crane and John Berryman as well as T.S. Eliot and his poem, "The Hollow Men"; in Act 1, a brief but revealing exchange between the oldest Weston daughter and her husband about Beverly's book of poems, *Meadowlark*; in Act 2, Violet's admission of her inability to recite poetry as evidenced in her reference to Emily Dickinson's "The Chariot"; and, finally, in Act 3, Letts's framing of the play with quotes from "The Hollow Men," including Johnna's final words referencing the poem. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to provide the foundation for my argument that, collectively, Letts's three plays, *Man from Nebraska*, *August: Osage County*, and *Superior Donuts*, celebrate art -- specifically, poetry -- as a force for personal and cultural renewal.

#### Olympian Suicidalists and Marginalized Icon

The prologue of *August: Osage County* opens with family patriarch Beverly Weston lamenting: "Life is very long" (Letts, *August* 10). The published poet and retired professor of literature sits in his cluttered home office interviewing the young Cheyenne woman Johnna for a position as housekeeper and caretaker for his acerbic, garrulous wife Violet, while bemoaning the contrast between T. S. Eliot "the man" and T. S. Eliot "the

poet” (Letts, *August* 10-11). During the interview, in which Beverly does most of the talking, he candidly admits, “My wife takes pills and I drink. That’s the bargain we’ve struck . . . *one* of the bargains” (Letts, *August* 13). He explains that one did not precipitate the other; they are simply facts – facts that “over time made burdensome the maintenance of the traditional, American routine” (Letts, *August* 13). As they sit, the Oklahoma summer heat, lack of air-conditioning, and drawn window blinds duct-taped shut create a stifling, dark interior in the Weston home. Acknowledging the pervasive “illness” within, Beverly cautions Johnna that she will not “be able to maintain any sort of healthy routine” while in their home (Letts, *August* 15). With its image of the family cocooned within the substance-enhanced “Weston world,” the prologue prefigures Beverly’s suicide and foreshadows the family’s impending struggle. It also depicts an illusionist representation of a stereotypic dysfunctional American family, as well as an emblematic presentation of a contemporary western worldview insulated within its own walls, rejecting all light from the outside.<sup>10</sup>

During this opening “monologue,” Beverly mentions both Hart Crane and John Berryman and, before the prologue ends, twice more refers to Eliot. Initially, Beverly generally refers to all three poets as he evaluates how Crane and Berryman might handle personal turmoil versus Eliot:

Not hard to imagine, faced with Eliot’s first wife, lovely, Viv, how Hart Crane or John Berryman might have reacted, just footraced to the nearest bridge, Olympian Suicidalists. Not Eliot: following sufficient years of ecclesiastical guilt, plop her in the nearest asylum and get on with the day. (Letts *August* 10).<sup>11</sup>

As Beverly continues interviewing Johnna, he refers to Berryman thrice more. The second reference to Berryman, “The world is gradually becoming a place where I do not care to be anymore,” derives from the elegiac “Dream Song 149” and occurs soon after Beverly’s criticism of Eliot and his confession of having an “affinity with the damaged” (Letts, *August* 11).<sup>12</sup> Beverly’s third reference to Berryman, his infamous quote, “Something has been said for sobriety but very little,” constitutes a weak attempt at ironic humor considering his own bargain with Violet about alcohol and drugs (Letts, *August* 11). Here, the references to Berryman and his poetry comment on Beverly’s hopelessness, alcoholism, and intention to end his life.

The final mention of Berryman occurs near the end of the prologue when Violet is first introduced to the audience by calling to Beverly from offstage. According to the stage notes, Beverly recites “to himself”: “By night within that ancient house/Immense, black, damned, anonymous” (Letts, *August* 13). This closing line from Berryman’s “The Curse” alludes to the Weston’s home, which not only has its window shades drawn and duct-taped shut, but, as the stage notes explain, lacks “structural care since 1972” (Letts, *August* 13). On an illusionist level, Beverly’s references to Berryman’s poetry inform the audience about the “damaged” and despairing mind of the patriarchal figure -- a man who made a bargain and took refuge in alcohol. Furthermore, the references demonstrate not only the professor-poet’s knowledge of poetry but his valuation of it. However, on an emblematic level, the references emphasize the “resolutely historical” and “inescapably political” characteristics of postmodernism (Hutcheon 4). Here, not only is Beverly Weston presented as symbolic of the damaged, dejected modern American liberal humanist, but the Weston “home” becomes the quintessential symbol of the American

Dream, which lacks “structural care since 1972” (Letts, *August* 13).<sup>13</sup> This significant year in American political history found Republican Richard Nixon winning the presidency in a “landslide” victory over Democratic candidate George McGovern -- the archetypal modern American liberal. For some historians the Nixon administration marks the beginning of the modern Republican era and a shift to a political ideology dedicated to benefitting corporate America rather than the American middle class. Therefore, from an emblematic perspective, the Western culture, and specifically the American middle class, symbolized by the Weston home, currently remains in a state of structural disrepair due to neglect by its patriarchal overseers for the past 35 years.

Beverly’s two remaining references to Eliot likewise inform the play on both the illusionist and emblematic levels, as well as indicating a devaluation of poetry. The first, which I suggest can be viewed as an “objective correlative” for the entire play, emerges when Beverly bestows his book of Eliot’s poetry on Johnna.<sup>14</sup> Dismissive of the work, he tells her: “Read it or not. It isn’t a job requirement” (Letts, *August* 16). Viewed as a metapoetic,<sup>15</sup> this self-conscious gesture comments on Eliot, who, according to Cynthia Ozick (ostensibly speaking for the literary community in her 1989 essay “A Critic at Large: T. S. Eliot at 101”), went from literary “god” to relative unwelcome guest in the halls of academia during the course of his career (119-120). This gesture, viewed as an “objective correlative” is characteristically postmodern in its self-reflective, self-conscious reaction to modernism. Linda Hutcheon explains that postmodern works engage with “critical revisiting: an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society,” which is inherently self-reflective and simultaneously paradoxical in its “claim to historical events and personages” (5). Furthermore, Jean-François Lyotard maintains that

postmodernism retains an attachment to modernism by “remembering” the past through art and integrating it with our thinking, specifically, our “current troubles” (1468). While this gesture, whereby Beverly purposely removes his book of Eliot poetry from his bookshelf and gives it to his newly hired Native American housekeeper, appears to be that of an individual simply dispersing possessions that he no longer needs, it also expresses the retired professor-poet’s current emotional attachment – or lack thereof -- to the poetry with which he once admittedly identified (Letts, *August* 16). Accordingly, Beverly’s act expresses an attitude toward art in which the value of poetry, or at least modern poetry with its inherent elitism (as represented by Eliot),<sup>16</sup> is not simply questioned, but diminished, if not entirely dismissed.

Beverly’s second and last reference to Eliot occurs at the close of the prologue when he again quotes from “The Hollow Men,” reciting, “Here we go round the prickly pear,” the knowing patriarch’s ironic pun considering the turmoil about to transpire in the following three acts (Letts, *August* 6). This final reference is addressed in the following section.

#### “The Hollow Men” and a Prickly Pear

Three years after the publication of Eliot’s landmark work, *The Waste Land*, “The Hollow Men” was first published in *Poems: 1909-1925*, and while the focus here is not on an explication of “The Hollow Men,” a brief overview of the poem and a discussion of a few key elements help inform the thematic connection between “The Hollow Men,” Beverly Weston, and *August: Osage County*. Situated between Eliot’s emerging literary celebrity and his baptism in the Anglican Church, some literary critics suggest that “The Hollow Men” consists of remnants from *The Waste Land*, while others contend that it

differs dramatically in style and stresses more vehemently the theme of modern corruption; still others believe it expresses a personal shift in Eliot's philosophical perspective. Although critics hold diametrically opposed opinions about "The Hollow Men" (and Eliot) and create a sense of confusion about the poem in general, most concur, as pointed out by Venus Freeman, that "the theme of despair dominates" the poem (41).<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, Beverly Weston's recollection of this particular poem as he plans his suicide not only confirms Beverly's despair but hints at its cause.

The epigraphs from "The Hollow Men" -- "Mistah Kurtz -- he dead" and "A penny for the Old Guy," -- suggest the themes of the poem and, in turn, inform some aspects of *August: Osage County*. The first epigraph contains a reference to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; the second refers to Guy Fawkes of the infamous Gunpowder Plot.<sup>18</sup> Hugh Kenner states that Eliot had an "affinity with Conrad's vision of subtle evisceration," and the metaphorical connection between Kurtz and the "hollow men" accentuates the parallel between men like Conrad's Kurtz, who live in pursuit of "things" without thought about the consequences of their actions on the world in which they live, and Eliot's vision of modern man, in other words, a parallel between men focused on personal extrinsic value rather than the communal intrinsic value (159). And although the "hollow men" literally alludes to a line from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Craig Raine, among others, explains that the speaker(s), the "hollow men," are "men without substance . . . without guts or integrity . . . men who are spiritually gelded" (15).<sup>19</sup> Consequently, for Raine and Kenner, the "hollow men" represent a specific

segment of individuals within the Western culture who exist without any substance, act without questioning their actions, and follow the status quo, men stuffed with the hollowness of their insincere financial pursuits.

When the audience first meets Beverly Weston, he bemoans the upkeep required to maintain the “traditional American routine” of “paying bills, purchase of goods, cleaning of our clothes or carpets or crappers,” and, as if quoting directly from Jean-François Lyotard, the professor-poet criticizes ritualistic consumerism when he comments on “the American-made behemoth parked in the carport,” and “all this garbage we’ve acquired” (Letts, *August* 11). The playwright’s chosen reference to “The Hollow Men” reinforces the challenge to the ritualistic American consumer culture in which Beverly participates, and, albeit partially, explains his psychomachia,<sup>20</sup> and points to at least one cause for his deep despair.

According to Kenner, the Guy Fawkes epigraph (“A penny for the old guy”) invokes Fawkes as emblematic of the failed assassination of King James I. Furthermore, it operates as an intertextual reference that glosses the oft quoted final lines of “The Hollow Men”: “This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper.” As Harold Bloom comments, this line, partially quoted by Johnna at the conclusion of *August*, alludes to the violent, but failed Gunpowder Plot “that ended not with a bang but with an act of cowardice” (61). Here, from an illusionist perspective, the association of Beverly Weston with Guy Fawkes not only identifies the act of suicide but also Beverly’s life of conforming to the “status quo” -- “the ritualistic American consumer culture” in pursuit of things that quantify life based on personal extrinsic rewards rather than the communal intrinsic – with an act of cowardice. Emblematically, it comments on the dissipation of

the American middle class (arguably beginning in 1972) and of the possibility of “financial freedom and economic independence, which lies at the heart of the ‘American Dream’” (Mohler 134).

In *August*, the three textual references to “The Hollow Men” consist of two lines spoken by Beverly Weston (“Life is very long” and “Here we go round the prickly pear”), which frame the prologue, and the final reference, delivered by Johnna -- the final line of the play -- (“This is the way the world end”) (Letts, *August* 10, 16, 138).<sup>21</sup> These three references thus bracket the play with references to Eliot’s poem. Beverly attributes the first reference (the first line of the play), “Life is very long,” to Eliot although he readily acknowledges that Eliot was not the first to say it, but he receives the credit because he was the first to “write it down” (Letts, *August* 10). Beverly’s final words, which also close the prologue, “Here we go round the prickly pear/At five o’clock in the morning” parodies a nursery rhyme alluding to the carefree, yet mindless activity of children. Raine explains that the line is not “simply a nursery rhyme, but describes behaviour that is enigmatically empty. Why do we go round the prickly pear? It is a perfect, quasi-ritualized pointless activity that symbolizes the life fundamentally un-lived” (20). Recited at the end of the prologue and immediately before the audience meets the “prickly” Weston family, it provides ironic humor; however, it also comments again on Beverly’s despair about a life “un-lived” and possibly his observation concerning the Weston family as a whole.

When Letts opens his play with an older, white male, mid-western college professor quoting Eliot while interviewing a Native American housekeeper and lamenting the burden of maintaining the “traditional American routine,” the playwright not only



alludes to the character's psychological state, but also foreshadows Beverly Weston's suicide and suggests the demise of an era (Letts, *August* 11). He also prefigures the family's struggle to define their existence, insulated within their "Weston world." In characteristically postmodern fashion, despite having the Weston patriarch dismiss Eliot, Letts also exploits Eliot and his work to demonstrate that "The Hollow Men," over 80 years after its publication, continues to represent a segment of American culture. The references likewise suggest, as the action of the play demonstrates, that the "hollowness" is not limited to "men," but has pervaded the entire family and the surviving Weston women are as hollow as the men of the previous generation.

Furthermore, I would argue that Letts's references to "The Hollow Men" reinforce the observations of Joseph Jonghyn Jeon and Craig Raine who maintain that "The Hollow Men" is situated between Eliot's earlier conviction, as expressed in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," that the "poet might transform culture," and his later position whereby Eliot "calls for poetry to serve orthodox values" (15). Similarly, Raine points out that "The Hollow Men" reflects the polarity between Eliot's early "humanist" view and his later "theological" perspective (18). Thus, Beverly Weston, who admits "identifying" with Eliot "the poet" in his "role" as a professor and published poet, suggests an affinity with Eliot's early humanist belief that the poet possessed the ability to "transform culture" through art (Letts, *August* 11). However, as life -- this long life -- continued and, ultimately, faded into the twilight years, Weston came to realize that he followed a path, perhaps not so far removed metaphysically and ideologically from that of Conrad's Kurtz, whereby the pursuit of money and the collection of "things" shaped him into another one of Eliot's "hollow men." By having Weston bestow his book of

Eliot's poetry on Johnna, the Native American housekeeper who operates as the moral touchstone of the play, Letts divests Weston of his culture and transfers it to Johnna as a sort of "guidebook" from which to understand the dysfunctional family who now employs her as symbolic of the patriarchal ideology that usurped her cultural heritage. Eliot's poetry in Johnna's hands is ostensibly a foreign language, a commentary on a culture far removed from her own despite occupying the same land mass.

### Meadowlark and a Broken Chariot

Early in Beverly Weston's career, his book of poems *Meadowlark* was a "big deal" (Letts, *August* 46), but other than the few notebooks of "new poetry" discovered after his death, presumably Beverly had not written poetry in close to 40 years (Letts, *August* 88). Arguably, the title of Beverly's first and only book may reveal yet another ironic engagement with the past. However, I suggest that the title *Meadowlark* indicates Beverly's kinship, albeit neglected or long forgotten, to a philosophy more closely aligned with Johnna's heritage than with his own, one that embraced "poetic connections" and affirmed community, flexibility, and synthesis rather than rigid linear "narrative" individualism.

In his book *Skylark Meets Meadowlark*, Thomas C. Gannon explores the marked distinction between the dominant mode of Euro-American/Romantic and Native American avian imagery and discusses the significant role of the Western Meadowlark in Native American myth and poetry.<sup>22</sup> For example, Gannon explains that poets who wrote about the English skylark, such as Wordsworth and Shelley, found "no warmth from their ethereal bird"; in fact, it only serves to remind them of "the burden of their humanity" (234). Conversely, the benevolent role of the meadowlark in Native American culture is

more than mere stereotypical “animal guardian” (Gannon 234). Julian Rice characterizes the distinction as follows: “Unlike the animals of Romantic and twentieth-century British and American Poetry, the meadowlark is neither more or less blessed than man; rather, he exists in the Lakota consciousness as both model and messenger” (430). In Native American culture, these ground-nesting songbirds remind their human counterparts that connectedness is more than mere words (Gannon 307). Julia Kristeva proposes a similar idea in her concept of the *chora*, in particular the idea that a “pre-verbal” or “kinetic functional stage . . . precede[s] or transcend[s] language” and emphasizes a connection between body, objects, and family structure (2074). The meadowlark in Native American literature articulates this connection in its role as a truth-teller, a protector, and in some stories the ideal parental figure to “instructively” provide a “healthful atmosphere” for the “listener’s growth” (Rice 424-428). Rice further characterizes the meadowlark as a “conscientious storyteller,” who communicates “messages of immediate and long-range benefit to individuals and to the people through these individuals” and “enlivens” their life with “joy” (425). Most significantly for this thesis, Rice explains that the people “not only appreciated and admired the song of the bird – but needed it” (427).

The audience first learns of Beverly’s book of poetry in Act 1, scene 2 when in the course of chastising the eldest Weston daughter Barbara for moving away, Violet mentions that Beverly declined opportunities to leave Oklahoma for teaching jobs elsewhere “after *Meadowlark* came out” (Letts, *August* 39). Barbara immediately minimizes the success of her father’s book and suggests that it would not meet with the same success in today’s competitive market as it did 40 years ago (Letts, *August* 39). In the next scene, a brief but telling exchange between Barbara and her husband Bill further

reveals the devaluation of Beverly's book by his daughter. Just before bed on that first night in the "madhouse," Bill explains to Barbara that he found hard copies of Beverly's book. Barbara dismisses the discovery with her comment, "We have copies"; still intrigued by the find, Bill ponders aloud, "I wonder if this is worth something?" Barbara indifferently replies, "I'm sure it's not" (Letts, *August* 46). They continue:

BILL. This book was big deal.

BARBARA. It wasn't that big a deal.

BILL. In those circles, it was.

BARBARA. Those are small circles. (Letts, *August* 46)

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BILL. "Dedicated to my Violet." That's nice. . . I can't imagine the kind of pressure he must've felt after this came out. Probably every word he wrote after this, he had to be to thinking, "What are they going to say about this? Are they going to compare it to *Meadowlark*? . . . At some point you just say, "To hell with this," and you write something anyway, and who cares what they say about it. . . .

BARBARA. Will you please shut up about the fucking book? (Letts, *August* 46)

Throughout the remainder of the play, *Meadowlark* is only mentioned once more: at the beginning of Act 2, after Beverly's burial, Violet picks up a copy of the book, reads the dedication -- to her -- aloud, and then, drops the book on the desk and pops a pill (Letts, *August* 58). At the family dinner later that day, Violet mentions Beverly's poetry but only

to belittle his failure to write more (Letts, *August* 88). Markedly, neither of the other two Weston daughters, the middle child Ivy and the youngest Karen, ever mention their father's publication or poetry.

In striking contrast to her husband, at the beginning of Act 2, Violet Weston -- whose name phonetically suggests violence (and contrasts with her husband's feminine name) -- confesses her inability to write or recite poetry. As Violet sits in Beverly's office, she mangles a few broken lines from Emily Dickinson's poem "The Chariot": "The Carriage held but just Ourselves,' dum-de-dum . . . mm, best I got . . . Emily Dickinson's all I got . . . something something, 'Horse's Heads Were Toward Eternity'" (Letts, *August* 58). Conversely, her caretaker Johnna, who emerges as the play's moral touchstone, at least once remarks that she is reading from the book of Eliot's poetry.<sup>23</sup> The drama concludes with Johnna sitting on the side of her attic bed singing, "This is the way the world ends, this is the way the world ends . . ." while comforting Violet who cries in her lap saying "-- and then you're gone, and then you're gone" (Letts, *August* 138). Together, the two women -- one who belittles her husband's poetry and has little interest in anyone else's, and one who willingly spends free time engaging with a poet whom Western culture has marginalized -- conclude the play in a dramatic tableau.<sup>24</sup>

Collectively, Barbara's diminishment of her father's book, her sisters' seeming indifference to it, and Violet's disparagement of Beverly's or anyone else's verse, indicate the family's lack of admiration and little, if any, appreciation for Beverly's *Meadowlark*, and for poetry in general. One is tempted to characterize the family's attitude as representative of a postmodern challenge to a "master narrative" -- specifically, a challenge to individualism, patriarchal linear thinking, and elitism

associated with the “narrow view” of Eliot.<sup>25</sup> However, when juxtaposed against Johnna’s interest in poetry and viewed from a Native American perspective -- especially one as associated with avian imagery – this devaluation of poetry demonstrates that the Weston family failed to heed their “model and messenger” and cull from their “truthteller” what might have been of benefit: instruction, long-term guidance, a “healthful atmosphere,” and, most importantly, “personal growth” and “joy” (Rice 423-428). Likewise, it hints at Western culture’s devaluation or complete dismissal of Native American culture that might have been equally beneficial. As a result, the surviving Weston women reflect a society centered on patriarchal privilege and power and portray the lack of insight experienced when individuals fail to see beyond their own “kingdom.” In fact, in a many ways, the surviving Weston family is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. As Marilyn French observes, *Lear* “represents an entire class of Western culture and mainstream Western thinking” and the “flaw” of “all societies in which people who “believe in traditional privilege and inherent right exhibit” “blindness and arrogance” (French 225). In *August*, the “unwell” Weston family is similarly flawed.

For example, later in Act 2, at the ritual dinner following Beverly’s burial, Violet assumes her role as “head of the household,” but her power is usurped nearly as quickly as it is gained. Rejecting the feminine characteristics of compassion, benevolence, and mercy, Violet bombards her company with vicious verbal remarks directed at family members and guests about their respective flaws or secrets. Alternating between disparaging personal observations and callous references to auctioning the family furniture, Violet awkwardly announces that Beverly had a number of “nice investments,” and although they “never got around to taking care of it legally,” Beverly meant to leave

“everything” – that is “the money” to her (Letts, *August* 92). In Lear-like fashion, Violet quantifies love not by what her daughters stand to inherit, but rather by their willingness to relinquish rights to family possessions or wealth in favor of their mother. As the tension increases, Barbara admonishes Violet for “attacking” everyone and realizes that her mother is under the influence of her “little blue babies,” but Violet now recognizes Barbara as a threat to her power and yells at her (adult) children, “You can’t do this! This is my house! This is my house!” (Letts, *August* 96). However, Barbara, as much a product of the patriarchy as her mother, “towering over her” screams “You don’t get it do you? I’M RUNNING THINGS NOW!!” (Letts, *August* 97). This climactic power struggle with its violent words and actions, demonstrates what critics and audiences have already identified -- the dysfunctional, contemporary American family. Dramaturgically, Barbara’s declaration of power represents the generational shift in Western culture from the “greatest generation” to “baby boomers” who, despite growing up in the 1960s and 1970s and commonly associated with the rejection of traditional values, are generally no less focused on material wealth and patriarchal values than the preceding generation.

Furthermore, Violet Weston and her daughters, all products of an oppressive patriarchal society rather than a society that a book titled *Meadowlark* might have advocated, never achieve an understanding of a “healthy” love. As discussed above, Barbara, who left Oklahoma with her husband for more lucrative university positions elsewhere, trivializes the “worth” of her father’s poetry and poetry in general (“Those are small circles”), despite her occupation as a literature professor. Barbara’s pecuniary goals, judgment about “worth,” and declaration of power within the Weston family – as well as abandoning her own writing -- affirm her assimilation of patriarchal values.

Ultimately, Barbara's marital and parental relationships suffer. The middle Weston daughter Ivy at age forty-four still clings so tightly to her parents and her childhood home that she is unable to find "love" other than to commit to an incestuous relationship with her half-brother-cousin, Charles. Yet, the youngest Weston child is arguably the most significant. The effervescent Karen, who lives the furthest away in "sunny Florida" but claims to still feel "very connected," remains determined to fulfill what feminist Adrienne Rich describes as the patriarchal "ideology of heterosexual romance" (1591-1602).<sup>26</sup> Upon returning home for her father's funeral, Karen recalls childhood dreams for the future when she would "marry a lawyer or football player," vacation on tropical islands, and have children—all of which, at forty, have eluded her (Letts, *August* 59). Her determination to fulfill these childhood dreams of romance and "happily-ever-after" results in misplaced "values" and commitment to share her life with a lying, perverted thrice married arms dealer in exchange for "a dream" (Letts, *August* 102). While all three daughters portray the lost sense of values, the inability to love, and, arguably, the ignorance shared by a segment of Americans, Karen's poignant speech about the inability to "move forward because you can't stop thinking backward" and her subsequent actions of turning away from her family to fulfill her "dream," seemingly represents those immobilized by self-flagellation who have failed to learn from their mistakes (Letts, *August* 59-60). Thus, under the disillusionary idea of "doing" something, the Westons perpetuate the mistakes of the past in pursuit of a "dream." In the end, Violet's self-centered and vicious actions destroy her entire family leaving her alone and metaphorically "stripped to her nakedness" as she crawls up the attic stairs -- literally the



“mad woman in the attic”; there, left to cry on the lap of Johnna, who recites “This is the way the world ends, this is the way the world ends . . .” (Gilbert and Gubar 1926; Letts, *August* 138).

While Letts could not expect the theatre audience to recognize all of the allusions, poetic and otherwise, in *August: Osage County*, like all great writers he writes on many levels and leaves his work to the audience for their various interpretations. From my view, the textual references support the idea that the Westons, as a family and as a symbol of the “unwell” Western world, reflect a hollowness and loss of connectedness between the individual, the family, and society due to lack of self-knowledge. This pessimistic view results from the failure of society to engage in the arts and culture in favor of pursuing dreams of material possessions. Thus, closing the play with Johnna reciting lines from a poem by the poet whom Beverly references and laments in the prologue (presumably learned from the book of poetry he bestows on her), neatly frames the drama, but reminds the audience of the emptiness and despair that Beverly expresses before his suicide. The framing also serves to remind the audience that Beverly once identified with Eliot “the poet” and suggests an affinity with Eliot’s early conviction that the poet possessed the ability to “transform culture” through art. Like Eliot, who later rejected his idealistic view of the power of poetry to transform humanity in favor of the orthodoxy of the church and monarchy, Beverly turned away from poetry. However, as his “long life” continued, Beverly realized that he followed a path whereby the things that provided intrinsic value, such as art and culture, were traded for “all this garbage we’ve acquired,” which shaped him, and, consequently, his wife and daughters into hollow images of a home and family (Letts, *August* 15).

### Chapter Three: *Man from Nebraska*

For a brief period in the early 1920's, the United States claimed a significant connection to human evolution. When geologist Harold Cook discovered a fossilized tooth in sediment on his ranch in northwestern Nebraska, he sent it to paleontologist Henry Fairfield Osborn, then president of the American Museum for Natural History, to determine its origins. According to John Wolf and James S. Mellett, within a month of receiving the tooth from Cook, Osborn announced that "*Hesperopithecus haroldcookii* was the first anthropoid ape from North America" (33). Soon thereafter, this tooth, which became known as the "Ape of the Western World" caused intense debate since Osborn, who was eager to have a North American connection to evolution, based his announcement on little more than the appearance of the "worn fossil tooth" (Wolf and Mellett 32). While some considered the announcement speculative and based on personal agenda rather than credible scientific inquiry, Osborn's friend and colleague, British anatomist Grafton Elliot Smith, "acknowledged *Hesperopithecus* as a genus of extinct hominids" and together with artist Amedee Forestier "rendered an artistic reconstruction" of "Nebraska Man" which appeared in the *Illustrated London News* (Wolf and Mellett 33). Smith became one of the strongest defenders of the "Ape of the Western World," but after six years of debate and credible scientific research by William King Gregory, the true "affinity" of the fossilized tooth was discovered to be that of a "pig-like animal" (Wolf and Mellett 32). While Wolf and Mellett admit that "Nebraska Man" did not

survive long enough to become widely accepted by the scientific community and was quickly forgotten when its true identity was recognized,” for a few short years, this “Ape of the Western World” played a role in the evolution of “man” (Wolf and Mellet 32).

Like Osborn, my attempt to draw a connection between “Nebraska Man” and Tracy Letts’s *Man from Nebraska* might be founded on speculation and personal agenda. However, Letts’s play about a middle-class, middle-aged, mid-western “everyman” who awakens one night with a sense of emptiness that causes him to question his faith and the meaning of his existence seems more than mere coincidence. For Letts, Ken Carpenter, the uncomplicated man from Nebraska, plays all the prescribed middle-American roles: faithful husband, loving father, and dutiful son. Carpenter’s “awakening” propels him on a journey that transforms him from a simple-minded man living a prescribed life to a more fully evolved individual living more fulfilling existence.

In striking contrast to Letts’s earlier work, *Killer Joe* (1994) and *Bug* (1996), in which he prolifically employs vulgarity and violence to provoke an audience from their habitual gaze, *Man from Nebraska* subtly intrigues with silences “comfortable and otherwise” (Letts, *Nebraska* 2). At the onset of this minimalist play, these silences express more than words as the gentle shift from scenes and movements depicts the routine of everyday life: attending church, going to dinner, and visiting a terminally ill parent. To be sure, Letts does not completely abandon the use of sex, nudity, and violence, but what seems like a passing reference to the poetry of Pablo Neruda proves one of the most provocative aspect of this work – especially in conjunction with the two plays succeeding it, *August: Osage County* (2007) and *Superior Donuts* (2008), which likewise contain numerous references to poetry. In *Man from Nebraska*, Letts finely

weaves references to Neruda's poetry within the dialogue between Carpenter, an allegorical representation of the un-evolved Western world, and Tamyra, a young black woman who functions as his catalyst of change.<sup>27</sup> This chapter examines *Man from Nebraska* and the textual references to the poetry of Pablo Neruda that operate as a "poetic exchange" between the protagonist Ken Carpenter and his agent of change Tamyra and support the idea that art, specifically poetry and sculpture, evoke a transformation resulting in the protagonist's emotional evolution.

This unoriginal premise of mid-life crisis (immortalized in the works of Sinclair Lewis and Saul Bellow, among others) follows a linear or Aristotelian plot structure: Carpenter experiences a "crisis of faith," escapes to London, undergoes a transformation, and returns home a recreated man, seeking reconciliation with his wife and family. In Carpenter's journey, London serves as the Shakespearean "green world" in which an individual undergoes a transformative process by encountering the unexpected, which evokes a sense of wonder, effects a metamorphosis, and results in an illumination.<sup>28</sup> This transformative process commences when Carpenter strikes up a friendship with the hotel bartender, Tamyra, who introduces him to the world of art, beginning with the poetry of Pablo Neruda. After Tamyra identifies the book that she is reading as Neruda's poetry, the following exchange occurs:

KEN. It never held much interest for me. Poetry. As a subject. As kind of writing.

TAMYRA. As a form of literature.

KEN. Right.

TAMYRA. You prefer other forms.

KEN. I suppose so.

TAMYRA. You need a narrative.

KEN. Right.

TAMYRA. A story.

KEN. Yes.

TAMYRA. Otherwise, how would you ever get from here to there? (Letts, *Nebraska* 40-41)

Tamyra astutely sizes up her American customer and correctly identifies Carpenter with patriarchal, linear thinking.

According to Margaret Morganroth Gullette, this linear thinking begins in childhood and develops throughout youth and middle age as a result of “naturalized mega-narratives” (142). Gullette refers to these “mega-narratives as “life-course imaginaries” and explains that these narratives, which vary from culture to culture, include “comprehensive narratives . . . stories, prospective or retrospective, about moving through life” and are passed from generation to generation as well as depicted through novels and films (142). Gullette argues that these narratives contribute to the cultural construction of age as well the individual’s world view. Gullette also explains that some of the most influential “life-course imaginaries” are “invisible”:

Narratives may have the most power over us when they are invisible, that is, infinitely repeatable in ordinary life but unnoticed and unanalyzed. The “American Dream” is actually –whatever else it may be – such a narrative. It flourishes in the half-lit, semiconscious realm of conversation and writing, where all the other master narratives once dwelt. It is an example

of a life-course imaginary told by people in their everyday lives, over time, about work and its consequences: first to themselves prospectively, then in media res, and finally, retrospectively. (143)

Generally speaking, the “American Dream” narrative includes the promise of personal fulfillment, opportunity, upward mobility, financial success (including the accumulation of goods and wealth), and home ownership. Gullette maintains that the “Dream” “seems purely personal or domestic” because of its focus on homeownership, but adds that “it is an economic life-course story” that “requires extrinsic measures like steady employment, a decent salary, security, and of course, a rising age/wage curve” (145). Similar to *August: Osage County*, *Man from Nebraska* begins with the premise that the “American Dream” and its focus on the pursuit of “extrinsic measures” results in an emotional or philosophical hollowness.

Utilizing the definition above, Ken Carpenter has fulfilled many life-course imaginaries including the “American Dream”: he enjoys a sound marriage, two healthy daughters, a successful career, a luxury car, a beautiful home, and the financial means to care for his elderly mother in a private nursing home. In fact, Carpenter enjoys the luxury of exploring his mid-life crisis -- one that he articulates as a “crisis of faith” -- by “vacationing” for more than three weeks in London. In Scene 7 of the First Movement, Carpenter awakens in the middle of the night shaking, weeping, and having difficulty breathing; he cannot answer his frightened wife Nancy’s questions about how to help (Letts, *Nebraska* 11-13). When she “approaches him with comforting arms,” the stage directions indicate that Carpenter “spasms, retreats” and rebuffs her three times (Letts,

*Nebraska* 12). After strained moments, Carpenter confesses, “I don’t believe in God” (Letts, *Nebraska* 12). However, as the plot continues, Carpenter’s “crisis” seems to involve much more than his belief (or not) in God:

KEN. I don’t think . . . there’s a God. I don’t believe in him anymore.

NANCY. What do you believe in?

KEN. I don’t know.

\*\*\*

KEN. Maybe we’re just . . . *science*. Like they say accidental science. . . .That doesn’t matter. I don’t know what I believe in. It doesn’t matter. But I don’t think there’s a man in heaven, a God in heaven. I don’t believe there’s a heaven. We die and . . . we’re done, no more, just.

\*\*\*

The stars. In the sky. Don’t make sense. To me. I don’t understand them.

\*\*\*

Can you explain the stars?

NANCY. No.

KEN. Then you can’t do anything. There’s nothing you can do. (Letts, *Nebraska* 13-17)

Here, the self-professed “man of faith,” who heretofore simply “accepted,” begins to question not only his belief in God, but his understanding of the world.<sup>29</sup> The morning following his “awakening,” Nancy suggests that he speak with their pastor, but Carpenter expresses hesitancy:

KEN. It's a feeling.

NANCY. Sounds like an empty feeling.

KEN. I don't know. Maybe.

NANCY. Well, isn't empty bad?

KEN. Not necessarily.

\*\*\*

KEN. Empty isn't bad if it's the truth. The truth can't be bad, can it? (Letts, *Nebraska* 17-18)

This conversation suggests that Carpenter's doubts extend beyond the existence (or not) of God; rather, Carpenter, now "awakened" to a sense of hollowness, seeks to question instead of blindly accepting. Consequently, what he initially articulates as a "crisis of faith" begins to emerge as a quest for meaning, which Carpenter struggles to communicate (Letts, *Nebraska* 17-18).

For example, after his morning conversation with his wife, Carpenter visits his daughter Ashley and confesses "a crisis of faith." He explains that his "doubts" are "tied up with . . . with everything . . . my way of life, um . . . routines. My routine with your mother . . . And the job, and the, the town . . ." (Letts, *Nebraska* 21). Here again, Carpenter characterizes his "crisis" as religious doubt; however, his explanations (at home and later in London) contain few specific questions about God, faith, or religion. In fact, in the conversation with his pastor, he does not question religious beliefs or doubts or how one might undertake a modern religious quest. Oddly, they discuss the weather, their respective golf handicaps, and Carpenter's need for a vacation. Moreover, Carpenter's choice of London, the birthplace of literary not religious traditions, suggests



a secular, not spiritual, journey. Thus, I maintain that Carpenter's repressed sense of exploration causes him to identify this "empty feeling" with the only philosophical thought he is familiar: his faith (Letts, *Nebraska* 40-41).<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, as a man who admittedly prefers a narrative, Carpenter conflates the Christian narrative of faith with the American Dream narrative, which -- despite a successful marriage, healthy children and grandchildren, and his numerous "extrinsic measures" of success -- results in his social, cultural, and emotional repression as well as a sense of hollowness (Gullette 145).

In the Third Movement, Carpenter's encounter on the plane to London with successful business woman Pat Monday demonstrates his artlessness and reticent personality. On this first trip out of the United States in forty years and away from Nebraska for the first time in twenty, Carpenter awkwardly converses with Pat and fails to recognize her overt invitation for casual sex while in London. Pat's worldliness and candor juxtaposed against Carpenter's naiveté and inability to articulate the reason for his trip reveal Carpenter as socially and culturally stunted. Further, in response to one of Pat's questions, Carpenter mentions he is staying at the Leicester Square Sheraton; a "nice," "centrally located" hotel in London's popular theatre and cinema district (Letts, *Nebraska* 37). The mid-western insurance man's selection of an American chain hotel might indicate either his preference for value or perhaps a lack of travel experience, but the hotel and its location also suggest Carpenter's naiveté about how to undertake a quest for enlightenment. As Tamyra explains, Leicester Square is "designed for you lot, for Americans, to feel like America's gutless version of England. You'll get as an authentic experience at Epcot" (Letts, *Nebraska* 58). Within this *simulacra*,<sup>31</sup> Carpenter remains in a protected environment that prevents him from experiencing the "pain" required for

authentic growth; as the insightful Tamyra observes, he “never really needed to leave Lincoln” (Letts, *Nebraska* 58). Similarly, Carpenter’s “customer-bartender relationship” with Tamyra operates as another type of *simulacra*. The hotel bar offers yet another “safe” and familiar, but equally fraudulent environment. And once again, Tamyra provides enlightenment. When she comments to Carpenter that he has “a lot to say” to her (in contrast to his complaint that he has nothing to say to his wife), he replies, “You’re easy. You’re just the bartender” (Letts, *Nebraska* 55). Tamyra allows the comment to pass unchallenged, but when Carpenter “pines for his freedom,” the insightful barkeep educates her patron about “freedom” and illuminates the reality of their “relationship”:

Why do you think I’m nice to you? . . . because it’s my job, I listen to your stories, ask you questions, lend a sympathetic ear. Why do you suppose that is? Have an opinion? . . . For the money. I’m nice because you tip well. . . Americans speak the language of money. That’s your language, Ken. Money. You pay me to be nice to you. So I am. (Letts, *Nebraska* 56)

Thus, despite traveling 4000 miles with the intention of resolving a “crisis of faith,” Carpenter soon learns that this “Foreign but . . . not too foreign country” requires him not only to venture outside his comfort zone but to learn a new language: the language of poetry (Letts, *Nebraska* 43).

As discussed earlier, when Carpenter first meets Tamyra she identifies the book that she is reading as Neruda’s poetry. When he admits that poetry never held his interest, she playfully chides him about needing a “narrative”; the audience later learns the impact of this encounter (Letts, *Nebraska* 40-41). This first reference alludes to an unnamed

book of Neruda's poetry and occurs soon after Carpenter's arrival in London. The second reference to Neruda's poetry (in the Sixth Movement, Scene 11) is to "Sonnet 49" published in *100 Love Sonnets* (1986) and, unbeknownst to both Carpenter and Tamyra, occurs the last time they see each other before Carpenter returns to Nebraska. He recites: "The sky folds its wings over you,/Lifting you, carrying you to my arms,/With punctual, mysterious courtesy./That's why I sing to the day and to the moon,/To the sea, to time and all the planets,/To your daily voice, to your nocturnal skin" (Letts, *Nebraska* 76). While this sonnet is a typical, yet mature, love poem, and somewhat of an homage to Shakespeare's sonnets to his "dark lady,"<sup>32</sup> especially in its concern about ageing and the passage of time, it expresses Neruda's tradition of associating women with nature and "making woman into a veritable force of the universe" (Costa 21). Thus, Carpenter's decision to recite this poem to Tamyra demonstrates his engagement with poetry and his understanding of poetic language since the poem expresses not only his affection for her but acknowledges her role in his transformation.

Furthermore, the function of Neruda's poetry within the play serves a dual purpose. First, as illustrated above, it frames Carpenter's journey to emotional enlightenment, and second, it informs as to how his journey transpires. As Adam Feinstein observes, the young Neruda led an eccentric, bohemian lifestyle and conformed to the modernist view of "the poet as an outcast from bourgeois society" (2). Neruda, the Marxist-thinker-poet also believed that "that man – and writers, above all, had a duty to embrace life and commit to seeking social justice" (Feinstein 2, 36). Based on this assessment of Neruda, the connection between Neruda's poetry and the figures who act as agents of change for Carpenter -- the insightful and free-spirited Tamyra and her artist-

sculptor and politically aware flat mate Harry -- supports the view that the play urges this “man from Nebraska” not only toward a more fully evolved “passion” for life than he had previously experienced but also toward a new perspective on the world around him.

For example, Carpenter’s transformation begins when he leaves the Leicester Square Sheraton and ventures into Tamyra and Harry’s “bohemian” world. After an intoxicating night of dancing and partying, Carpenter and Harry engage in a brief but tense political debate about “swapping culture and education for aggression and capitalism” (Letts, *Nebraska* 64). However, Carpenter’s facile responses prove no match for Harry’s Oxford education, social-cultural awareness, and politically progressive philosophy. Later, after Carpenter expresses an interest in learning to sculpt, Harry’s artistic sensitivity aids Carpenter in his journey. Harry explains that sculpturing is not a “recreation” but rather an “interpretation” or a translation of the subject “[t]hrough [the artist’s] language” (Letts, *Nebraska* 74). Carpenter crudely attempts to sculpt his piece while Harry explains that “your belief, your expression of your belief: that’s art” (Letts, *Nebraska* 74). As Carpenter continues to sculpt in a rudimentary fashion, the piece eventually breaks, which causes Harry to exclaim: “You’re like some ape, one of those fucking apes from 2001” (Letts, *Nebraska* 75). Harry’s remark establishes the connection between Osborn’s “Nebraska Man” and Letts’s *Man from Nebraska*, which supports the proposition that Ken Carpenter functions as an allegorical representation of Western culture and that his journey is not faith-based, but rather more closely aligned with a struggle for understanding. By engaging with the arts, specifically poetry and sculpture, Carpenter becomes more intuitive and emotionally evolved.

*Man from Nebraska* opens with Carpenter's wife delivering the line, "They're finally going to tear down that ugly house" (3). Accordingly, in the tradition of Ibsen and other modern dramatists who, as Una Chaudhuri explains, address the "problematic of home," Letts identifies the home that needs razing, presumably for the audience that he claims to have missed with his two earlier, grittier, plays (57-58).<sup>33</sup> As an allegorical figure, Nebraska Man" Ken Carpenter represents the dominant segment of the white, middle-class American population and their un-evolved, linear thinking, those who willing trade off "culture and education for aggression and capitalism," resulting in a socially-culturally repressed and hollow middle class (Letts, *Nebraska* 64). However, Letts depicts this "Ape of the Western world" as capable of evolving. The references to Pablo Neruda's poetry not only celebrate artistry and inspiration but suggest that the artist possesses the power to effect social change. Thus, when Ken Carpenter steps out of the Leicester Square Sheraton with Tamyra, he abandons his narrative centered on the pursuit of "extrinsic measures" and the "language of money" in exchange for the language of poetry and a new found awareness. As a result, this "Nebraska Man" discovers a more meaningful "poetic life" and returns home with a new perspective and defined purpose -- fully capable of seeking forgiveness and reconciliation with his family and tearing down and rebuilding his "home."

## Chapter Four: *Superior Donuts*

In a recent editorial, *New York Times* executive editor Bill Keller proposed the idea that members of the United States Congress might benefit from reading poetry. Keller wrote that he expected “eye-rolling,” and his editor thought the idea raised “a tiny, very, very small red flag,” but Keller held firm. Reflecting on a management program he attended at Wharton Business School 20 years ago, Keller explained that lecture topics included not only finance and entrepreneurship but a “delightfully incongruous session on . . . poetry.” Keller explained that the course, which initially seemed frivolous, proved beneficial both personally and professionally. In the words of his poetry professor, Al Filreis, Keller explained: “In poetry there are no absolute pledges prior to understanding what’s being said . . . If you go to a poem with a prior commitment, you’ll get neither edification nor pleasure from it. Poetry is *open*.” More importantly, Keller added that “[Poetry] is . . . an invitation to consider the inner lives and circumstances of others. . . .” And while Keller recognized that “Poetry is no substitute for courage or competence,” if “properly applied, it is a challenge to self-certainty” – something Keller believes thwarts change. Thus, through his suggestion to Congress he hoped to “spur” creative thinking, which might serve Congress, and, in turn, the people of the United States, to find innovative solutions to the nation’s current programs rather than remaining wedged in

“dogma and habit.” This notion that poetry might inspire the necessary mindset to write the “narrative” of America’s future is similarly suggested in Tracy Letts’s most recent play, *Superior Donuts*.

Written in the year that Barack Obama declared his candidacy for the presidency of the United States and staged during the campaign,<sup>34</sup> Chicago’s uptown neighborhood serves as the setting for Letts’s exploration of the unlikely friendship between second-generation donut shop owner Arthur Przybyszewski and his new employee Franco Wicks. Within this two act play, which some critics brushed aside as an imitation of a 1970’s sit-com, resides a deftly written comedy that intertwines the personal “narratives” of an apathetic, guilt-ridden-draft-“evader” and a downtrodden dreamer with the social, cultural, and political issues of the period. The Chicago neighborhood portrays a typical working class community as well as providing a microcosm of America with characters representing various generations, ethnicities, and economic classes. And *Superior Donuts*, the immigrant Przybyszewski family’s life work, embodies the spirit of American entrepreneurship and the sense, or lack thereof, of economic opportunity.

Illustrating a different economic and social segment from *Man from Nebraska*’s Ken Carpenter, Arthur, with his suppressed passion for life, seems a result of apathy rather than emptiness. However, following a similar plotline to *Man from Nebraska*, in *Superior Donuts*, a young black person enters the protagonist’s life and the “poetic exchange” results in a re-awakening, which suggests that healing the individual and the community occurs through embracing poetry. Accordingly, this chapter examines *Superior Donuts* and its textual references to black poets, specifically the poetry of Langston Hughes. This poetry, which operates as a “poetic exchange” between

individuals with seemingly dissimilar backgrounds and occupations, leads to the emotional evolution of the individuals, offering an alternative to the traditional American "narrative," while advocating the unity and synthesis of community.

In characteristically postmodern fashion, the textual references reveal the “resolutely historical” and “inescapably political” characteristics of postmodernism and engage in a conversation with the past (Hutcheon 4). For example, while Arthur and Franco represent two different segments of America’s working class (the small family business owner and the blue collar employee, respectively), each presents a political and philosophical movement that sought to deconstruct myths and effect social change for America’s marginalized. While a full discussion of the social-political positions of each movement and their ideologies extend beyond the scope of this paper, I offer a brief explanation to connect Arthur, Franco, and the textual references to black poets, and specifically Langston Hughes. Furthermore, to narrow my discussion of this play, this chapter centers on three significant instances that best demonstrate how poetry not only unites individuals from seemingly dissimilar backgrounds but also how it spurs creative thinking and engenders unity. These moments include: the textual references to Langston Hughes’s poem “Let America Be America Again” in Act One and Act Two, Franco’s “racist test” in Act One, and, finally, the conclusion of the play, when Arthur sits at the donut shop table with Franco to re-write the “Great American Novel.”

### What’s in a Name?

When Arthur’s neighbor and fellow businessman, Russian immigrant Max Tarasov, first meets Arthur’s new employee Franco Wicks, he questions Franco about his name: “Franco. Like the Generalissimo?” (Presumably a reference to General Francisco



Franco, the Spanish general and head of state from the mid-1930s until his death in 1975).<sup>35</sup> In response, Franco claims that he is named after football player Franco Harris (Letts, *Donuts* 37).<sup>36</sup> And while Franco's name might merely point to his "frankness," I suggest it may also refer to the literary and ideological concept of Négritude. This movement led by French-speaking ("Francophone") black writers and intellectuals endorsed a marked pride in "blackness" and traditional African values "mixed with an undercurrent of Marxist ideals" ("A Brief Guide to Négritude"). From his extensive travel,<sup>37</sup> Langston Hughes was familiar with the Négritude movement in the Francophone Caribbean. Edward J. Mullen explains that during the 1930s, when Hughes was developing a more political aesthetic, he was "discovered by francophone writers of the black diaspora such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Paulette Nardal, and Etienne Léro, the founders of the Négritude school of ethnic consciousness" (11). Mullen also comments that Haitian author René Piquion's biographical study of Hughes "extols [his] sense of Négritude" as well as positing "him as a spokesman for the down trodden" (3). In subject matter and style, Hughes's poetry, essays, and dramatic work express pride in being black as well as an acute awareness of racial and class oppression. Thus, as a "*Proud* black man" familiar with the writings of Hughes (and Malcolm X), as well as a keen observer of life, Franco presents as an exemplar of "the Negro Artist" set forth by Hughes in his 1926 essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain."<sup>38</sup>

In his essay, allegedly written in response to fellow African-American poet Countee Cullen's plea "to be a poet, not a Negro poet," Hughes criticizes "Negro" poets who "desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible" and upholds the "low-down folks,

the so-called common element” who “furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material because they hold their individuality in the face of American standardization” (Hughes 692, 693 ). Not only does Franco declare himself a “*Proud* black man,” but his decision to seek employment at the run-down neighborhood donut shop rather than the “Starbucks right across the street” suggests “discernment” for individuality over American standardization (Letts, *Donuts* 24-25, 54). In the opening scene, Max and Arthur both refer to the Starbucks across the street three times each, and later when Franco questions Arthur about making donuts and their role as a “dessert cake” or “meal substitute,” the following exchange occurs:

ARTHUR. You’re not giving much credit to the discernment of the consumer, African-American or otherwise.

FRANCO. Discernment implies choice. You don’t see no Whole Foods in this neighborhood, do you?

ARTHUR. Oh, it’s coming. We got a Starbucks right across the street.

FRANCO. Brother, they got Starbucks in wheat fields now. Anyway, you don’t see a lot of brothers in the Starbucks, do you? And you ain’t never seen a brother in the Whole Foods unless he’s stockin’ the shelves. Can you picture that, some big angry black man shoppin’ in Whole Foods, his arms all loaded with soy cheese and echinacea and star fruit?

ARTHUR. I wouldn’t know. . . .I don’t shop at Whole Foods (Letts, *Donuts* 24, 25).

These references to Starbucks (and Whole Foods) not only illustrate the changing landscape of Chicago’s ethnic neighborhoods,<sup>39</sup> but the corporatization of America,

which often results in the demise of family owned businesses and squelches the sense of economic opportunity for middle class Americans. Franco's response to a "help wanted" sign in a broken window of a family owned donut shop struggling to stay in business rather than seeking employment at a successful coffee house chain exemplifies a communal quest to maintain individuality in the face of American standardization. Thus, despite Arthur and Franco's apparent differences, their actions suggest an affinity for maintaining and accepting individuality as a celebration of community rather than succumbing to a culturally homogenous neighborhood.

Likewise, Arthur, whose name suggests an association with writing, continues, albeit passively, to resist social, cultural, and political forces pushing him to the margins since the late sixties. While a connection between the name "Arthur," patriarchal ideology, and masculine writing exists, Arthur P. represents a different perspective and ideology from that repressing Ken Carpenter and the despairing Beverly Weston. At fifty-nine,<sup>40</sup> Arthur seemingly represents a conflicted generation of Americans deeply divided by the social, cultural, and political ideologies of the 1960s. As a second-generation Polish-American, whose father not only served in the Polish army but was held captive, Arthur's family narrative exemplifies the traditional American Dream of European immigrants moving to a land of unbound opportunity (*Donuts* 19). However, as "child of the 1960s" and Vietnam era, Arthur's conception of American exceptionalism is fraught with disillusionment and disappointment, which, in part, explains his apathy.

Paul Lyons argues that the "generational portrait" of the Sixties and Vietnam consists of a "triad" composed of "those who served, those who protested, and those who did neither" (3).<sup>41</sup> Using this "triad," Lyons reconstructs the Sixties generation as

comprising the “New Left/countercultural elite; a New Right elite; a more apolitical “silent majority” mass . . . [and] Vietnam veterans, cutting across all three of these categories”(5). This Left/counterculture elite consisted, in part, of the Beats and the hippies who, as Sam Binkley explains, shared leftist political orientations, a tolerance for diversity, and a belief that “culture needed liberating” (410-411). While the term “Beats” became associated with “any devotee of the 1950s angst-ridden counter-culture lifestyle,” Edward Moran and Caitlin L Gannon describe the Beat Generation as a “movement that swept through American culture after World War II as a counterweight to suburban conformity,” and, initially, consisted of poets whose “literature speaks to injustice, apathy, consumerism, and war” (201-202). Steve Waston explains that the Beats exemplified “a pivotal paradigm in twentieth-century American literature, finding the highest spirituality among the marginalized and dispossessed (qtd. Moran and Gannon 201). As cultural successors to the Beats, hippies emerged in the mid-1960s and consisted of mostly white, middle class, educated youths with a philosophy of “natural living, easy sexuality and social relations, sincerity, hedonism, a blend of Eastern mysticism, left wing social critique and Beatnik appropriations” (Binkley 411). Lyons distinguishes the two movements based on their expectation of social change and asserts that “Social change requires anticipation of the heroic,” to which the Beats were not inclined (54). He maintains that the Beats “limited their anticipation to individual and small group act” but “never anticipated social change, in making history . . . [they did] not even desire to” (54). Rather, their “beatness rested in a sense of hopelessness . . . all that was left to do

was howl at the injustices” (Lyons 54). Conversely, the Vietnam War “provided a ready target” for hippies to assert their moral superiority through “opposition and rebellion” (Binkley 411).

As a passive, pot-smoking, pony-tailed draft evader who spent the Vietnam War in Toronto writing articles for the “Union of American exiles howling about Mao,” Arthur seems to defy Lyons ready-made categories (Letts, *Donuts* 47). Rather, forty years after his counterculture days as part Beat and part hippie, Arthur presents the “apolitical ‘silent majority’” as he struggles to maintain the sixty year-old family business and laments the loss of the “pure magic” in his old neighborhood (Letts, *Donuts* 47). Coupled with the haunting memory of his father calling him a “coward,” the recent death of his former wife, and the five-year estrangement from his only child, Arthur’s withdrawal from society seems to stem from his unwillingness to fight for any cause – his country, his marriage, and his daughter (until he later finds Franco worth defending). In Arthur, Letts presents an emotionally wrought middle-aged white man suffering a sense of defeat and dispossession as superior forces slowly squeeze him out of his marriage, his role as a father, his family’s business, and his community (Letts, *Donuts* 53). Thus, while on the surface Arthur and Franco seemingly have little in common, their shared sense of dispossession and understanding of social injustices and life in the margins provides a foundation for friendship that transcends race, class, and generation.

### America Will Be

Early in the first act, Franco presents Arthur with a “collection of worn notebooks, legal pads, typing paper, all of it scribbled on and marked up, and bound into a single package with elastic bike cords” (Letts, *Donuts* 31). Franco grills Arthur: “Don’t

you recognize it? . . . You've heard about it. You've read it. Maybe even long time ago you thought you'd write it. It's the Great American Novel, my man. Authored by yours truly" (Letts, *Donuts* 31). Nonplussed, Arthur asks the title of the novel, and Franco replies, "*America Will Be*. That's from a Langston Hughes' poem. 'O, yes, I say it plain, America never was America to me, And yet I swear this oath—America will be!'" (Letts, *Donuts* 32). This reference to Hughes's 1938 poem, "Let America Be America Again," as the title of a young, black man's version of the "Great American Novel" results in a double irony. First, the poem itself expresses irony in its criticism of all that America purports to be but is not – especially for the marginalized. Second, Franco's decision to title his version of the "Great American Novel" after a poem criticizing America for what it is not (rather than what it is) demonstrates the postmodernism characteristic of the critical, often ironic, "engagement with the past of both art and society" (Hutcheon 5). Here, the reference to a poet who wrote during the same period as the modernists (such as Eliot, Ezra Pound, Hart Crane, Emily Dickinson, and h.d.) but is not immediately associated with the modernist philosophy and aesthetic creates a challenge to the "master narrative" from yet another perspective.

In the modernist period when the esoteric and elitist verse of poets such as Eliot and Pound was at the height of popularity, Langston Hughes's poetry met with criticism from literary scholars for its simplicity of style and its representation of common, "low-down folk." As Lorenzo Thomas explains, Hughes "avoided lofty and irrelevant sentiment in his poetry" and as a young man drew inspiration from studying Carl Sandburg's work which influenced his plain style and content addressing human suffering, racial exploitation, and oppression (182,183).<sup>42</sup> Christopher De Santis claims

that “Hughes viewed himself early on as a poetic chronicler of the democratic ideal” and challenged the United States to live up to its founding ideals; this philosophy is reflected in his aesthetic approach (285). Steven Tracy explains: “plain style is more attractive in a county whose ideals are democratic and egalitarian and whose nascent national literature necessitates direct access to heritage including ethos, folk ways, and language” (6). He observes of Hughes’s poetry that “we encounter the philosophy of ‘all us’ regularly . . . the idea that we are all ‘us,’ not ‘we’ and ‘they’. . . ; Eluned Summers Bremner concurs when she explains that “For Hughes, the life of the street is the poetic medium” (273). Thus, the irony in referencing Hughes’s poem as the title of Franco’s “Great American Novel” highlights the “political and historical realities” in contemporary America. Despite some success by New Left movements to open the American Dream to minorities, seventy years after Hughes wrote his famous poem a major political party in the United States had just nominated the first African-American as a presidential candidate *and* race remained an major issue in American culture (Hutcheon 5, Lyons 56).<sup>43</sup>

#### The Dessert Cake with an Absence of a Center

In “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” Jacques Derrida asserts that “destructive discourses and all their analogues are trapped in a sort of circle” and discusses the “many ways of being caught in this circle” when discourse is “closed off” from freeplay (961, 967). In *Superior Donuts*, Arthur and Franco find themselves similarly “trapped” by their respective “texts” or narratives, and I suggest that within the donut shop -- which serves the “dessert cake” with an absence of a center -- Letts “questions the system” or erases the center and creates a space for rewriting the

“text” (here, specifically, the “Great American Novel”) (Derrida 962). To open this space, Letts juxtaposes the fixed, linear thinking of “narrative” against the open, circular thinking of “poetry”; this begins soon after Franco shares with Arthur that he has written the “Great American Novel.” The scene begins with both characters demonstrating that, despite their awareness and liberal mindset, each bears social and cultural “narratives” founded in belief, habit, and self-certainty that thwart effective communication:

ARTHUR: And you wrote it. You wrote the Great American Novel.

*(Franco grins.)*

FRANCO: The Great American Novel.

ARTHUR: Good for you.

FRANCO: You don’t believe me.

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FRANCO: That I wrote the Great American Novel. You don’t believe me.

ARTHUR: No, I believe you.

FRANCO: You don’t sound like you believe me.

ARTHUR: Why wouldn’t I believe you?

FRANCO: I don’t know why you wouldn’t believe me. Maybe you’re a racist.

ARTHUR: I could not believe you and still not be a racist.

FRANCO: So you don’t believe me.

ARTHUR: I didn’t say that. (Letts, *Donuts* 33)

Here, the dialogue reveals how Franco and Arthur both retain a “prior commitment” or belief about what the other communicates, which leads to assumptions and accusations. As the scene continues, Franco’s defensiveness continues as he questions Arthur about



being a racist: “You think I can’t write the Great American Novel ‘cause I’m a black man” (Letts, *Donuts* 33). Here, Franco seems to echo Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s assertion that “the African American literary tradition was generated as a response to allegations that its authors did not, and *could not* create literature, considered the signal measure of a race’s innate ‘humanity’” (2433). Consequently, despite Arthur’s belief that he is not a racist, Franco’s interrogation causes Arthur to doubt: “No, I mean. I don’t think so. I mean, I hope not. I mean probably not, but. . . you know. . . I *hired* you, didn’t I? (Letts, *Donuts* 33). As the scene progresses, the humorous tone and quick witticisms provide the necessary comic relief as Arthur presses Franco to allow him to read his “book,” but Franco constructs another barrier to his text:

ARTHUR: Please let me read it.

FRANCO: Hell, no.

ARTHUR: Why not.

FRANCO: You wouldn’t understand it.

ARTHUR: Is it in English?

FRANCO: You wouldn’t get a lot out of my book, Arthur P. I just mean, you know . . . you run a donut shop. (Letts, *Donuts* 34).

This exchange suggests that Franco’s history informs him that Arthur, as a middle-aged, middle-class white man, is likely a racist and would not appreciate his narrative. More significantly, it demonstrates Franco’s intellectual dexterity as he inverts the white/black binary by denying Arthur access to his text based on Arthur’s race and class. Here,

Franco asserts that race is a text and in order to understand his “book” Arthur requires a certain level of “knowledge” of black literary inheritance. Gates, who established the African-American canon, explains:

The black tradition exists only insofar as black artists enact it. Only because black writers have read and responded to other black writers with a sense of recognition and acknowledgment can we speak of a black literary inheritance, with all the burdens and ironies that has entailed. Race is text (an array of discursive practices), not an essence. It must be *read* with painstaking care and suspicion, not imbibed. (2435)

Franco’s confidence that Arthur lacks the requisite knowledge of engaging with other black writers “with a sense of recognition” and understanding results in yet another challenge:

ARTHUR: Franco. Regardless of your skin color, yet in acknowledgement of your estimable heritage, I’m asking to read your book.

FRANCO: ‘Cause you’re so crazy about “Afro-American” literature? What, you read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and so now you know all about the Experience? They made you read Langston Hughes in school and now you’re an expert? Can you name any black poets other than Langston Hughes?

ARTHUR: Yeah, in fact, I can.

FRANCO: Go.

ARTHUR: Is this a test?

FRANCO: Yeah. This is a racist test. This is your racist test.

ARTHUR: I have to take a racist test.

FRANCO: You said you weren't no racist.

Okay, okay, the test is . . . name ten black poets. (Letts, *Donuts* 34-35)

Franco's assumption of Arthur's inability to name ten black poets bolsters his confidence, and, in an amusing but condescending gesture, "throws in Langston Hughes" (Letts, *Donuts* 35). Arthur recognizes his young employee's assumptions and plays along by slowly naming Maya Angelou ("saw her on Oprah"), Gwendolyn Brooks ("Chicago blood"), and Countee Cullen (Letts, *Donuts* 34-35). Still overly assured, Franco teases, "I'm impressed. You just answered the four black poets who might be in your crossword puzzle" (Letts, *Donuts* 36). Amused and demonstrating that he understands the sense of "play" and improvisation inherent in the black vernacular, Arthur toys with Franco. And in an exchange that foreshadows his gambling problems, Franco raises the ante; however, true to his Beat and hippie philosophy, Arthur's interest lies in Franco's book not his money. With a new deal struck, Arthur rapidly names the six remaining poets: "Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, Amiri Baraka, Lucille Clifton, Nikki Giovanni and Yusef Komunyakaa" (36). The stage directions indicate that, in response, Franco "stands, frozen" and the scene shifts to Max entering the donut shop.

Presumably, a general audience would have familiarity with the first few poets that Arthur names; arguably, the remaining names are lesser known, if not completely obscure to a general audience.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, an audience's familiarity or not with the poets that Arthur names does not thwart their ability to appreciate the inciting action and transformation.<sup>45</sup> Franco's immediate reaction as well as the shift in Arthur's demeanor and the content of their conversations indicates a transformation both within them and

between them as a result of the shared appreciation for poetry. Arthur's personal concern for Franco, his renewed attention to the donut shop, and an interest in beginning a romantic relationship with female officer who has pursued him indicate Franco's success at bringing Arthur "into the light" (Letts, *Donuts* 12). Arthur and Franco, having abandoned their "prior commitments of understanding," find a mutual place among those who are *open* – the poets. Thus, the "racist test" creates a type of "poetic exchange" which re-awakens Arthur, allows both men to consider the inner life and circumstances of the other, and fosters a deeper understanding of each other.

However, Franco's past, like his "text," still looms. When a neighborhood police officer informs Arthur that Franco was assaulted and hospitalized, Arthur learns that Franco's sizeable gambling losses cost him three fingers on his right hand and the destruction of his "book." In this moment, Arthur decides to accept Max's offer to buy the donut shop and use the proceeds to settle Franco's gambling debt with Luther Flynn. Then, in an action that seems incongruent with Arthur's character – he decides that before paying off Flynn – he must fight him (Letts, *Donuts* 79). The stage directions state that "the fight is long" and "will not be easily decided," yet in the end, "Arthur prevails" - - but not through his "strength of purpose," rather, presumably, as comic relief, because of Luther's ulcer (Letts, *Donuts* 82). Nonetheless, the purpose of the scene demonstrates Arthur's willingness to finally -- or once again – fight for an injustice. He explains to Flynn: "You humiliated that boy's body and you think you can justify that. But you can't justify destroying a kid's story" (Letts, *Donuts* 79). With Arthur's acts of shedding his

past and Franco's "book" destroyed, they are no longer "trapped" by their "narratives" and the space now exists for two poets in the margins to rewrite the American "narrative."

Similar to Bill Keller's recent suggestion that Congress might benefit from reading poetry by shifting members out of "dogma and habit" and finding innovative solutions to the problems facing the United States, *Superior Donuts* proposes that engaging with poetry provides the necessary perspective to effect unity and synthesis for socially, culturally, and economically dissimilar people in the community. As bell hooks observes of radical postmodernism, there exists "a loss of sense of grounding even if it is not informed by shared circumstance . . . [it] calls attention to those shared sensibilities which cross boundaries of class, gender, race . . . that could be fertile ground for the construction of empathy -- ties that would promote recognition of common commitments and serve as a basis for solidarity and coalition" (2513). In Chicago's uptown neighborhood, which presents a microcosm of America, Arthur and Franco recognize a shared sense of alienation, despair, and uncertainty, but similarly provide each other with a sense of hope. The basis for solidarity and coalition, which begins with the "racist test," is solidified when Arthur and Franco sit *together* at the table in the donut shop to rewrite their version of the "Great American Novel," and begin their work – the last lines of the play -- with "America. . . Will. . . Be" (Letts, *Donuts* 93). If the American narrative of the past had divided Arthur and Franco by race, class, and age, poetry and the pen of Tracy Letts situated them at the table together to write America's future.

## Conclusion

Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge—

it is as immortal as the heart of man.

--William Wordsworth, "Preface to Lyrical Ballads"

In a 2009 interview for Steppenwolf Theatre's "Watch & Learn" videos, Tracy Letts discussed his creative process and confided that for him writing "is very private . . . it's very intuitive. I don't know where a lot it comes from." As for the theater, he explained that "it becomes problem solving. It becomes craftsmanship. It becomes like carpentry in a way. You're fixing problems. You're building a house." Letts's analogy to carpentry, repairs, and a house as a symbol of his work in the theatre comes as no surprise since his writing articulates a similar refrain. In all three of the plays discussed in this thesis, *Man from Nebraska*, *August: Osage County*, and *Superior Donuts*, Letts uses his craft of storytelling to identify problems, tear them down, and rebuild with new solutions. In the tradition of Ibsen, Letts locates the subject of modern drama as "the problematic of home" (Chaudhuri 62-63). In one scenario, the home symbolizes the materially contented but emotionally "unaware" individual willing and able to evolve and create a more meaningful existence; in another, the home becomes a metaphor for the "damaged" and their "broken" offspring unable to move forward because they are burdened by the past; and in yet a third situation, the "home" represents the "family" of diverse individuals in the community who discover that they are more alike than different once minds and hearts are "re-opened" to the circumstances of others. In each instance,

Letts explores the problems that require “fixing” for the individual, the family, and society, and in *every* scenario, Letts makes it clear: the “home” most in need of repair is America.

As a contemporary postmodern dramatist, Letts challenges gaps, ruptures, and contradictions in the myths and narratives of the American “home” through “an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society” (Hutcheon 4). Letts begins this “ironic dialogue” by seducing his audience with the comfort of narrative structure; like Tamyra, he recognizes that his “American patron” needs a narrative “to get from here to there” (Letts, *Nebraska* 41). However, between the remnants of his “in-yer-face” style of theatre and the narratives to which individuals cling, gravitate, and fixate on something subtle but significant lingers: poetry. For that reason, the segment of that “ironic dialogue” on which I have focused in this study are the textual references to poetry in each of the plays examined. Moreover, I have attempted to demonstrate how the “poetic exchanges” occurring in these plays reveal either a devaluation or an elevation of poetry that, in turn, either fails or facilitates a transformation. My goal is to demonstrate that the “poetic exchanges” in *Man from Nebraska*, *August: Osage County*, and *Superior Donuts* suggest an alternative to the traditional American “narrative” focused on the individual and advocate a “poetic perspective” centered on the community, and that this “poetic perspective” urges a shift from a rigid, linear, individual goal-oriented principle (as depicted in *August: Osage County*) toward a principle of flexibility, unity, and synthesis (as advocated in *Man from Nebraska* and *Superior Donuts*).

Ironically, when I began this study, I approached it from an exceedingly linear perspective. Following an Aristotelian format, I judged that the three plays sequentially addressed the individual, the family, and the community, assuming that in each the protagonist “pursues a goal and then learns from the experience of overcoming or being defeated” (Al-Shamma 8). In *Man from Nebraska*, I surmised that Letts identifies the individual who lacks awareness and requires an “awakening.” In *August: Osage County*, I inferred that Letts pinpoints the dysfunctional family and “the house” that requires deconstruction. Finally, in *Superior Donuts*, I concluded that Letts sought to rebuild that ruined home via the community at large, particularly since he employs the comic mode to effect reconciliation. While I still believe these observations to be accurate, my conception benefitted from the feedback of two attentive doctoral students -- whose focus of study is poetry --who encouraged me to shift my thinking away from a linear, narrative construction. Realigning my approach so that form matches content, I have adopted a synchronic comparison/contrast argument (as opposed to a diachronic chronological argument) to develop my point more clearly. I argue that in *August: Osage County* the value of poetry is diminished and this devaluation is shown to be detrimental to the individual, the family, and society, whereas in *Man from Nebraska* and *Superior Donuts* poetry is elevated and shown to encourage the evolution or “illumination” of the individual, which, in turn, benefits the family and society.

Furthermore, considering the poets whom Letts highlights in his work, I attempted to illustrate that the playwright supports the idea that the poet or the artist possesses the power to effect change in the individual and society. In his recent review of Ibsen’s “Emperor and Galilean,” Paul Binding comments that after the “irreversible



power-shift” of the Franco-Prussian War, Ibsen “felt more strongly than ever the artist’s duty first to face up to the contemporary world, and then create freestanding metaphors for understanding it” (18). To that end, all three poets referenced in Letts’s work, Neruda, Eliot, and Hughes, maintained that the artist not only possessed the power to effect social change but had an obligation to do so through his or her art. Additionally, I believe that, like Ibsen, Letts not only detects the “problematic of home,” but also suggests that the United States, and the world at large, is experiencing an epochal moment. Ibsenist scholar Toril Moi believes that our contemporary world is “eerily relevant” to that of Ibsen’s with its preoccupation “with warfare, revolt, terrorism, dictatorship, and cataclysmic historical and cultural change as well as with historical transition and the search for meaning in a world where God is dead and traditional values have lost their grip” (13). These “resolutely historical” and “inescapably political” features of postmodernism are not lost on Letts or his dramatic works as he creates his “metaphors for understanding” this epochal moment and suggests, like those before him, that the artist and his or her work -- including his own -- might provide at least one method of effecting individual and social change.

Admittedly, playwrights, poets, and artists in general continually target the middle class for their various personal, social, and political failures. However, Letts also demonstrates his awareness of audience when he depicts many types of middle class Americans who have traded “culture and education for aggression and capitalism” and require a shift from their habitual gaze: the intellectually “elite,” the white collar businessman and his traditional family, and the blue collar working class community (Letts, *Nebraska* 64). In *August: Osage County*, Beverly Weston identifies with Eliot “the

poet,” which suggests an affinity with Eliot’s early philosophy that the poet possessed the ability, if not the power, to “transform culture” through art. However, as his long life continued and, ultimately, faded into the twilight years, Weston came to realize that he, and his family as well, had not been shaped by poetry but by “all this garbage we’ve acquired” into representations of Eliot’s “hollow men” (*August 15*). Conversely, Ken Carpenter recognizes the hollow narrative that he has lived and, after engaging with art, particularly the poetry of Pablo Neruda, achieves a wakefulness that enables him to lead a more meaningful life based on genuine love for himself, his wife, and family. Similarly, Arthur and Franco – two poets on the margins – discover through their mutual appreciation of poetry to embrace their similarities and appreciate their differences to provide a foundation for a friendship and a sense of community working toward unanimity rather than away from it. And while postmodern conclusions do not, as Linda Hutcheon observes, offer any “transcendental timeless meaning,” the textual references to poetry in these three plays do not simply criticize the narrative of the “American Dream” (19). Rather, they offer a suggestion – the hope – that shifting from a narrative perspective to a poetic one on might offer new guidance on how to progress, how “to get from here to there” (Letts, *Nebraska* 41).

## Notes

1. Billie Letts is an American author known for her award-winning novel *Where the Heart Is* (which became a major motion picture) and *Shoot the Moon*. Dennis Letts originated the role of Beverly Weston in *August: Osage County* and portrayed the character in both the original Steppenwolf Theatre production and the Broadway production until his death in February 2008.

2. In her 2011 article discussing the role of Johnna in *August: Osage County*, Courtney Elkin Mohler uses the term “Native American.” Likewise, eco-critic Thomas C. Gannon, in *Skylark Meets Meadowlark: Reimagining the Bird in British Romantic and Contemporary Native American Literature* (2009) employs the term “Native American” throughout his study.

3. *August: Osage County* joins the esteemed list that includes: Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949) by Arthur Miller, *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1955) adapted by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1957) by Eugene O’Neill, *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* (1993) by Tony Kushner, and *Doubt, A Parable* (2005) by John Patrick Stanley.

4. In August 2008, I attended a performance of *Superior Donuts* at Steppenwolf Theatre, Chicago, IL, and in November 2008, I had the pleasure of seeing the Steppenwolf production of *August: Osage County* at the Music Box Theatre, New York City.

5. In addition to the sources discussed herein, I located a few master's theses focused on *Killer Joe* (character analysis for graduate work in theatre production) and the film version of *Bug*.

6. Hutcheon explains that Richard Rorty has “posited the existence of ‘poetic’ moments as occurring periodically in many different areas of culture – science, philosophy, painting, politics, as well as they lyric and the drama” (qtd. in Hutcheon 14).

7. The citation to Hutcheon here refers to her use of the term “poetic”; she writes, “Art and theory about art (and culture) should both be a part of a poetics of postmodernism” and connects to Rorty’s idea of “poetic moments” (see preceding footnote) which Hutcheon maintains are “not coincidental; it [poetic moment] is made, not found (14).

8. Hutcheon notes that “*modernism* is largely Anglo-American” but the “poetics of *postmodernism*” should not be limited to the Anglo-American culture; she offers French *nouveau* and Spanish “neo-baroque” as examples (4).

9. Kristeva bases the term intertextuality on “Bakhtinian dialogism”; Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism holds that language is multi-voiced and that the word and the speaker exist in an “elastic environment of other, alien words about the same subject, the same theme” (276). He posits that any “living utterance” in any particular social environment or historical time “cannot fail to brush up against thousand of other living dialogic threads,” and, in turn, becomes “an active participant in social dialogue” (276). In other words, all texts are in dialogue with and informed by previous texts.

10. Catherine Belsey was the first to identify and define the “illusionist” and emblematic” aesthetic modes in early modern drama. The illusionist mode, which evolved from the ancient Greeks and Romans, realistically depicts characters and action; the “emblematic” mode, which evolved from medieval and morality plays, operates on a symbolic level.

11. In *Hart Crane: Comprehensive Research and Study Guide* (2003), Harold Bloom explains that Crane frequently threatened suicide; in the winter of 1932, he accomplished the task by jumping from the deck of a steamship in the Gulf of Mexico (28-30). In Denis Donoghue’s book, *Reading America: Essays on American Literature* (1987), the essay “The Life of John Berryman, by John Haffenden” explains that in January 1972, Berryman took his own life by jumping from the Washington Avenue Bridge (Saint Louis, Missouri) (276-280). Berryman indulged in both drink and tragic suffering, and, according to Haffenden, “suicide was always in the script” (279).

12. *The Dream Songs* is a collection of Berryman’s poetry divided into two parts. The quasi-autobiographical work addresses problems such as parental suicide, the death of friends, and drunkenness. “Dream Song 149” is an elegy addressed to Berryman’s friend and fellow poet, Dunmore Schwartz.

13. While only a reading audience would be aware of this specification by the author, Todd Andrew Rosenthal’s set design for the Steppenwolf productions of *August: Osage County* was mindful of such details. Rosenthal was recognized for his efforts with the 2008 Tony for Best Scenic Design of a Play.

14. An “objective correlative” is an older literary term that Eliot revived in his 1919 critical essay “Hamlet and His Problems” and is defined as follows: “the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula for that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.”

15. Meta-poetic or meta-poetry is a literary term that refers to poetry that comments on or refers to poetry or objects related to poetry (from Greek *meta* meaning with, after, between, among).

16. In *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (2003), David Chinitz attempts to “restore Eliot to a fuller context” arguing that critics and scholars have constructed a narrow view of the modernist cultural icon, and, in turn, we have “inherited a terribly serious Eliot . . . a paragon of solemn purpose, tormented vision, and lofty contemplation” (12). Chinitz frames his study around the idea that this “constructed narrow view” of Eliot is an overgeneralization as well as the division between “high” and “low” arts (2-4). Chinitz considers Eliot’s artistic career as a whole to establish that Eliot made concerted artistic choices that balanced his “avant-garde tendencies” with an understanding of audience (16, 17).

17. For example, Edmund Wilson states that “‘The Hollow Men’ is a more advanced state of the condition of demoralization already given expression in *The Waste Land*” (qtd. Grant 239). Likewise, Eliot scholar, Hugh Kenner believes that the poem conveys “everything that *The Waste Land*, for one reason or another, omitted to say

(194). Conversely, Harold Bloom offers that the poem “addresses human courage and faith” (60). Yet, Craig Raine maintains that it is the “first radically (different thing) Eliot wrote after *The Waste Land*” (14). For differing view of Eliot, see Chinitz.

18. The Guy Fawkes allusion remains relatively obscure for a general contemporary readership since it refers to events that took place in Jacobean England. Fawkes, a co-conspirator in the plot to assassinate King James I, was arrested, as he guarded the gunpowder in the House of Lords, the day before the assignation was to take place. Fawkes was tortured and hung but not before giving up the names of his co-conspirators (Kenner 61).

19. Shakespeare's version of *Julius Caesar* centers on a violent conspiracy of men “blinded” by their cause; Brutus replies to Lucillius about Cassius: “There are no tricks in plain and simple faith./But hollow men, like horses hot at hand,/Make gallant show and promise of their mettle.” (4.2.22-23).

20. An internal moral struggle or battle for one’s soul.

21. As referenced in Eliot’s poem, the phrase is an allusion to Conrad’s *An Outcast on the Islands*, which according to Heather Van Aelst, conveys the story of “a broken man punished by being kept alive rather than by being killed.”

22. See footnote #2 regarding use of the term “Native American.”

23. JEAN. What are you reading?

JOHNNA. T.S.Eliot

JEAN. That’s cool.

JOHNNA. Your grandfather loaned it to me. (Letts, *August* 44)

24. In “A Critic at Large: T. S. Eliot at 101” Ozick explains that Eliot went from literary “god” to relative unwelcome guest in the halls of academia during the course of his career. While she does not characterize this fact as “marginalization,” it arguably has the same effect.

25. Refer to earlier note #16 addressing Chinitz’s opinion regarding “narrow view” of Eliot.

26. In “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience,” Rich challenges the assumption that women are naturally attracted to men and asserts that heterosexuality is a social construct designed to support the patriarchy. Rich, among others, maintains that the workplace is one area where women “learn to accept male violation of the psychic and physical boundaries” (1598). In a sense then, women become victims of sexual slavery which is reinforced by the “ideology of heterosexual romance beamed at her since childhood out of fairytales, television, films, advertising, popular songs, [and] wedding pageantry” (1600).

27. Although the playwright’s production “Notes” do not specify, it is clear from the text that Tamyra is a woman of color. The original Steppenwolf production cast a black woman as Tamyra and similarly recent casting calls sought a black actress for the role.

28. In his essay titled “The Argument of Comedy” (1949), Northrop Frye identifies the concept, now widely accepted, of the Shakespearean “green world” as a place of escape which results in renewal and rebirth, a place of metamorphosis which extends, humanizes, and transforms individuals.



29. When Reverend Todd asks Carpenter when he was “saved,” he replies “12? . . . And I think that maybe I’ve just never considered it. I’ve always just accepted” (*Nebraska* 30). In the tradition of the *bildungsroman*, twelve is a common age for a boy to undertake his journey to enlightenment.

30. Within the context of this chapter, the term “repressed” refers to the general definition as provided by the O.E.D.: “restrained; oppressed; held back.” I do not intend to argue that Carpenter is “repressed” in the Freudian sense of psychological repression. Carpenter represents a stable, successful person albeit emotionally and socially underdeveloped. Also, I do not use the term to refer to “repression” as in the RSA or ISA of Althusserian theory. Nonetheless, the text might support an argument that Carpenter’s “life in the church” contributed to his stunted philosophical development as suggested in footnote #29 above.

31. Jean Baudrillard uses the term *simulacra* -- a word that “denotes representation but also carries the sense of counterfeit” -- to explain the “new function of signs” and explains that *simulacras* are not real representations of the “thing” but rather mark its absence of what it “purports to represent”; Baudrillard points to “contemporary consumer culture and imperialistic Western science and philosophy as the cause” (1554).

32. Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 147.”

33. In a 2008 interview with Teresa Miller, Letts discusses *Man from Nebraska* and his intent to “find” the middle-American audience he missed with *Killer Joe* and *Bug*.

34. The stage directions indicate the play is set in “December 2009-January 2010” presumably, considering the Chicago setting as well as the social, racial, and political themes, to avoid the necessity of referencing the historic 2008 U.S. presidential election.

35. Franco’s last name “Wicks” presumably refers to a “wick” which when lit draws up oil or candle wax to create light. As Max Tarasov states, “Arthur . . . he does not want to be pulled into light, so I do not pull” (Letts, *Donuts* 12). Franco Wicks does.

36. Since Max is unfamiliar with American football, Franco explains to Max that, in 1972, while playing for the Pittsburgh Steelers’, Franco Harris was instrumental in one of football’s most famous plays: “The Immaculate Reception.” Harris retired in 1984 and was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1990; thus, no obvious connection exists between Franco’s birth year (1988) and Harris other than Harris’s continued popularity. However, as this brief exchange continues, it reflects Franco’s secular mindset versus Max’s religious one.

37. According to Christopher De Santis, Hughes had a “sense of wanderlust” and travelled that he experienced in his homeland (284). Lorenzo Thomas explains that as a young man, Hughes travelled as a merchant seaman to such places as Africa, the West Indies, Cuba, and Haiti, and later, as an aspiring journalist to Paris and the Soviet Union (186).

38. I need to mention here that a critical study of Franco and Hughes’s satirical character, the “Black Everyman,” Jesse B. Semple might prove valuable. In her critical essay “Jesse B. Semple and the Narrative Art of Langston Hughes,” Phyllis R. Klotman

provides a character analysis of Semple which indicates some of his characteristics (i.e. black pride and experience, “the serio-comic nature of Semple’s wit,” occasional eloquence, and verbal and situational irony) are similarly found in Franco.

39. In an attempt to convince Arthur to sell him his donut shop property (“Donut is like videotape, it is over!), Max also refers to Best Buy and Dunkin’ Donuts to argue that the donut is no longer a commodity (Letts, *Donuts* 39).

40. The Setting Notes indicate the play is set in December 2009 –January 2010; in Act One, Arthur mentions he was born in 1950 (Letts, *Donuts* 19).

41. Lyons categorizes “those who did neither” as the elite who had political connections to avoid the draft (3). For Arthur, he characterizes himself as an “evader” and draws a distinction between “evaders” and “resisters” explaining that “Resisters fight. Evaders evade” (Letts, *Donuts* 47).

42. Thomas explains that in his youth Hughes was influenced by Sandburg’s “Whitmanesque catalogue’s and psalm-like long lines that match Midwest vernacular diction” as well as Sandburg’s “sympathetic interest in immigrants and the working class” (182).

43. Lyons discusses the successes of the New Left in *New Left, New Right, and the Legacy of the Sixties*, Temple University Press (1996).

44. As part of presentation about Henry Louis Gates, Jr in a graduate literary theory course, I challenged the class of twenty to the “racist test.” With help from the professor, the class eventually named ten black poets. However, some of the poets that Arthur names were not immediately recognizable to this small group of graduate students studying literature.

45. In *Sarah Ruhl: A Critical Study of the Plays* (2011), James Al-Shamma explains that Ruhl prefers “drama based on Ovid rather than Aristotle, one abounding in small transformations rather than one in which the protagonist pursues a goal and then learns from the experience of either overcoming or being defeated by an obstacle” (8). Letts’s protagonists likewise follow this Ovidian rather than an Aristotelian pattern of transformation.

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