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Holler: An Exploration of Appalachian Performativity

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

David Powell

B.A. Theatre

Marshall University, 2020

Director: Dr. Aaron Anderson

Interim Director of Graduates Studies, Theatre Department

Virginia Commonwealth University

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	5
Definition of Terms.....	7
Introduction.....	9
<i>Holler: An Appatragedy</i>	14
Teddy, The Perfect.....	83
Bridget, The Woman.....	94
Mitch, The Assimilationist.....	105
Clay, The Malleable.....	121
Conclusion.....	132
Annotated Bibliography.....	135
Vita.....	138

Abstract

HOLLER: AN EXPLORATION OF APPALACHIAN PERFORMATIVITY

By David Michael Powell

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2022.

Major Director: Dr. Aaron Anderson, Interim Director of Graduate Studies,
Theatre Department

Holler: An Appatragedy is a play written in order to indict, examine and contemplate the toxic ideals of Appalachian culture. The play and the following in-depth character analysis are meant to portray a quartet of siblings who have been abandoned by their parents due to undisclosed issues (potentially addiction or mental health issues) and left to be cared for by their grandparents.

Throughout the events of the play, the culture is questioned as the elder siblings return from their lives outside Appalachia to attend the grandmother's funeral, colliding with their brother and scheming to help their youngest brother escape from Appalachia's grip before it can imprison him for good. The characters are symbolist whereas the setting is expressionistic in nature, specifically the dilapidated nature of the home and its parallels to the dilapidated nature

of the familial relationship. The siblings are further inconvenienced by a snowstorm, left with no electricity or heat to fight against the ever-growing fridity of the outside world (in more ways than one).

Definition of Terms

1. **Holler:** variation of “hollow”; a section of two or more hills near a creek. Can also be used to mean a loud, forceful cry or yell.

2. **Youngin’:** a regional variation of “youngling” to denote youth. The characters who exist in the physical form within this play are youthful, but not so youthful as to be naïve about the world around them. Clay exists as the only truly youthful character, but all are youthful and naïve in the sense of mentality.

3. **Expatalachian:** a former member of the Appalachian community who has abandoned the community for opportunity elsewhere. Considered a betrayal of one’s own community.

4. **Emotional abuse:** the process of nonphysical behavior that works to belittle a person through a variety of tactics, such as threats, insults, or other verbal tactics.

5. **Intergenerational trauma:** the trauma passed through the generations of families, completing a vicious cycle of being abused to becoming the abuser against the next generation.

6. **Environmental hopelessness:** a feeling caused by the dilapidated state of the environment in which the sufferers live and dwell.

7. **Communal mistrust:** an unwillingness to give trust or interest to outside forces due to historical abuse perpetrated from outsiders on the inhabitants of Appalachia and other rural areas.

8. **External locus of control:** a belief that success or failure rests outside of the individual's hands.

9. **Appatragedy:** tale or story venturing from Appalachia which contains the classical elements of tragedy while also featuring the landscape of Appalachia (such as, but not limited to) a barren or far away landscape such as those within fairy tales. The characters are alone, trapped by their environment and forced to face the antagonist of the story with nowhere to turn. The origin can arguably be said to be steeped within the genre of absurdism, as the presence of hopelessness is omnipresent. By using the idea of Appatragedy, a culture is deconstructed and with it, language, and narrative.

10. **Absenteeism parenting:** the act of abandoning one's own children.

Introduction

Holler: An Appatragedy was written in order to bring issues of Appalachian families to light. The characters mentioned within the play (Teddy, Bridget, Mitch, and Clay) are used to inhabit the multiple issues that can come from cultural issues such as parental neglect, intergenerational trauma, and toxicity in an unwelcoming culture. The characters' presence, therefore, are used to showcase the issues and how to alleviate the issues they both face and represent. Alternatively, the characters that aren't shown (MeeMaw, the Parents) further shows the disconnect between elder figures, the abandonment of the parental figures and the lasting consequence it has on the innocent youngins' that are forced to suffer due to the neglect.

The character of Teddy is arguably the protagonist (though, he is merely a member in the play rather than the main character) and experiences all issues that come with being an Expatalachian. He has left his expected societal expectations and created a grand career in professional theatre (namely, Broadway and the West End) but has allowed the guilt of leaving to follow and control him throughout his life. He is faced with a physical representation of the guilt and the consequences that came with his departure in the character of Mitch. Teddy further utilizes cosmetic procedures to continue looking his best in order to compete in the industry that refuses to value age, and thus appears younger than Mitch. Though this is only brought up in both the character description and the taunts Mitch hurls at Teddy, it is shown as the necessary step in separating one from his own physical culture. By erasing the blemishes and the familial aspects of one's own physical form, he has medically erased any hints of his own culture. He

refuses to even look like the relatives he has abandoned and becomes an outsider in multiple functions.

Mitch is the complete antithesis of Teddy in that he does honor the culture in which he was conditioned, and it has ruined him physically. Rather than taking the pathway of his brother and sister, he allowed himself to become completely worn down by the responsibilities he was forced to take. He appears older than Teddy even though he is in fact years younger due to the stress and work it takes to live in rural Appalachia. Combined with a lack of access to both affordable healthcare and a discomfort with erasure of the familial features, he is shown in way that Teddy cannot allow himself to do. His profession as a community pastor furthers the divide through the lens of religion and the performativity of religion. He is shown in the beginning practicing a sermon, specifically with Biblical passages that allude to God casting Lucifer from the comfort of Heaven into the hopelessness of Hell. This is not only a way of showing his fire-and-brimstone ways but also shows how he feels about his own older siblings. Rather than seeing them as people who wanted to escape for upward mobility the region could never offer, he sees them as people who were thrown out due to a lacking the necessary fortitude that comes with rural living.

Bridget, or Jet is the only woman showcased within the performance. She acts on her own volition and follows her eldest brother into voluntary exile as she too wishes for more out of her life. Her punishment for this cultural abandonment is far harsher than that of Teddy to showcase her place as an Appalachian woman. She was expected to graduate high school, take the hand of the first man who wanted her to be his wife, birth his children and raise them with

the same strict ideals of Appalachian culture and (pending the children were girls) Appalachian womanhood. She refutes these ideas by leaving and becoming a wealthy political journalist in Washington DC. This is considered a worse sin than merely leaving due to its projected “unfeminine” nature. Bridget, by result, loses her femininity in the eyes of her family and this is where her nickname “Jet” comes into play. The idea of a jet departing, leaving anything and everything in its dust, is an allusion that should come to mind when thinking of Bridget as a character. Her relationship to her eldest brother is strained as they live far away from one another but her relationship to the younger brothers is further strained as she does not care to be near them, despite being geographically closer. Her refusal to become parentified is the just cause for her departure.

Clay is the youngest and by far most impressionable character of the play. He is a high school senior, a server at a local diner and has his future argued over by the elders within his life. While Teddy and Bridget have undermined Mitch by getting Clay into college far away from the home, Mitch has essentially bullied and forced Clay into accepting a lowly lot in life. Clay himself, however, is never asked about his own desires. He has two clear-cut pathways in front of him and he is essentially being strong-armed into accepting one at risk of alienating those on the other pathway. Clay becomes a symbol of youth within Appalachian culture as they very rarely get the opportunity to choose their own path in life. Rather, it is chosen for them from familial obligation or limited resources within their given area. All three siblings subsequently become hypocrites as they have developed their own way in life but believe themselves qualified to force Clay down their own pathways. Mitch wants him to essentially pick a local girl to marry

and have children with while Teddy and Bridget (working as one unit) are attempting to make him go out into the world where he may not wish to go. Clay's wishes are never respected because they are not inquired about from him specifically.

The elders and their absence should speak volumes within the play. The long-term abuse and neglect are evident through the absence of the parents during the time their offspring need them the most, but also goes to show just how Teddy and Bridget would be the parentified siblings there to care for the emotional needs of humans they did not reproduce. The reason for the parental absence is not specified within the play to give them an infinite number of reasons for absence, but the lack of presence nonetheless is felt by the adults within the play. The grandmother figure ("MeeMaw") is a hanging presence rather than a real character but her reasons for being absent are clearly defined: she has died. The youngins' are in her home (the one they were raised in) to mourn and say goodbye, but she is no longer there to hear them. This attributes itself to performative grieving: how much are these characters truly feeling the loss and pain at the beginning versus the end? It can never be known.

The characters and the storyline within the play are emblematic, representing the issues within the Appalachian community and the toxicity within the culture. The character of Teddy exists as a physical manifestation of internal locus of control as he has become successful in a tremendously difficult field yet chooses to return to the place of external locus of control, getting trapped there by multiple congregating forces. Bridget exists as a figure who represents the refusal of a woman's place within the Appalachian setting, refusing marriage and children in favor of her own desires and fulfillment. Mitch exists as a complete foil to the two elder siblings,

choosing to comply with the cultural expectations that have been thrust upon him, and seeing his elder siblings as flawed or incorrect in their own personal desires. Clay exists as a representation of the youth, who have been trapped between the cultural expectations of the community around him and the desires for the external world he longs to enjoy. The shadow of the parents and of MeeMaw exist merely to act as forces beyond the youngins' control that do have undue influence over the characters.

HOLLER:
AN APPATRAGEDY

DAVID POWELL

CHARACTERS

TEDDY: mid-30s Broadway, West End, and film actor. Eldest of the four siblings. Beautiful in the most grotesque of ways due to cosmetic surgery procedures. Perfect, and insincere.

BRIDGET: late 20s-early 30s. Second of the four siblings and only girl. Political journalist in Washington DC and esteemed novelist. Feminine on her own terms. Quiet, contemplative.

MITCH: mid 20s. Third of the four siblings but appears older. Suffers from extreme burnout and appears haggard. Preacher at the local church. Aggressive, nearly feral to hide a deep sense of constant stress and isolation.

CLAY: seventeen. Last of the four siblings. Only one of the four to have no knowledge of the parents or any other life prior to living with the grandparents. Waiter in the local diner, and aspiring dentist. Idealistic, torn between the outside world of his elder siblings versus the insulated culture of Mitch. Malleable, susceptible to influence from others. Younger than the others in more ways than one.

MeeMaw: late 80s-early 90s. Not a physical presence in the play but looms over them all regardless. Raised the four siblings, and recently passed away.

Act I, Scene I.

Living room. A simple, dilapidated farmhouse. A couch and two chairs sit in the middle of the room, coffee table in front. Against the wall sits a desk, a bookcase overflowing with old books, a staircase leads upstairs. Windows are covered by heavy curtains and blinds. The room is closed, stuffy. A coatrack stands next to the door, covered in scarves and hats. Walls are covered in peeling wallpaper and spotty paint.

MITCH paces the floor of the living room, continually rehearsing a sermon. He is a man of late twenties but looks much older. He has gray sprouts in his dark hair, thick worry wrinkles around his eyes, dark bags underneath. He wears a light tan button-up with dark brown tie and brown slacks. His clothing is caught between casual and formal, respectable.

MITCH

(With fire and brimstone intonation to himself) "You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you. Through your widespread trade, you were filled with violence, and you sinned. So, I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God and I expelled you, guardian

cherub, from among the fiery stones. Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So, I threw you to the earth". Make no mistake brothers and sisters, God is not the being to trifle with, and he *will* throw you from his graces. Says it all right there in Ezekiel folks: If he didn't reserve love for a wayward angel made by his own hand, what hope could you have as a lowly human?

ENTER CLAY. A young man, roughly seventeen or eighteen years old. Dark blonde hair meticulously combed and groomed. He wears a black coat, white button-up, black slacks, black slip-on shoes, and carries a full-frontal apron. He instinctively slips his shoes off, hangs his apron and coat on the coatrack and heads towards the couch.

CLAY

New sermon?

CLAY sits on the couch and digs through backpack absentmindedly. He takes out different school supplies, books, and papers trying to find something. MITCH closes the bible, puts it in the bookshelf as he continues.

MITCH

Old, edited sermon. I figured it would keep my mind off...things.

CLAY

You need to relax. The speaker is going to do a fine job, he did know her after all-

MITCH

(interrupting) Everyone on this side of the Mississippi knew her. She wasn't the type of person you could avoid. That don't mean he'll give a good eulogy.

CLAY

(comforting) It'll be fine, bub. Macon Funeral has taken care of her body, and they will ensure she looks better than ever. The eulogy will be heartfelt, executed with care and sensitivity. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were more worried about the funeral than she would have been.

MITCH

How was the night shift at the diner?

CLAY

About as interesting as a greasy spoon can be. I got burnt with grease, hit on by two women old enough to be the mother, and made maybe fifty dollars in tips.

MITCH

Oh well. Good thing you ain't savin' for nothin'.

CLAY nods, silent.

(continues) Did you ever apply to Camden? One of the church secretaries was telling me her daughter already got accepted-

CLAY

(interrupting) No. I planned on a gap year or something. I need to get more saved up before I go off.

MITCH

Going off?

CLAY

I mean off to community college. It may only be thirty-five minutes away but that's still "going off".

MITCH remains silent. Contemplative.

MITCH

Have *they* reached out yet?

CLAY

(*avoidant*) Who?

MITCH

(*sarcastic*) The meth-cookers down the road. You know who.

CLAY

No. The plane is supposed to land in an hour or so. I assume they'll take cabs or rent cars from there.

MITCH

I don't know why they even needed to be invited-

CLAY

Because they're her grandkids just as much as we are. Teddy and Bridget may not be your favorite people in the world, but they're still family.

MITCH

Maybe they should act like it more often. Or perhaps come by more than once every five years.

CLAY knows this song and dance. He stays silent hoping to let it diffuse.

CLAY

With all due respect, I'm backing out of that. The problems you got with them are your problems alone, and neither of them exist to please you.

MITCH glares in CLAY's direction.

MITCH

I wouldn't have problems with them if they didn't tap-dance all over my last nerve every time they come around. Teddy ain't even real nowadays and Bridget turned into such a frigid girl. They was once good people but then-

CLAY

(interrupting) then they left and made you the eldest by process of elimination? Yeah, I know. You seem to forget that you're not much older than me.

MITCH

I'll just be glad when all this is over and MeeMaw is resting six feet deep. The dramatics never helped her when she was alive but at least they can't kill her now.

CLAY

(Not surprised by this morbidity) They'll come, they'll say their goodbyes and then they'll be gone for good. I promise you this isn't any easier for them than it is for you.

MITCH

I severely doubt that. I'm goin' out to salt the road to make sure it's ready for later. There's a snowstorm comin'.

EXIT MITCH.

CLAY is alone in the living room. He lifts a backpack from behind the couch and pulls out a textbook. He pulls a wad of cash from his sock and stashes it in the book with even more cash. He looks around nervously before replacing the book. Afterwards, gets off the couch and goes toward the kitchen for coffee.

Act I, Scene II.

TEDDY enters the home. He is a man of mid-thirties but looks younger, impeccably dressed and without a wrinkle or blemish on his face. He is "perfect" in the most grotesque of ways, resembling an embalmed corpse more so than a breathing human. He wears a suede coat, purple button-up and slacks. Everything about him screams "be impressed!".

TEDDY

Helloo?

No response. He puts the bags down next to the door.

BRIDGET? CLAY? I swear they don't even know how to lock doors in this damn place. If I were a robber, I would've walked out with half the family heirlooms by now.

Looks around at the dilapidated walls.

Never mind. Nothing to steal here, except maybe the pissants.

He walks over to the bookshelf, browsing. His hand finds a tattered, broken photo album.

ENTER CLAY. TEDDY turns quickly, sees CLAY and smiles. They hug.

TEDDY

Goddamn kid! You've grown since the last time I saw ya! I thought you were-

CLAY

No, no. He left, probably out to the shed or something. We're supposed to get a storm later.

TEDDY

Where's Jet?

CLAY

Her train is late. You should know at this point how unreliable transport is Mr. British Broadway.

TEDDY

(laughs) They prefer "West End" across the pond. *(Looks at watch nervously)* I hope she gets here soon. I wish she'd taken a plane. It's pricier but much better on the time.

CLAY

Once a worrywart big brother, always a worrywart big brother.

TEDDY

(Looks around and whispers) You got it four days ago...

CLAY's eyes widen, and he becomes excited.

CLAY

Did I get in?!?

TEDDY

I don't know, it wasn't addressed to me. You think I wanna commit a federal offense?

CLAY

Did you bring it?

TEDDY

It's in my bag somewhere. I'll have to find it. It was a thick envelope though, so I think you did well kiddo *(winks)*. Have you been saving like I told you to?

CLAY

(nods) over six thousand so far. I should have more by the time graduation rolls around.

TEDDY

That isn't much time. Graduation is only a few months away! Does preachy know about your plans?

CLAY

I wish you wouldn't call him that.

TEDDY

I just call it like I see it. You're almost legal age to do whatever you want, bubby. He can't keep you chained at that shitty waiter job forever-

CLAY

He isn't. I'm doing it because it's the best pay I can git in this town. How much more do I need to aim for?

TEDDY

As much as you can get your greasy fingers on. New York ain't cheap, but they have a kickass pre-Dental program at NYU, and it takes all the dough you can get your burnt fingers on.

ENTER MITCH.

At first, he doesn't pay attention to TEDDY. Then, he sees him and becomes instinctively cold and defensive.

MITCH

Oh, look what the cat dragged in.

TEDDY

It's...pleasant...to see you again, Mitch.

MITCH

(grunts) The pleasure is all yours.

Turns to CLAY.

The road is salted and ready in case that storm covers the road. Make sure you bring the window and door blankets downstairs, so we have them nearby in case we have to cover everything. I'm headed up to Donahue Holler to see if Therese needs a ride to the funeral tomorrow. Do you need anything?

TEDDY begins digging through his briefcase, ignoring the entire conversation.

CLAY

I'm good. Drive safe out there, Therese Donahue isn't known for keeping up her road.

TEDDY

Why don't you just call her?

MITCH ignores this.

MITCH

Well, just text me on my cell phone when she gets here. I want some warning the next time around.

CLAY

Sure, Mitch. Just try to be back before it gets too dark out there.

MITCH nods and exits.

As MITCH leaves, TEDDY pulls a thick envelope from his briefcase.

TEDDY

God, I thought he'd never leave. Here's your NYU packet!

CLAY eagerly tears it open. He skims the first page.

Well?!?

CLAY is stunned, reading the letter repeatedly to himself.

CLAY

I...I...

TEDDY

SPIT IT OUT KIDDO!

As the brothers process the letter, BRIDGET enters. Her black hair is pinned up in a tight, smart bun. She wears a pink turtleneck sweater with strategically fitted dress pants and stylish boots. Her premium long, black coat is bundled around her body.

BRIDGET

There's the bitches I've been waitin' to see!

TEDDY

Jet!!

They embrace. She hugs TEDDY, then CLAY.

CLAY

I never thought you were going to make it! Teddy was beginning to worry!

BRIDGET

That makes two of us, boyo. I got stuck beside the most talkative pyramid scheme consultant and let me just say- I think there's an expose waiting to be written there. But how are you?! Better yet, how's Mitch the bitch these days?

CLAY

Hanging in there, I guess. He went up Donahue Holler to see if that nosey bat needs a ride to MeeMaw's funeral tomorrow. Oh shoot, I'm supposed to warn him about your arrival.

CLAY pulls out his phone and texts.

BRIDGET

Why is he concerned about my arrival? I didn't think he liked me enough for that!

TEDDY

(To BRIDGET) He got snippy the moment I walked in. I don't think we're as welcome as we'd like to assume. Just wait till he hears about the letter; he'll have a stroke!

BRIDGET

(To CLAY) Oh my god... Did you get it?

CLAY nods. He hands her the packet.

(reading) Dear Clayton Mooney, we are pleased to inform you of your early acceptance into the New York University program for Chemistry with focus in pre-Dentistry.

(Processes this) OH MY GOD! BUBBY YOU DID IT! *(She takes her little brother into a tight, congratulatory bear hug)*

TEDDY looks through the rest of the packet, finding the tuition statement. He gives BRIDGET an uneasy look.

TEDDY

Clay, it doesn't say anything about those scholarships you applied for.

CLAY

Wait, what? *(He scans the letter)*

BRIDGET

(uneasy) What does that mean exactly?

TEDDY

It means we'll find a way to get the money, that's what. We found it for me, we found it for you *(to BRIDGET)*, and we'll find it for you *(to CLAY)*.

CLAY

But...it's so much money-

TEDDY

Shush. Do you think we're gonna let our baby brother get trapped in this dump?

BRIDGET

I wish we could ask the folks-

TEDDY

You know that isn't an option. We've always done this on our own, we don't need anyone else, we *can't* need anyone else. Especially the folks.

BRIDGET reluctantly nods in agreement.

If need be, you can come live at my rental house, and commute on the subway. God knows I hardly rent it out anyways.

CLAY

Eww New Jersey?! (*Playful disgust*)

TEDDY

Hey don't knock it 'til ya try it. At least you're not bothered by neighbors there. I've been at my place for eleven years and my neighbor could be a serial killer for all I know, or care.

BRIDGET

I know what my neighbors look like but that's just because I sat and drank coffee while their flat got raided. I love a good morning show. Speaking of a good show, think of Mitch's reaction when he finds out!

CLAY

Do you think we should tell him?

TEDDY

That's up to you, but personally I don't think it's any of Mitch's business. He knows you want to do more...right?

CLAY

I...I tried to bring it up earlier, but he is still convinced that Camden Community and Technical College is as far as I can go-

BRIDGET

But that's absolute bullshit. Who is he to tell you how far you can go?

CLAY

I don't think he wants me to get hurt out there.

BRIDGET

So, he wants you to stay insulated from the real world, huh?
Does he think you're a hamster in a plastic ball?

CLAY

Seems that way. I don't think he wants me to go because he sees
how much you two have put up with to get to where you are-

TEDDY

Shit is just as inevitable as death. You're gonna deal with it
no matter what, and I think Mitch knows that.

BRIDGET

Don't worry about it too much, bub. We'll take care of it, I
promise.

CLAY

I'm going to go take a nap. I worked an eleven to seven last
night and I'm dead on my feet.

BRIDGET

Go rest up, do you want us to wake you up at any specific time?

CLAY

No thanks, I've got an alarm.

EXIT CLAY UPSTAIRS.

TEDDY

Hey, do you wanna go see some of the old sights?

BRIDGET

I would love to! This frigid old house is too gloomy!

TEDDY AND BRIDGET EXIT.

ACT I, SCENE III.

MITCH enters with the mail. He looks over it, sitting at the desk and tearing the envelopes open with a butter knife. He scans over the bills, the condolence letters, and the junk mail. Looking over at the coffee table, he notices the letter from NYU. Curious, he takes one of the pages and reads it.

MITCH

What the hell is that kid planning?

MITCH continues looking through the pages. He finds the tuition statement page and chuckles a bit to himself then shakes his head.

I can't wait to see how they pull this off.

MITCH exits into the kitchen with the acceptance letter and the other pages, leaving the torn envelope.

Bridget and Teddy enter the home. They remove their coats and settle in on the couch. They rub their hands from the cold, warming themselves up.

BRIDGET

This town sure as shit ain't changed much, has it?

TEDDY

Not a bit. It's almost like a set built for a period piece in a coal town. Everything is still as dry and dusty as ever. The old general store, the grocery store with the same peeling paint job, hell even the weather doesn't seem to ever change.

BRIDGET

The sidewalk litter has certainly stayed static. Old cigarette packs, pop bottles and candy wrappers.

TEDDY

Who was that guy on Main Street? You two talked for ages.

BRIDGET

An old fling from high school. He used to supply me with weed and wanted to marry me at one point.

TEDDY

(Looks at her with surprised expression) Wait, what?

BRIDGET

Oh yeah, you didn't know that? He wanted us to get married straight out of high school and move into the house on the other side of the hill. Said a girl should always be within a mile of her mama.

TEDDY

That's assuming the girl has a mama worth being near. If we had folks like that, we'd probably have been more inclined to stay right where we were. *(sarcastically)* Thank God Almighty for child abandonment!

BRIDGET

That next day I called you up in New York from the train station and asked for the bus money. He wanted a wife, and a homemaker and children but I think I would've rather died than take that

life on. Dealing with rude publishers was easier. I mean, you know I was never one to wear an apron and play with dolls. I was always too busy riding the dirt bikes with you and the neighbors.

TEDDY

I remember that day. I was in the middle of rehearsal and almost ran my account into overdraft to get you that money. I was a swing for the musicalized version of "DEATH BECOMES HER", one of my first big parts. Those were some of the lean years, but I am still glad I had them over the alternatives (*looking around the dodgy living room*). Do you think the money will really come through for Clay? He has his heart set on NYU, but I don't know if we can realistically swing it.

BRIDGET

Well... the house is still in an irrevocable trust for you, isn't it?

TEDDY nods.

(cont.) Then you have some sellable collateral with the house and the land. Mitch has his own house; you and I don't want to come back, and Clay is coming up to New York with you in a few

months anyways. There's no reason to keep this dump. Besides, if push comes to shove, I can always write a new book, or you could take a new project. The money *will* come together. We don't leave family behind.

TEDDY

I don't really know If anyone would want this place though. Besides, I know Mitch would keep me tied up in court for years or at least try. I wish he could lighten the hell up sometimes.

BRIDGET

It's hell that he's always thinking about. I wish for our sakes he could at least be courteous. In my line of work, we don't show aggression like that, it's downright unprofessional. Holding onto grudges like that is childish. "Getting the heck over it and moving on" is something we should write down and place in his church's suggestion box.

TEDDY

We won't have to worry about him much longer. We just need to get this funeral over with, get Clay out of here and we can skip this god-forsaken place for the rest of our lives.

TEDDY looks on the table where the letter was laid, and notices the pages are gone. He picks up the torn envelope and examines it.

Hey Jet, did Clay take his papers with him? They aren't here...

BRIDGET

I haven't seen them.

Both look around the table and couch, trying to find the pages.

ENTER Mitch from kitchen. He gives them both a death glare and walks out the front door.

Do you think he-?

TEDDY

Oh god, I hope not.

ACT I, SCENE IV.

BRIDGET goes to the kitchen, pours two cups of coffee, and returns to the living room. She sets them on the table and sits down. TEDDY stops looking for the pages, sits on the couch and picks up his cup. He blows the steam away and takes a drink. They enjoy coffee together, silently.

CLAY enters from the stairs. He is now wearing sweatpants and a hoodie with house slippers. He is more disheveled than last time he was onstage. He carries a pile of thick, folded blankets, and a toolbox and lays them on desk upstage.

TEDDY

Have a nice nap?

CLAY

I don't think I've slept well in this house since MeeMaw died.

TEDDY

I know how that feels. Next time we go into town we'll get you a box of sleeping tablets if you'd like.

CLAY

I'm good. I need good, real rest after dealing with those awful people all night long. They stiff you on tips, they make messes intentionally, they let their filthy children scream for minutes on end. It's just not worth the pay, I swear to God.

TEDDY

Sounds like a greasy spoon clientele. That was one of the first things I noticed when I left; there's more refinement out in the world than there is here. Here, the trashy people take any chance they get to act like royalty.

CLAY

Well, it's only for a few more months. (*Notices the empty envelope*) hey where did my letter go?

TEDDY

Didn't you take it upstairs with you?

CLAY

No, I left it on the table with the envelope. (*His sleepy demeanor becomes a light anxiety as he realizes that Mitch may have it*) Oh shit no!

TEDDY

Hey, it'll be fine-

CLAY

No, it really won't! Mitch'll skin me alive if he knows I applied without asking-

TEDDY

Since when do you have to ask him for anything? He ain't your parent. He's barely brotherly!

BRIDGET takes the cups away back to the kitchen.

CLAY

You won't be here, and it'll be me left alone to deal with him!

(The anxiety grows more and more)

TEDDY

(gently) Calm down, bubby. If it comes to blows, I'll sign you out of school and you'll come with me right after the funeral.

CLAY

How would MeeMaw handle this?

TEDDY

She would beat the shit out of Mitch, but since she ain't here it's up to us to figure out what to do.

BRIDGET

It'll be three against one. I like those odds.

MITCH enters. He glares over at the two older siblings.

TEDDY

Did you find papers on the table earlier?

MITCH nods, silently.

TEDDY

Well, where are they?

MITCH reaches into his pocket, pulls out a handful of ash, and blows it in TEDDY's face. He goes towards Clay in a threatening manner while Clay cowers.

MITCH

(To Clay) So when was you gonna tell me, you sorry bastard?! I break my back to keep you out of the damn foster care system and *this* is how you repay me?! If I had a belt, I'd give you the lashin' of a lifetime-!

BRIDGET

Lay a fingernail on him and you go to jail.

MITCH

I don't recall asking your opinion on anything, you frigid *bitch!* This is between me and my brother-

CLAY

They're my brother and sister too! I don't give a damn what you think of them, but you will *not* speak to them like they ain't blood! I am sick to death of your treatment! What did I ever do to you?! I break my back at school to get honor roll every month, I break my neck at work to do good, I do my damndest to go to church every Sunday. When will I be enough for you, Mitch? Huh? What will be enough for you?

MITCH is silent. He looks at the three siblings. They stand in a perfect equidistant triangle, with Teddy far upstage right, Bridget downstage center and Clay upstage left.

MITCH

You're lucky you didn't have to deal with the MeeMaw we did, boy. You ain't close to what perfect is.

TEDDY

He's coming with me and there ain't a damn thing you can do about it-

MITCH

(Jovial laughter) And where are you gonna get that type of money? I read those pages, and ain't none of yall able to drop that much money on this screw-up.

TEDDY

We're selling this house. It's mine and the money is goin' to his education.

MITCH

Teddy, you ain't ever gonna sell this house. I'll make sure of it. This is MeeMaw and papaw's house, and they wanted us to keep it-!

TEDDY

I will fight you in court with every lawyer I can get my hands on. I've always beaten you Mitch, at everything we've ever competed at. What makes you think you can win now?

MITCH

You win because you never play fair. A cheater is the same as a loser in the Good Book.

CLAY

Mitch, I'm going. I don't care if I have to hitchhike to New York and live on the street. I would rather be dead than stay here.

MITCH

That's your prerogative. I sure hope for your sake that New York is all it's cracked up to be.

MITCH heads to the kitchen and works to fill the oil lamps, gathering the candles and checking the flashlights.

ACT I, SCENE V

CLAY sits among TEDDY and BRIDGET. They are used to this explosive behavior and take it with a grain of salt. This is completely normal.

TEDDY and BRIDGET give each other a knowing glance.

TEDDY

(To Bridget) I think it's time for a little relaxation.

CLAY

Ooh, can I try it?

BRIDGET

Not on your life, kid.

TEDDY pulls a joint and book of matches from his pocket and twists it in his fingers.

TEDDY

(Sparks, inhales deeply, and blows out the smoke) this is that Gorilla Glue stuff. The people at the dispensary assured me it was primo.

He passes it to Bridget, and she also inhales and blows out the smoke. She rolls her head, releasing the tension in her shoulders.

Clay sits and watches them.

They sit on the couch, passing it back and forth for a little time before they speak again. BRIDGET walks over to the bookcase, grabs the ashtray and then the photo album. She picks

up the photo album and sets it on the table and flips through while smoking.

BRIDGET

I think this is them.

TEDDY

(exhaling) Huh?

BRIDGET

(Looks at picture from photo album) They look like us. The man has features like you and Clay, the nose and the-

TEDDY

Not my features anymore.

BRIDGET

Under the work done they still are.

As they speak, they each take a hard puff before handing it back.

TEDDY

I've had the work done ever since I moved to New York. Do you remember when you came to that one Broadway show I did at the Rosenthal, and you showed up with flowers-?

CLAY

I remember when my friends in the theatre department at school found a bootleg of your show! They loved it so much-

BRIDGET

That show was a damn unapologetic abortion, but I was so proud to be the little sister of a big Broadway star. (*Puffs and passes*)

CLAY

Me too. (*pause*) I mean little brother not little sister-
They all laugh. They're all getting inebriated from the secondhand smoke.

TEDDY

It wasn't that bad, but it definitely wasn't a Tony winner. When you're offered a Broadway contract, you can't be picky. I just wish MeeMaw had been able to make the trip. I was looking forward to seeing her in the audience like I did when I did those little shows in high school. I couldn't share that with the parents, but I so wanted to share it with her. Sometimes I wonder if she was ashamed of me.

BRIDGET

I know how it feels, Teddy. I wish I'd had her there at my first book release party, or to even send a congratulatory card. I think ceasing to exist is something we just deal with.

TEDDY

She was too busy being stuck up Mitch's ass. The golden child always got the best out of us all because he could do something we never could- submit to her and her bitchy, nosy friends.

CLAY

At least the friends are dying off. I hope they can't be nosy from beyond the grave!

BRIDGET

You know, this (*looks down at half consumed joint*) isn't doing your cosmetic work any favors-

TEDDY

Doctor Teagan can take care of me if I start to wrinkle, droop or sag. He's the one that gave me the face and body I needed to get ahead in this life. Without that angel, I would still look like these people (*continues to look through the photo album,*

*grimacing at certain pictures while staring at others
delicately)*

CLAY

Hey, we looked alike. What's wrong with our features?

TEDDY

They're too natural. Nature rots and in this business, you can do anything but rot.

BRIDGET

You didn't need to do that, you know. Maybe some casting directors would've enjoyed the overfed, rustic look.

TEDDY

Like the mutants in this album? No thanks. I know I wouldn't have made it if I still looked like *that*. If you aren't at least an eight out of ten, they don't want you on their stages or acting in their movies or promoting their products. I know! I tried before and they didn't want me! *(pause)* Nobody wanted me.

(Pauses, puffs, and continues)

I can admit to being more plastic than man. I have no qualms with that. Sometimes I think about what would've happened if I

kept my gut, or my double chin, or my fuller face.

(sarcastically) The family features. The cultural features. I remember when the work was over. My hair was dyed, my wardrobe was fitted, my teeth were veneered. It took a lot, but the attention came to me. I think it feels so much worse when you know they are only giving you their time because you're attractive. It shows just how they would treat you if you looked like you.

CLAY

I am feeling really buzzy from this smoke. I think I'm gonna go to bed.

BRIDGET

Alrighty, bubby. Let us know if you need anything.

CLAY

I may be needing a bag of chips soon.

He mumbles to himself as he climbs the stairs slowly, before exiting.

ACT II, SCENE I

Both sit in silence, passing the joint back and forth until it's a stub. Both are well-baked, almost incoherent.

BRIDGET

I think we just got our baby brother high.

TEDDY

I still remember when I covered as Earnest for "Death Becomes Her" the first time. I had rehearsed for days, and it was finally happening but, in the wings, I just remember seeing the audience footage on the monitor backstage. I looked around and didn't see anybody I knew. I was freezing up, I couldn't breathe, couldn't think, and couldn't sing a note from the fear. I just remember the woman covering Liesl shaking me, comforting me. I will be forever grateful to that actress until the day they fill me with formaldehyde, but I wish it'd been the folks. We can make snide remarks about them till the cows come home to roost, but their lack of presence really hit the hardest in times of crisis like that. Now, we don't have anyone.

BRIDGET

Don't play revisionist to me. We never had anyone. For most of our lives here we didn't even have each other to count on. No matter what, we were always at each other's throats-

TEDDY

Jet, that's just how siblings are. We hate each other, we avoid each other like the plague, we try to get under each other's skin but in the end, I'm almost positive we have love for each other.

BRIDGET

I think we skipped that last part.

ENTER MITCH. He is carrying full oil lamps, candles, and flashlights. He sits them out around the house as the conversation continues.

TEDDY

There's one that definitely skipped the last part.

MITCH looks over at Teddy, realizes he is very stoned and scowls.

MITCH

Are you two crazy?! What if the damn cops come?!

TEDDY AND BRIDGET laugh.

BRIDGET

Cops can't make it up the holler. Why don't you take in some of the secondhand goodness like Clay and relax?

MITCH

(furious) You got Clay high too?! Ugh!

TEDDY

He enjoyed the diffusion that Mistress Cannabis doth bring. It was a hell of a lot better than your constant insistence on order-

MITCH

This house *would* be in order if you weren't too scared of dirtying your fancy designer clothes!

TEDDY

This house isn't my job-

MITCH

You can say that again.

TEDDY looks at him with scorn.

If you had even a lick of sense this wouldn't be so damn difficult-

TEDDY

Here we go yet again. If you want to keep rehashing your petty shit, please do. Jet can you hand me my noise-canceling headphones from that bag?

BRIDGET just looks at him.

MITCH

Sure, go ahead. Cut off anything you don't want, block out anything you don't want. It's always down to what you want-

TEDDY

Obviously not. I want you to shut up but that's obviously a want that isn't getting satisfied.

MITCH takes his focus from TEDDY and begins to roll up the wicks of the oil lamps, and one by one takes off the glass chimneys, lights them and replaces the chimneys.

Oh sure, go ahead and ignore me. You are just like the folks-

MITCH

Don't you ever say that again unless you want those fake teeth knocked down your throat! I am not the one that decided that nobody else mattered, that the obligations to family did not matter!

TEDDY

It currently *doesn't* matter. Not when you're being so melodramatic. I left, big damn deal. Last I checked that isn't illegal.

MITCH

Legality doesn't mean morality. It may not have been against the law to leave blood to fend for themselves but it sure as shit is immoral-

BRIDGET

You're jealous.

MITCH looks at her.

MITCH

I don't know what I've got to be jealous of. I never needed to forget I's a woman and act like a man to get somewhere in life. That was you (*to BRIDGET*). I also didn't need to get carved up

like a thanksgiving turkey to be purty, that was you (to *TEDDY*).
I have helped so many troubled souls, but I've never met someone
quite like you. (To *TEDDY*) You are the devil.

TEDDY

(cold) I'm a winner.

MITCH turns his attention away to look at the window. He lets
go of the curtain and immediately goes into panic mode.

MITCH

Oh god!

TEDDY

What?

MITCH

The storm! I didn't think it was gonna be this bad, the snow has
to be more than seven inches by now! (quickly) Where's Clay?!

TEDDY

Upstairs sleeping-

MITCH

CLAY! Get down here!

After a few beats, CLAY groggily walks down the stairs, rubbing his eyes. He is now dressed in fleece pajamas and an oversized nightshirt with a robe. He is less high than he was before, but still kind of inhibited.

CLAY

What's happening?

MITCH

We need to condense all the heat together. I need you to run upstairs, shut the doors and seal the bottom with blankets. I got the oil lamps set out, but we may not be able to make it out of here for days-

TEDDY

DAYS?! I am not staying in this dump a second longer than I must-

MITCH

Looks like you're gonna have to stay here until the road is cleared. The house is losing heat and we need to keep it in. Bridget, the portable space heaters are upstairs in MeeMaw's room. I need you to go get them now while we still have some

heat left. It'll be easier to keep the house warm than to warm it back up.

BRIDGET

You mean the room she died in?!

MITCH

GO! It ain't proper for a boy to go in a woman's room!

TEDDY

Of all the things I didn't miss, this is probably the highest on the list.

As TEDDY gets up, the power goes out.

BLACKOUT.

BRIDGET and CLAY exit as the lights go out. TEDDY is left all alone. He pulls the matches from his coat.

The match is struck. TEDDY hurries over to the lamp sitting on the table, rolls the wick up and lights it. The stage is dark and empty except for the lone light.

TEDDY

Hey! Where is everyone?!

No answer.

(To himself) Goddamn, the dark is darker here. Hello? Is anybody else down here?! What am I doing? You have done horror movies before, dum dum. The one who tries to voice out people gets killed first *(puts hands to face and rubs in frustration)*.

BRIDGET enter from the stairs, carrying two space heaters and carries a lit cigarette lighter to lead her way.

TEDDY rushes to help her unload the heaters. They take them over to the couch and set them up on the coffee table. They click on, and heat begins to weakly surge through the room. They stand at the coffee table, rubbing their hands and getting warm.

BRIDGET

After I left this place with a single suitcase in hand, I hoped I'd never have to see another battery-operated heater ever again.

The lighter gets too hot, BRIDGET reflexively drops her cigarette lighter and feels under the couch to find it in the

dark. She pulls out a small storage box. She lifts it up, sets it on the table.

TEDDY

What is that?

BRIDGET

It looks like a scrapbook box. You think it was MeeMaws?

TEDDY

Only one way to find out. Let's open it.

BRIDGET

Let's wait until the electric comes back first. I want to see what's in it before checking it without any light.

ACT II, SCENE II

ENTER MITCH.

MITCH

Did y'all find the heaters?

TEDDY nods.

Good.

TEDDY

The lanterns in the kitchen haven't been lit yet. There's nobody in there to use them.

MITCH

We can light them when it comes time to eat. The relatives brought plenty of soups and pies.

TEDDY

Sounds like the relatives. Does Aunt Leah still make the chili con carne with venison?

MITCH nods.

MITCH

Doesn't she always? I think she makes large quantities of it and then prays for someone to croak.

TEDDY

How are they? I read somewhere that Soraya just had another baby and cousin Nick just bought that dump on Mulberry and Thyme-

MITCH

(interrupting) Teddy, do you really care? When you left, they weren't your concern anymore. I don't know how else to explain it to you. You made the decision to unblood them, and they did the same to you. Same with Bridget and it'll be the same with Clay when he goes off too.

TEDDY

I will never understand it. I don't understand how someone ceases to be family if they move away for a better life. This isn't the day of Laura Ingalls Wilder where somebody had to say goodbye forever!

MITCH

The world moves out there, it don't here and we git used to it. Here we know who to trust, cain't say that about the world out there (*points at curtained window*). That's why I don't want Clay to go.

TEDDY

That doesn't ever leave, you know.

MITCH

What?

TEDDY

Trustlessness. Clay will learn how to trust the same way we did, and he'll learn how to make something of himself. I promise I won't take him away then dump him.

MITCH

You better not. He's a good kid, he don't deserve none of this shit you're draggin' him into. I just worry he won't have what it takes to make it out there. He ain't the brightest kid-

TEDDY

Mitch, he got into one of the best programs in the country for pre-Dentistry. He beat out hundreds of other applicants for the spot and he got it! I am proud as hell of that kid. Clay is smart as hell; nobody could deny it.

MITCH

One-one of the best?

MITCH represses tears. He is trying his best not to show just how proud he is.

Looks at the photo album on the coffee table.

I haven't seen this for a while. When MeeMaw got bad, she used to look over these things every day just to remember. When it got real bad, she flipped through it just trying to jog something in her that would help her remember. *Make her remember.* At the end she would look at this album and just cry. She knew enough to know that her memory was no longer hers to control. Sometimes she would ask for you, sometimes she would take Clay for you and just talk that kid's ear off. I think it hurt him more than anything when she went.

TEDDY

That kid has been through hell and returned as a champion.
That's why I want him to go out, make something of himself!
Mitch, he has what it takes. I promise you!

MITCH

He has what it takes, but that doesn't mean I want him to go get
hurt. New York is a dangerous place.

TEDDY

I'll be there with him. It'll be easier for him than it was for
me.

Mitch

I won't ever stop worrying. He's my baby brother, I would kill
for him, and I'd die for him. Whenever I look at him all I can
feel is guilt, you know? He never got any normalcy. We could at
least pick the folks out of a lineup. We had somebody cheering
for us at our graduations. He won't have any of that-

TEDDY

He has us. He will *always* have us.

ACT II SCENE III.

TEDDY

I'm sorry, Mitch. I am so sorry for everything. From not being there, to leaving you to maintain the others when it really was my job-

MITCH

Stop. Would you for one damn second just stop? There ain't any award people here. You don't gotta keep acting, not for me. It wasn't your job. Kids shouldn't be responsible for taking care of their brothers and sisters. That's up to the people who fornicated to make 'em. We needed the people who brought us into this world, but they were never there. I hope missing out was worth it.

TEDDY

I hope they burn in hell someday. I would give my right arm to be there just to see the dad go slowly.

MITCH

I do my best not to feel those feelings. "Honour thy father and thy mother"-

TEDDY

Ephesians says differently. "Fathers do not provoke your children to wrath; instead, bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord". Remember, I was forced to attend that rundown little church too. If parents don't want to parent, they don't need children. I'm sure your congregation could learn a lot about child rearing. And I must say, they have provoked a lot of wrath.

MITCH

Some do. I don't do what I do for the good-choice folks out there. My only concern is those people hurtin', feelin' like they don't matter. Church is like an urgent care for the spirit. I can't judge any of 'em because I'm just as sinful and doubtful as they are.

ENTER BRIDGET. She carries a tray of coffee mugs.

BRIDGET

The coffee is getting cool, we better finish it now before it gets frigid.

TEDDY

I think I'm good on coffee for now. Between the caffeine and the THC, my body don't know which way it wants to go!

BRIDGET

Have the coffee anyways. The worst thing to do is fall asleep during a snowstorm. Is it letting up at all outside?

MITCH

No. It snows a lot harder than it did before. We may be trapped up here for a few days if it don't heat up and melt off.

BRIDGET

If we knew it was gonna get this bad, we'd got some supplies in town.

TEDDY

You forget that we've survived this before. We always survive. I think the lantern needs more oil.

BLACKOUT.

ACT II, SCENE IV

BRIDGET, TEDDY, CLAY and MITCH sit on the couch silent. All are tightly wound in fabrics they have collected. The home has been closed off by thick blankets over the doors and windows, the oil lamps congregated on the coffee table. All now shiver, frigid by the lack of heat or electricity in the house. The portable heaters are nearly dead.

TEDDY

Do you guys ever wonder where they are?

MITCH

It's best not to think of that, Teddy.

BRIDGET

I looked to see if I could find them before, but no leads. Wherever they are, they're hiding and good at it.

MITCH

We don't need them-

TEDDY

(interrupting) Yes, we do. There is no gray area about it, they were supposed to be here for all of us! If we freeze to death up here, it'll be their fault!

MITCH

It would be the weather's fault. The season's fault. They may be at fault for a lot, but they don't control the weather-

BRIDGET

Why do you stick up for them? Please tell me because I'm dying to know.

MITCH

I have worked for years to forgive them because it's all I can do. I can't let myself feel the brunt of the anger that I have for them because it's not godly to harbor grudges!

CLAY

What were they like?

SILENCE.

TEDDY

The father looked like you and I quite a bit. You get your dirty blonde hair from him. The mother kind of looked like Jet. She always had her hair up; she never wore makeup. Both of them were rail thin.

BRIDGET

That's what happens when you're stupid enough to do needle drugs.

MITCH

They came back, you know. When papaw died, I mean.

BRIDGET

They did?!

MITCH

They stayed for a minute. They didn't ask about any of us. I stood right next to MeeMaw at the funeral home, and they never said a word to me or anything. They just wanted money, or to steal some of MeeMaw's jewelry. I don't think they even knew who I was or who Clay was.

TEDDY

How did they look?

MITCH

Are appearances all you care about? If you must know they looked awful. No teeth, skin pick wounds, dirty clothes. I think MeeMaw got nauseated from the smell.

BRIDGET

I wish they would've decided one way to go. You can't just leave then come back when it's suitable-

MITCH

Be careful with the hypocrisy, sis.

All sit in silence, pondering. Nobody wants to say anything.

The heaters shut down.

LIGHTS UP.

BRIDGET

The power's finally back!

MITCH

It may be a fluke. Don't celebrate for a few minutes.

CLAY

Anyone have the time?

TEDDY

Who cares what time it is?

THE four siblings go to bed.

ACT II, SCENE V.

The new day welcomes the four as they come downstairs. CLAY wears an oversized, wrinkled suit with his hair combed back. MITCH wears a black suit with a green tie. BRIDGET wears a calf-length black dress with her hair tied back with tall, black leather boots. TEDDY wears a black blazer, white dress shirt, purple tie with diamond tie clip and designer black shoes. All get ready in their own way and go their own way. Mitch looks over the verses in his tattered Bible. BRIDGET checks her makeup. CLAY sips coffee and TEDDY looks through the scrapbook box on the couch.

TEDDY

Jet, come look at this.

In the box are newspaper articles, magazine pieces and pictures.

BRIDGET

Are those... mine?

She looks over the pieces in the box.

Oh my god, it's almost every piece I've written since I was twenty!

TEDDY continues to browse the box. In it, he finds playbills and clipped reviews for musicals, ticket stubs and plays with pictures clipped from magazines.

TEDDY

Do you think MeeMaw...?

BRIDGET

Who else?!

They both continue to browse when they find a series of letters, postmarked different dates. All addressed to Teddy, and all marked "RETURN TO SENDER".

Teddy, is this your address?

TEDDY

No, the street is wrong. I lived on Melbourne Drive not Melrose Drive.

He continues to dig through the letters. He tears one open, reads it.

Jet...

BRIDGET

Hmm?

TEDDY

She was there.

BRIDGET

What do you mean?

TEDDY

I mean she was at my show. All of them. She wrote about how much she loved my performance, how fun the dancing looked. She signed it with "I love you so much and I'm so proud of you".

BRIDGET digs through the box next as TEDDY reads this letter again, while looking at the others all equally marked the same way.

BRIDGET finds her letter, and after tearing it open, she begins to read it to herself.

BRIDGET

I only have one. She wrote about how engaging my novel was, and how envious her friends were that their girls got knocked up while hers is interviewing big name folks.

SHE looks at the bottom.

She signed mine the same way. Teddy, I never knew she felt this way about us.

CLAY

What's going on?

TEDDY

A box under the couch. I think it was MeeMaw's.

CLAY

(Looking into the box, pulling out clippings) I remember seeing her sit here with this box, just hours at a time reading it over but I never asked what was in it.

They dump the box onto the coffee table and begin sorting it out into neat stacks. Letters and clippings for Teddy and Bridget are sorted on the table. TEDDY tears open the RETURN TO SENDER letter and begins to read.

TEDDY

Dear Theodore, I managed to catch your show at the Rosenthal in New York about a week ago. I never in my whole goddamn life ever had to pay ninety damn dollars to sit in a seat before that night. I ain't well-versed in 'at theater stuff but I thought it was purty damn funny and the girls did too. Therese Donahue never saw nothin' quite like a woman gittin' her belly blowed through with a shotgun on a stage but it got funny when that ol' girl stood back up! I tried to cetch ya after the show, but the girls didn't think it proper. Said I wasn't dressed right. I

didn't wanna embarrass ya in front of ya theater people, so I went back to the hotel. There twerent nobody in this whole damn holler more prouder n'me when I came back off the train. Who else up n' here can say they gotta grandbaby doin' that?! Your papaw woulda been so proud I promise ya that. Ya mama tried callin' me to see what you was into, but I just hung up the phone on her ol' ass. She don't gotta know nothin' 'bout you or any of you because you my babies. If they wanted to know 'bout any o' y'all they shoulda called you up or wrote like I am now. Call up here sometime. I'll try to make it back to New York then take the train to Washington to see your sister soon. I love you, See you soon. MeeMaw.

Silence. None of the four are sure where to go with this new information.

BRIDGET

She was there... the entire time?

TEDDY just looks at her.

TEDDY

I thought I embarrassed her. She thought I was embarrassed... of her?

MITCH

I never looked through this stuff before. She would sit on this couch, look over this box and the photo album for hours at a time. I never bothered to ask her what it was, just assumed she was triggerin' some old memories.

MITCH stares at his own clippings. FOOTBALL STAR TAKES STATE TO FINALS.

BRIDGET

I wish-

TEDDY

It's too late for that now. What's done is done, and what will come will come. Let's just get this funeral over with so we can all go home.

TEDDY folds up the letters, playbills, etc., puts them in the box and puts them back in the box. He returns the box to its spot under the couch.

CLAY

What happens if the folks come?

TEDDY

We will call the cops and have them arrested. They have no business being there. Fuck 'em.

BRIDGET

We better get going if we want to make it in time for breakfast. Clay, are you ready?

TEDDY

I just hope the road lets us out. It's always bad after a storm like that.

BRIDGET

We'll make it out in one way or another.

They all exit except for Mitch. Mitch easily goes around the room, taking the blankets off the windows and door frames, piling them up behind the couch. The sun shines through the window. Before he leaves, he examines the house before reading from the passage in his Bible.

MITCH

(*Reading from passage*) Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over.

MITCH exits.

THE END.

Chapter One: Teddy, the Perfect

Teddy as a character exists as a physical embodiment of refutation of cultural expectations that surround him while also exemplifying the idea of the perfect eldest sibling, one whom the other siblings should follow. Teddy exemplifies all that it is to be “perfect” to the macabre extreme through the usage of aesthetic surgeries meant to mask the true version of himself, to create a physical distance between himself and the parents, and to become a marketable product for his industry. In this specific instance, his industry is entertainment. The field in which looks can matter more so than other fields of expertise. The character is described as:

TEDDY enters the home. He is a man of mid-thirties but looks younger, impeccably dressed and without a wrinkle or blemish on his face. He is “perfect” in the most grotesque of ways, resembling an embalmed corpse more so than a breathing human. He wears a suede coat, purple button-up and slacks. Everything about him screams “be impressed!”.

This characterization is meant to give the character an imperfect, macabre “perfection” through the usage of designer clothing impeccably suited to the character, give him a suave and ethereal essence and most importantly it gives him an air of dishonesty. This dishonesty comes from his acting abilities more so than his appearance, allowing the audience to side only partially with the character as his desires are unknown. The character exists as a foil to his brother Mitch, the third of the fourth siblings. While Teddy is groomed meticulously and works hard as the

eldest sibling to give an aura of aspiration, of who and how to be. Meanwhile, his younger brother and foil Mitch exists as an unapologetic worker and religious man who takes little care or effort for his appearance. The work that goes into each appearance ties directly to one's position in their own societies and exists to set them apart by showing what they do. This, by extension, gives an outsider a clue as to how much respect the person deserves. The connection between work and respect is one that runs deeply within this culture.

This character (as they all are) is named for an overlooked character within theatre. Teddy is named for Teddy in Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* with one discernible difference: no spouse. While the incarnation of Teddy in Pinter's work is an academic who arrives in London with the sexually repressed Ruth, my incarnation of Teddy arrives to his familiar Appalachian home with the gumption that Pinter's Teddy could never muster. When Teddy arrives in his old Appalachian home, he is immediately "greeted" by Clay's excitement and Mitch's cold indifference. While this is not the exact way Pinter's Teddy is treated by his rambunctious brothers, it's similar enough to fit within the confines of passive-aggressive Appalachian attitudes towards family members who've "sinned" against the family in some way. Both my Teddy and Pinter's Teddy are expatriates. Pinter's Teddy left London for the United States for a better life as a university professor while my incarnation of Teddy left a part of the United States for another, as well as the West End of London to perform. The characters have left their respective homes for opportunity, return for some reason, and are hassled by their own family members. By the end of Pinter's, *The Homecoming*, Teddy leaves Ruth to stay in London with his family; this is similar to my incarnation of the same character who does in fact leave

with the other siblings to attend the grandmother's funeral, but it can never be stated fully what happens after the funeral. There is no ending for the siblings that can be anything resembling happiness. Pinter's Teddy was able to return to the cleanliness and order of America, while my Teddy will never truly feel safe or comfortable in either Appalachia, New York, or London. Neither of the Teddys' are able to go to their original "home" again because that place doesn't really exist.

The character is shown to be the epitome of the perfect eldest sibling, the expectation fulfilled. However, this is turned into a refutation of norms as the elder sibling by abandoning his "post" and leaving the family to fend for itself. Within the Appalachian family structure, this is a discouraged action as the family is meant to stick together as one monolithic unit. By leaving Bridget, Mitch, Clay, and the grandparents behind he has essentially disrupted the familial unit and caused a shift in roles through the family unit. By leaving, he has essentially allowed the family to parentify the second eldest Bridget and take his role as the perfect sibling to look up to and mirror on top of her own prescribed role as the only girl in a family of boys who is expected to be feminine enough to care for them but masculine enough to do the back-breaking work required of the children. While this can usually fix a disruption within the familial unit, it unwinds and falls apart once again when the second sibling relinquishes her enforced role as the parentified sibling. Through the macabre irony of this piece, the eldest sibling does in fact give the younger siblings someone to look up to when it comes to familial refutation.

Throughout the play, reference is mentioned regarding a fictional musicalized version of the film "Death Becomes Her". Specifically, it is mentioned that Teddy's Broadway debut was

acting as a swing for Ernest (the male lead) and was finally afforded the opportunity to go on as a lead but only because it was unfulfilled. By using this specific character as a swing rather than a thorough lead, he is shown to carry multiple roles throughout the show, alluding to his own role in the family he left behind. Rather than carrying the multiple roles thrust upon him by order of birth, he accepts the role of covering others for professional growth. Another element of the film that worked within this play is the idea of flawed vanity and impossibility. Within the movie and by extension the fictitious musical, Teddy can see himself within the role of the peacekeeper. In the film “Death Becomes Her”, Ernest is the husband of one of the leading ladies and the ex-fiancée of another. Ernest is stuck in an impossible situation within the black comedy by being tasked to help keep the leading ladies from decomposing as they are in fact the living dead. This lines up with Teddy’s initial involuntary commitment to the family by being expected to uphold and keep a living dead entity of the family going when it should not continue to exist.

The character of Teddy exemplifies the notion of an “Expatalachian” due to his self-imposed exile from the home in which he lived. An expatalachian is defined as a former member of the Appalachian community who has abandoned the community for opportunity elsewhere, thereby “unbleeding” themselves from their family, culture and community and making themselves outsiders by default. Leaving is still considered a betrayal of one’s own community. While this is far from a positive connotation from an Appalachian family’s perspective, it has become a feat one must endure to have a chance away from the economic hopelessness that is the home. Teddy was the one who left first, and actually made it in the world which is implied to have given Bridget the knowledge she needed to leave as well. This type of disruption in the

community would have essentially left the burden of an eldest sibling, the parentified female sibling and the normal duties of the younger sibling all on Mitch's shoulders. Throughout the play until the power goes out due to the snowstorm, Mitch is antagonistic towards his elder brother because he believed it was the fault of the elder siblings for desiring financial well-being over their economically hopeless community when it was truly the culture expectations that were at fault. Teddy and Bridget were essentially meant to be the parental figures, filling the shadow of the real parents that were absent throughout the play. The elder siblings followed in the parents' shadow and left, leading to the younger siblings to potentially feel abandoned twice.

The home in which Teddy and the others resided within (and later get trapped in due to external circumstances) represents Appalachia as a whole. The home is described as a dilapidated place, cold and hopelessly unprepared to handle the oncoming snowstorm which in essence represents the changing tides of Appalachia brought upon by the youth and their escape. The home further shows just how difficult it is to leave, and how much of a near-impossible feat it is to escape. While the two eldest siblings do escape once, it is unsure if they will a second time due to the rising stakes of potentially freezing to death. While the house does hold fond, nostalgic memories for the four siblings it acts as a prison for them rather than a warm and comfortable environment. By pairing Teddy and the others with this desolate and unwelcoming environment, they are forced to confront all that has gone wrong within the home. The neglect, abandonment and emotional trauma follows all of them and when forced to face not only themselves but each other, they realize how wrong their treatment was. The grandmother (MeeMaw) meant well but helped the siblings very little when it came to emotional comfort and

other parental obligations. Few of the siblings can remember her fondly. Teddy is the only one who can remember the original parents somewhat, but rather than letting the siblings know anything about them such as physicality, he suppresses any memory of them and further alienates their memories by changing the aspects of himself that remind him of the parents.

The very concept of expatationism is tied to survivors' guilt in this instance. When a person suffers under some type of regime whether it be governmental or domestic and is able to escape, they can only see those who did not survive the same regime and thus will wonder what it was that made them so special or set apart from those that did not make it out the way the survivor did. Teddy knows that Mitch is the embodiment of what not making it out looks like. Mitch, unlike Teddy, has nothing that Teddy has. Mitch has no great career, cannot live in a house comparable to Teddy's dwelling, and can never revive his boyish good looks the way Teddy was able to hold onto his. Mitch's very existence proves what happens when one stays behind. This may work as the motivation he has to get Clay out of the same predicament, so he does not end up like Mitch. Teddy could never save Mitch the way he was able to save Bridget or how he plans to help Clay, and thus sees him as a failure in an individualistic manner, rather than a victim of the wider culture that hoists too many emotional and physical responsibilities on children.

The issue of mistrust runs throughout this play, but it becomes applicable to Teddy the most. From the beginning, he is seen as someone who voices his thoughts about the home before anyone can see or hear him do it. He complains about the house not being locked, and how anyone could walk in and steal before finishing the sentiment that there was nothing of value in

the house besides termites. Though his demeanor almost totally changes when he is with Clay, the idea of the house being dilapidated is continued when Teddy decides to sell it to put Clay through college. Teddy can see (just as the audience can see) how worthless the home is but he continues to insist it will sell for enough money to pay New York University tuition, housing, and commute. It can be insinuated that he would lie to get rid of the home to any prospective buyer regardless of its condition to get the money, and to have control over another sibling's life. The issue of mistrust further runs through Teddy as he is physically mistrustful; he changes his features in order to look less like himself. Though the reasons for this amount of work are virtually endless, he is nonetheless being misleading with his looks by pretending they are natural. The actor within this role would not necessarily need to look like a contestant on the television show "Botched" but would need some amount of unnatural makeup contouring in order to show the abnormal nature of this character's face and body. Through performance, this actor would have to be younger than the actor portraying Mitch and close in age to the actor playing Clay as Mitch must look as haggard and rundown as the house does. The mistrust runs deeply within this character and the only one who truly shows it is Mitch, while the others may be oblivious to Teddy's sneaky ways, or they may just know and not care as Teddy has benefitted both of their lives exponentially. The only time Bridget calls out Teddy in a meaningful way is when they are both inebriated on the couch, and Teddy mentions in his monologue about Broadway that:

TEDDY- I still remember when I covered as Earnest for "Death Becomes Her" the first time. I had rehearsed for days, and it was finally happening but, in the wings, I just remember seeing the audience footage on the monitor backstage. I looked around and didn't see anybody I knew. I was freezing up. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think, and couldn't sing a note from the fear. I just remember the woman covering Liesl shaking me, comforting me. I will be grateful to that actress until the day they fill me with formaldehyde, but I wish it'd been the folks. We can make snide remarks about them till the cows come home to roost, but their lack of presence really hits the hardest in times of crisis like that. Now, we don't have anyone.

BRIDGET- Don't play revisionist to me. We never had anyone. For most of our lives here we didn't even have each other to count on. No matter what, we were always at each other's throats-

This small exchange shows that not only is Teddy mistrusted by others, but he cannot trust himself either. During the night he went on as the leading man of his musical, he froze up because nobody was there to support him as the swing in this particular role. The reason the exchange occurs is another important factor, as neither he nor Bridget are sober. A common occurrence in plays is the idea that characters must be inebriated by something in order to show their true thoughts and feelings, as the substance breaks down walls that they use to keep secrets.

As the two smoke cannabis together, the exchange becomes softer than it would have had the two consumed a large amount of alcohol in which the exchange would have been far more antagonistic, explosive even as they are with Mitch who uses accusatory language and mannerisms each time he interacts with anyone onstage. The two characters, though they should be happy in theory, aren't. The desire the characters work from is rooted in wanting to discuss together whether or not what leaving was the right thing to do. The conversation pops up because of Clay's recent college acceptance. In their own way, they know their lives outside the Appalachian Mountains are not happy or fulfilling. Both Bridget and Teddy may have acquaintances but neither mention friends nor significant others.

The mistrust that runs through the characters is part of a larger, overreaching culture due to a history of abuse. In a now deleted conversation between the two eldest brothers, Teddy and Mitch have a conversation without arguing, Mitch mentions to Teddy that the family is in essence the most important part of the culture in Appalachia, because trust cannot be granted elsewhere as it could be betrayed. The mistrust goes past the characters trapped in the old house and further runs into the other members of the community the audience doesn't see. Relatives are the only appropriate company to keep in this region because they (theoretically) won't cheat relatives the way they would cheat someone they have no connection to. This is fallacious thinking, arguably but continues to this day to be a cultural identifier. The mistreatment of Appalachian West Virginians' and others by the early opportunistic coal companies is a well-documented phenomenon, and the fallout has led to a severe distrust of outsiders. This is

extended through the church (Mitch's domain) by associating the openness or honesty of friendship or non-familial companionship with danger or even the devil.

Teddy is known as an unapologetically vain character. Mitch in particular takes jabs at this fact multiple times throughout the play, referring to Teddy in demeaning ways in order to tap into his insecurity. This vanity is a cultural identifier with expatalachians who have erased their rural features through surgical means in order to fit in with the people outside of this area. Due to medical services such as dentistry and dermatology being woefully out of reach for rural dwellers, beauty and health are a service that can only be bought or purchased for an exorbitant price. While Mitch is described as older-looking and haggard due to the stress and workload that was forced upon him, Teddy is able to look the part of a richer person with a better upbringing. Veneers, Botox treatments, face lifts and other physical contouring services can hide an impoverished upbringing on the outside, but the internalized survival mode that is encrypted into poor children and cannot easily be wiped away by a cosmetic surgeon like an external blemish. Teddy sees his brother but cannot mentally accept him because he only sees what he himself would look like had he not escaped. Teddy must continue to keep himself groomed not just for his career as a professional actor in film and theatre but must continually keep his appearance up to feel like he is worthy of the profession. Bridget brings it up when they smoke a joint together after Mitch's outburst.

The character of Teddy is meant to overall be a representation of the alienation felt by leaving such as tight, repressed culture. While he does in fact manage to leave, he is stuck with the cultural trauma of mistrusting those around him outside of the confines of the house as well

as the questionable trust he gives to others in the house. Mitch is obviously not a trustworthy figure to Teddy as Mitch is a biased character who can only see Teddy's deeds rather than Teddy himself. Bridget and Teddy may trust each other more but that is due to the trauma bond they share as expatalachians who successfully got away from the economic hopelessness of the area. Clay as a representation of the malleable youth gives Teddy the most trust as he still respects Teddy's status as the eldest sibling and can only see Teddy as someone who wants the best for him. This, through the subtext, may not be the case. Teddy is a controlling figure who only wants to get under Mitch's skin by getting the last sibling out and away from his cultural roots as well as the toxic culture they all grew up in. By being the first to break the cycle of generational trauma, Teddy is seen as an almost-messiah to the youngest sibling. He has grown up seeing how it is within their small and intentionally unnamed coal town and believes in Teddy's ability to help him get out.

Chapter Two: Bridget, The Woman

Bridget is the second sibling within the piece, and notably the only woman present within the work in a physical sense. Her description is of a person of means, someone who can afford to dress in expensive clothing like her eldest brother. She is a political journalist in Washington D.C (an area much closer to Appalachian America versus Teddy in New York City) and presents herself as a knowledgeable person. She refutes the notion of ignorance of worldly matters beyond the home and reclaims femininity on her own terms rather than allowing herself to fit the paradigm of femininity present within Appalachian culture.

Bridget is named for the cook in *Long Day's Journey into Night* by Eugene O'Neill. This character is overlooked compared to the principles that make up the family and this is almost verbatim to the treatment that my incarnation of Bridget has experienced within the world of the play. Girls and women in Appalachia are parentified at young ages; in broken families such as the one in *Holler*, the oldest girl is seen as a second mother and another maternal figure on top of a housekeeper and cook. She is similar to Bridget in O'Neill's work as an unseen cook; however, my incarnation of this Bridget does get to keep her sense of individuality and lose the restraints that see young girls as surrogate parents for their siblings. Throughout my play, I made sure to keep Bridget's lines minimal when it comes to crossing Mitch because there is a level of uncertainty with the character of Mitch. He represents the abusive, aggressive patriarch of this culture, and she has been raised to not question that figure often. Bridget carries the spirit of O'Neill's Bridget by essentially being invisible. She is only given notice when someone else has

a need to satisfy, but her opinions are always forced to be interjected as she is not welcomed into the conversations.

From the moment Bridget is introduced into the action of the play, she is shown to be caring almost instantly, and instinctively as a built-in trauma response. She is shown to keep her focus on the males within the scene (Clay and Teddy) and having to announce her entrance into the scene. Her wardrobe is meant to reflect her own brand of femininity: a pink sweater, the fitted pants and boots are meant to convey the expensive tastes she has developed since leaving the holler, as well as her new place in society. The character of Bridget is shown in Act I, Scene III states to her eldest brother:

BRIDGET

Oh yeah, you didn't know that? He wanted us to get married straight out of high school and move into the house on the other side of the hill. Said a girl should always be within a mile of her mama.

Bridget tells her eldest brother about the boy she was seeing as a high school senior, but the single line says much more about Bridget and her Appalachian standing. She continues to tell Teddy that she decided to escape when the man wanted to marry her, have children with her and move a small distance away from the main house in which the play takes place. Teddy helped her to escape from this potential life, and she is shown to harbor gratitude towards him for doing so when he himself was financially struggling. Despite the closeness they siblings are shown to share, Teddy is shown to not know this important factor about Bridget. While her entire life is

none of his business, it is questionable why he did not know this about her considering he is the reason she had the money to escape to begin with. Bridget initially sees her brother as someone to revere but after this moment, she is shown through the subtext to be a little more untrusting of him as he is shown to forget pivotal moments such as that one for Bridget.

The line about the distance from a girl and her mother is meant to strike a chord not just with Bridget, but with Teddy as well. This line is meant to show how close families in Appalachia are supposed to be in theory, and how badly child neglect and abandonment are to not just the children who are abandoned, but to the structure of the culture as well. Teddy responds to his sister by saying:

TEDDY

(interrupting) that's assuming the girl has a mama worth being near. If we had folks like that, we'd probably have been more inclined to stay right where we were. (sarcastically) Thank God Almighty for child abandonment!

By responding this way, Teddy is facetiously justifying their departure from Appalachia by showing the lack of reason to stay. If there is no familial unit to depend on, one has no reason to continually try to survive in a place of economic hopelessness. The gendered language is also meant to give this line from Teddy an exclusion for the males of the family. The intentionally gendered language is meant to show just how sexually segregated the culture is. Women and girls, mothers and daughters are seen as each other's only allies when it comes to life choices. Bridget's choice to leave had less to do with the status of the man who wanted to marry her and

more to do with a lack of maternal opinion. Whilst the grandparents were the de-facto parents in this scenario, the grandmother's response to this proposition is never actually addressed.

Considering she was said to have wanted her grandchildren to get out and make their own lives, she would have potentially encouraged Bridget to leave in order to reach her maximum potential.

Considering the death of the grandmother is the inciting incident of the play that brings the characters together again, her opinion on the matter could not certainly be stated. By leaving to avoid her social "responsibility" of being a wife and mother in favor of meeting her own ambitions in Washington DC, she essentially refused the cultural status of an Appalachian woman.

One interesting point to be made in this scene is the fact that the males are not seen to be expected to stay while the women are. Bridget in essence unsexed herself and took a more masculine role when she left by carving her own path out of the confines of Appalachian culture. While Mitch does treat Teddy with passive-aggression as punishment for abandoning his post as the eldest sibling, he never focuses on the abandonment as much as he does on the work Teddy has had done to save his career as an entertainer. Bridget is downgraded by Mitch, but the criticism is more in line with her failing to fulfill her obligations as an Appalachian woman. Mitch throughout the play takes jabs at the femininity of his eldest siblings, showing his qualm with femininity than with his sister. For both males and females in this culture, weakness is intricately tied to femininity and thus, must be suppressed lest one be considered weak.

In Act I, Scene III she mentions not meeting these cultural expectations in favor of being one of the boys. When she responds to Teddy's interruption, she says:

BRIDGET

That next day I called you up in New York from the train station and asked for the bus money. He wanted a wife, and a homemaker and children but I think I would've rather died than take that life on. Dealing with rude interviewees was easier. I mean, you know I was never one to wear an apron and play with dolls. I was always too busy riding the dirt bikes with you and the neighbors.

Bridget's character growing up in Appalachia as the only girl in four children is shown in this brief statement. Rather than being socially ingrained to be a nurturing mother figure in favor of riskier, more masculine activities reserved for the males of the culture. Bridget was, in essence, treated as her brothers and little distinction was made to her in regard to her sex. This may have been the reason for her departure: she was trained to not fear the boys' activities, and instead of favoring dolls or cooking she was instead trained in an empowering way by a grandmother who came from a time of feminine submission. Her upbringing meant that Bridget was not trained to be meek or fear confrontation until it comes to the de-facto patriarch in the family. Her treatment at the hands of the play's patriarch, Mitch could arguably come from guilt rather than a cultural training to submit to the patriarch.

Later in the play, Mitch has a monologue about becoming the grandmother's caretaker when her dementia progressed, and the subtext of the monologue implies it gave an air of bitterness and burnout to him as he had to do it alone. Rather than placing the blame on the lack

of social infrastructure that supports the elderly, he turns his blame on the two elders, but Bridget more so. As the only girl, her place was caretaker through and through. Caretaker to the boys, caretaker to her own expected husband and children, and finally caretaker to her elders. Mitch had never let the cultural expectation of a woman's place go and blamed her for having to be the only supporter of everyone. The expectation of women as de-facto caretakers is not a new phenomenon by any means, but it's still an expectation of young girls in the culture, one that is almost glorified as the loving martyr with no room for goals or hopes. Bridget is an embodiment of this idea, and the embodiment of refusing it. She shows throughout the play that she isn't trying to deny her womanhood (this is stated through her style), but she does refuse a "woman's place" in a patriarchal culture that sees women as free caretakers, free psychologists, free nurses, free chefs, etc. By taking the brother's money and leaving, she refused to allow someone else to write her own life and wrote it herself.

The nickname "Jet" is stated by the characters within the play several times, and it carries weight. A "jet" is an aircraft powered by jet engines that flies to depart for one destination from another and is a shortened version of her name. A jet is arguably a phallic symbol, centering on the masculine aspect of her personality or potentially her jet-black hair. This nickname was specifically chosen to give her a more masculine presence and equalize her to her brothers by way of erasing any unchosen femininity from her character, besides a few moments. Throughout the play, Bridget is called this nickname by Teddy who doesn't see her as a woman, but rather as another brother. He makes no distinction in his manner of speech with her compared to the two other males, effectively taking away her difference. She refutes the positive discrimination by

dressing in a feminine manner, almost stereotypically so by way of her pink sweater. She wears expensive clothing, a pink sweater with fitted dress pants and a long coat. This way of dressing is intentionally similar to Teddy with one distinct difference from him: she has no mentionable cosmetic procedures like he has. Teddy is the more feminine character in physical presentation as he takes the initiative to keep his looks youthful.

In the dominant culture of beauty standards, it wouldn't be Teddy who had work done, it would've been Bridget. Considering she wears her hair pinned up and out of her face, she is showing every wrinkle and blemish on her skin and wears them with pride. This is comparable to her eldest brother who is ashamed of aging, a victim of the culture that praises youthful looks at every age no matter the cost. Bridget shows no judgment to herself or her eldest brother and seems to even show concern about his potential to lose some of the artificial youth when they smoke cannabis together.

Later in the play during the snowstorm, she accepts another feminine ideal of the culture by being the one to go into the grandmother's bedroom to get the battery-operated heaters. A seemingly innocuous practice in Appalachia is the unspoken rule of males never going to the elder female's bedroom for any reason unless granted explicit permission. By being the one to go into the room for the heaters, she reinforces this rule despite the matriarch being gone as a way of showing just how pervasive the unspoken rules are. The males don't go in there because nobody is there to permit them to do so. Mitch is implied to have been in there when the matriarch was sick, but permission was able to be granted. Bridget hesitates when Mitch orders her to get the heaters but continues once he reinforces his position by telling her to go. In that

small moment, Bridget regressed into a subservient child of Appalachia that the elders expected them to be, no matter how uncomfortable it made her to be in the room where her grandmother passed away. Throughout the play, Bridget's character is constantly shown to be empowered and disempowered by the cultural ideals. By being trapped in the snow storm, she has no other choice as there is no way to escape.

Bridget's chosen career path as a political journalist and novelist in Washington DC was not a randomly chosen career path, but rather one that has given her a voice. In her Appalachian home, Bridget is essentially voiceless until she speaks up on her own accord. Throughout the play, she is intentionally never asked about her work or home opinions and yet, she makes them (and by extension, her presence) known. Her career choice allows Bridget to offer her own perspective, her own vision, and her own words to those who read what she has to say, a drastic departure from the life she fled from in Appalachia. By writing about politics, she has interjected herself into a role that would stereotypically be a male role, rather than spending her potential writing for a stereotypically female-targeted beauty and health magazines. By taking an empowered position, Bridget has essentially masculinized herself by way of refusing aspects that don't fit her among both the urban DC culture and the rural Appalachian culture, while keeping elements of femininity that she herself chose.

By using a few lines, Bridget is not shown to be the most personable of people. In the beginning she mentions watching her neighbors get raided and enjoying the show with a cup of coffee. This is another practice in Appalachia I wanted to showcase: the schadenfreude. In Appalachia, this phenomenon is quite a common one to have against neighbors and other non-

familial connections (sometimes it applies even to family members). It means “shameful joy” and is derived from the interest or joy in another’s suffering. In the culture of Appalachia, the idea of the crab bucket becomes more than applicable. The crabs continue to pull others down when one gets too close to the rim of the bucket, thus fulfilling the cycle of being pulled down by the others imprisoned. Bridget (through the subtext) got enjoyment out of this incident by watching her neighbors be raided for unknown reasons, and just watched it occur without caring about those who are traumatized by such a raid. The enjoyment of another's misfortune is a deeply held belief in Appalachia that I myself had to come to terms with and was able to give a bit of it to Bridget. It comes from the mindset of “better them than me” and exists to make one feel a bit better about their own poor predicament by seeing themselves as just a bit better than the other being victimized by circumstances. Through this singular event, I attempted to show that Bridget and the others do not fall within the literary paradigm of hero versus villain, good versus evil. Bridget and the others are meant to essentially be shown to be flawed adults existing in a gray area who deal with the lasting wounds of their toxic culture in their own ways. Bridget is just one of the four who attempts to exist to achieve her goals for herself while falling into the old cultural traps from time to time.

Throughout the story, Bridget, and the others (besides Mitch) repress their true feelings in favor of keeping the peace, keeping the environment calm as opposed to saying what needs to be said. During the scene in which the elders consume cannabis, the conversation is potentially the only time we see the true characters come out in regard to Teddy and Bridget, finally able to let

the guard down and say what they want. One pivotal piece of dialogue comes from Bridget in Act I Scene IV when she says:

BRIDGET

Don't play revisionist to me. We never had anyone. For most of our lives here we didn't even have each other to count on. No matter what, we were always at each other's throats-

TEDDY

Jet, that's just how siblings are. We hate each other, we avoid each other like the plague, we try to get under each other's skin but in the end, I'm almost positive we have love for each other.

BRIDGET

I think we skipped that last part.

This bit of dialogue from the siblings is meant to show just how alone even siblings are when it comes to living through a broken home. The children all had their roles to play: Teddy was the perfect one to be paraded like a show pony but never fully humanized. Bridget was meant to be the caretaker and subservient girl that did her duty and never complained, Mitch was meant to be the rock of the family, perpetually strong and dependable, able to fight off any problems that arises and Clay was meant to be the baby that existed to be sheltered and treated as

a fragile doll. The siblings could never live up to these roles for one reason or another, but the biggest is their humanity and autonomy. Bridget could never live up to the ideal Appalachian woman because she had little interest in marriage, birthing children, domestic work or depending on a man solely to be taken care of. Teddy could never live up to the perfection that was projected onto him due to the person he was and the desires he had outside of the family's myopic scope of vision. Mitch came close to fulfilling his role as the rock the family could count on, but it came with consequences. He became jaded, bitter and the work was not fulfilling the way the family wanted it to be. Clay failed in his obligations to the family by simply aging. He didn't stay a baby that was left to the grandparents and developed his own wants and needs outside of the home.

Chapter Three: Mitch, The Assimilationist

Mitch acts as the play's arguable antagonist, and the most symbolic of the toxicity of Appalachia's culture. He is characterized as a haggard man, aged beyond his years, and exhibiting signs of burnout due to caretaking being a cultural requirement of descendants. This ideal is held up by parents and grandparents who have children proudly for one reason and one reason only: to have someone to care for them in their old age. This ideal is held up in many other cultures, known as "filial piety," but it's highly regarded in Appalachia as well. This ideal doesn't necessarily fit into the lexicon of Western ideals as some in the West tend to send elderly and at-risk relatives to care homes where they can be under supervision by qualified professionals. This is frowned upon in Appalachian culture as children are seen more as indebted to the elderly who raise them: the mindset is "we cared for you, now you care for us" without any care given to how this will affect the one who is coerced into doing the caring. Caring for elderly relatives tends to be a woman's expectation within Appalachia while men are essentially released from these duties, which is why Mitch being the caretaker over Bridget or another woman is so important to the plot. Part of his anger towards the siblings is just how much they have neglected their "assigned" duties, Bridget particularly.

His position as a pastor in the local church offers a glimpse into how religion is used as a pacifier for those who suffer within Appalachia's borders, promising eternal serenity in heaven in exchange for a life of suffering and degradation. He is the direct antithesis of his elder brother, Teddy in both opinion and appearance. Teddy has artificially preserved his youthful looks due to his rejection of social responsibility whilst Mitch has taken few to no precautions of self-care,

always sacrificing for others. His assimilationism stems from his place as the subservient member of the family: he never left and was forced to pick up the familial responsibility of three siblings.

While the others left for their own benefit, Mitch was the sole remaining adult that could care for not just the family but the community as well. His attitude becomes a spectacle within the play: to put it simply, he is aggressive. His aggression is predominantly against the elder siblings but grows against the youngest. The aggression has a pattern: it rears its ugly head when the siblings do not comply with his wishes. He is immediately aggressive and untrusting when the elders arrive in the beginning and becomes more aggressive and standoffish with the youngest when he discovers the college acceptance letter. Mitch is the primary antagonist of this piece, while the culture of mistrust for outsiders acts as the unseen main antagonist. His fault only applies to how he treats the others, while the culture itself is responsible for this mistrust and impossible level of expectations.

The characterization of Mitch is given in the character description before the play even begins.

The description is:

MITCH paces the floor of the living room, continually rehearsing a sermon. He is a man of late twenties but looks much older. He has gray sprouts in his dark hair, thick worry wrinkles around his eyes, dark bags underneath. He wears a light tan button-up with dark brown tie and brown slacks. His clothing is caught between casual and formal, respectable.

Mitch is named for the secondary character of Mitch in *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams, and arguably named after the conservative politician Mitch McConnell. My

incarnation of Mitch, however, has no power in the way that the previous Mitchs' do and instead attempts to gain power over the family as he has acted as the de-facto head of household for an undisclosed number of years. He is similar to Williams's Mitch in the way in which his attitude and goals can shift, as well as his disdain for the hard conversations. He is similar to Mitch McConnell in the political, religious, and geographic way as both are Appalachians that tend to fare more on the conservative side, fearing change or a usurpation of their own power. My rendition of Mitch has a physical description immediately given, showing just how the stress and burnout of caring for the family has taken its toll. He has sprouts of gray hair in his head, worry lines around his eyes coupled with dark circles to denote sleeplessness and worry. These features are intentionally stated to be haggard looking in order to give the idea of Mitch just being fatigued by his own responsibilities. While he is the third sibling, he appears to be much older than the others as he has been exposed to the culture that glorifies always putting others first, even at one's own expense. His appearance further acts as a contrast to Teddy, who does not bare any physical semblance of worry or sleeplessness because they've been surgically erased.

This idea to give Mitch this specific description goes further to show him (and the house) as being cultural symbols of just how outdated and exhausting this culture truly is. Appeasing others is one part of the cultural toxicity, but the other is the idea of upholding an image of perfection in order to keep the family name clean from gossip. The sibling quartet is shown to fundamentally be a broken unit; none of them were wanted by their parents and dumped onto grandparents to raise and upkeep. They work as symbols of perfection within their own right: Teddy is an esteemed Broadway performer, Bridget is a renowned author and political journalist,

Mitch has his place in the community as a pastor and Clay may be a dentist. None of them can unite and be a clean unit, but function instead as individual pieces. The idea of perfection at all costs is something families will enforce within Appalachia as a status symbol first and foremost: to keep themselves from being identified as “poor” (even if they are). Families will ensure their children are “perfect” in an authoritarian sense. Children do not necessarily make friends with others and instead keep connections such as those within the blood family. Family is a constricting unit within Appalachia, one that cannot allow competition. Mitch has been slighted by this assumption, as his place in his sibling’s lives has been usurped by “outsiders”.

Mitch is a perfect illustration of the toll this kind of dynamic will take on its victims. The characters are constantly striving for the perfection they have been taught to constantly exude but none of them have reached it and none of them ever will. The picture-perfect family is an ideal that comes before everything else (including caring for one’s own physical and mental health or breaking the cycles of neglect and abuse) has been downright romanticized within the confines of Appalachia and is something that the youth must strive to break, or at least to avoid perpetuating. Mitch’s characterization as a martyr shows the toll it takes to be a caretaker for the family, and why these ideals must be rejected by the new, upcoming generation in order to save themselves from the aggression and burnout that Mitch shows.

Mitch’s place through cultural assimilation stems from his attitudes towards his siblings, his perspective about his position in society and environment, and his utter refusal to ask questions that would unravel the social fabric he has grown to be strangled by. As a pastor, he is the head of the church that preaches commandments such as “Honour Thy Father and Mother”,

commandments he himself may have trouble obeying as a person that grew from a neglected child. His position of power in this instance is one of great importance in an Appalachian community as he is considered to be an ambassador of God himself. He speaks with a great biblical knowledge but cannot bring himself to recognize doubts that he himself has about his community, family and potentially his religion.

He further represents the assimilation by being a caretaker in the grandmother's last few years of life, sacrificing himself for her and arguably the youngest brother by being forced to take on the patriarchal role that Appalachian families tend to observe. As the playwright, I choose to never make it clear whether or not this is something Mitch wanted because this character is so ambiguous in his quest for power over others. Whether he wanted that position as the family head or not is irrelevant, as the patriarchal role was assumed by him once it was made clear that Teddy wouldn't take it and became more realized once the grandmother passed away.

The assimilation through the religion is evident from the very beginning, as Mitch recites a verse from Ezekiel 28:15-17 that describes Lucifer Morningstar being cast from the glory of Heaven into the fiery brim of Hell for his haughty demeanor against God. This shows his vast knowledge of religion and offers a glimpse into how Mitch feels about the intruding outsiders. He sees his culture as Heaven itself, himself as God (blasphemously enough) and sees it as his place to cast out those who do not belong as Lucifers', with the outside world standing in for Hell. The telling part of this beginning monologue is the idea of comparing the Appalachia geography and Appalachian culture to heaven: despite its need to change and become a bit more

trusting, Mitch does not see it this way and his perspective of seeing the outsiders as devils comes back.

Later in the story, the elder siblings smoke cannabis while the youngest sibling becomes high from the secondhand smoke and Mitch catches them. The following lines from the play take new meaning when compared to the beginning monologue:

MITCH

I don't know what I've got to be jealous of. I never needed to forget I's a woman and act like a man to get somewhere in life. That was you (*to BRIDGET*). I also didn't need to get carved up like a thanksgiving turkey to be attractive, that was you (*to TEDDY*). I have helped so many troubled souls, but I've never met someone quite like you. (*To TEDDY*) You are the devil.

TEDDY

(*cold*) I'm a winner.

In this instance, Mitch realizes he is outnumbered. None of the others are willing to strain themselves to keep up the home or pretend to be a loving family the way they need to in order to keep up appearances. He compares his elder brother to the devil and is taken aback when his brother simply responds "I'm a winner" in a cold way. Mitch in this moment probably expected Teddy to apologize but there is no apology coming Mitch's way for the cannabis-smoking or the apology he wants: to be affirmed that he made the right choices in caring for their grandmother

and the youngest brother. Mitch must also conclude, however painful that may be, that Teddy is the winner in this scenario when it comes to material goods and recognition. Mitch has material goods and recognition as well but not to the level of a wealthy Broadway star and never will. He must conclude that he is a loser in this instance and must consider if everything he gave up for the family was worth it. In the end, he finds an article about his football-playing that their grandmother kept in her memory box. Would Mitch have left to pursue football had it not been for the cultural requirements forcing him to stay and care for a family he never asked for? Would he and Teddy act brotherlike, as the leaving would be something they have in common?

Though he gets an apology from Teddy later, one can never be too sure that the apology is genuine. Few aspects of Teddy are genuine. Mitch is shown to see the world through a hyper-religious, almost fanatic, way of black and white, good, and evil. This is a mindset granted to Appalachian children to keep them safe from harm, as much harm has come to the people of Appalachia in the past. Mitch simply seems to want to keep himself and his non-abandoning family safe from the outsiders and uses his lens of religiosity to categorize others.

Mitch's character trait of aggression is shown to be outwardly negative and pessimistic, which goes against the real culture of Appalachia. In this culture, aggression is a virtue rather than a harmful way of existing within the world and will be harbored. Aggression as a societal virtue in Appalachia can be used to undermine others, to get what one desires, and to show superiority over another. The aggression aspect of Appalachian culture is one I examine and indict particularly, as it is not necessarily a virtue elsewhere. Bridget and Teddy are not shown to be aggressive because they've had to unlearn their cultural aspects that would not help them

outside of Appalachia's borders. The culture of aggression within Appalachia is one that has been taught due to a long history of exploitation, betrayal, and abuse from outsiders, and can only be unlearned by those who experience the world before returning, bringing a new found understanding of just how gray the world really is, rather than continually buying into the "us versus them" mentality that is created within the minds of Appalachian children who will grow into untrusting, aggressive, and angry adults.

Dialect work is one specific element that must be considered when it comes to Mitch's sound compared to the elder siblings. Mitch will have a strong, thick, and unapologetic Appalachian accent whereas Bridget and Teddy will have plainer, more general accents such as Transatlantic in order to create the idea of rootlessness. A persistent stereotype throughout the United States is the accent of Appalachia denotes a lack of knowledge whereas more affluent accents denote a higher class and higher level of knowledge. Mitch is a character that never escaped from Appalachia the way the others did, therefore there would have been no reason to be rid of the accent the way there was a reason for the elders. One common aspect of learning in Appalachia is to lose this accent if one wishes to advance further in life, to be taken seriously. While Mitch is a character that doesn't rebel against the culture the way the others do, he does defy this stereotype and rebel by having a higher position in the community whilst keeping the dialect he was brought up to do.

Part of Mitch's character is his tie to routine, and his aggression at the deviation from this routine. In Act I, Scene II when Mitch finds the acceptance letter, the audience gets a disturbing

idea that he will retaliate against the siblings for this disruption to his routine, potentially taking Clay away for good.

ACT I, SCENE III.

MITCH enters with the mail. He looks over it, sitting at the desk and tearing the envelopes open with a butter knife. He scans over the bills, the condolence letters, and the junk mail. Looking over at the coffee table, he notices the letter from NYU. Curious, he takes one of the pages and reads it.

MITCH

What the hell is that kid planning?

MITCH continues looking through the pages. He finds the tuition statement page and chuckles a bit to himself then shakes his head.

I can't wait to see how they pull this off.

MITCH exits into the kitchen with the acceptance letter and the other pages, leaving the torn envelope.

In this short instance, the audience is able to see not only the aggression but the cunning nature of Mitch as well. He not only took the letters and burned them, but he left the envelope to show that the letter was not simply misplaced. While this could be interpreted as an accident as a used letter isn't much help compared to the other papers, it was left to show Clay and the others

that Mitch knows what is happening. They can no longer keep this a secret between them, and they will have to deal with him. The initial plan was to not tell Mitch anything and just hide it until Clay moved out, but their own carelessness and inability to properly hide the evidence damned not only the scheme but potentially the entire plan. By being a cunning and downright vicious person, Mitch attempts to use the cultural training of aggression to squash Clay's hopes of going off to college far away from Mitch and his ruthless usage of power.

In Act I Scene III, the conflict arises when the siblings realize that Mitch does in fact know. The altercation occurs and it goes as follows:

TEDDY

Did you find papers on the table earlier?

MITCH nods, silently.

TEDDY

Well, where are they?

MITCH reaches into his pocket, pulls out a handful of ash, and blows it in TEDDY's face.

MITCH

(To Clay) So when was you gonna tell me you sorry bastard?! I break my back to keep you out of the damn foster care system and

this is how you repay me?! If I had a belt, I'd give you the lashin' of a lifetime-!

BRIDGET

Lay a fingernail on him and you go to jail.

MITCH

I don't recall asking your opinion on anything, you frigid bitch! This is between me and my brother-

CLAY

They're my brother and sister too! I don't give a damn what you think of them, but you will *not* speak to them like they ain't blood! I am sick to death of your treatment! What did I ever do to you?! I break my back at school to get honor roll every month, I break my neck at work to do good, I do my damndest to go to church every Sunday. When will I be enough for you, Mitch? Huh? What will be enough for you?

MITCH is silent. He looks at the three siblings. They stand in a perfect equidistant triangle, with Teddy far upstage right, Bridget downstage center and Clay upstage left.

MITCH

You're lucky you didn't have to deal with the MeeMaw we did, boy. You ain't close to what perfect is.

During the moment in which the three siblings are looking at Mitch, they stand in a perfectly equidistant triangle to evoke the imagery of the three Fates from mythology. He is seeing the fate of his family in that moment, as well as his own: abandonment. The ideals of which he subscribes cannot be fulfilled and thus the only option left for those that do not belong is to abandon the proverbial ship. Using Teddy as the past, Bridget as the present and Clay as the future, the audience is able to not only see that Mitch is outnumbered but that anything he has to say will be completely irrelevant. This is why he doesn't use excessive speech before his exit, but rather takes a final blow at Clay by reminding him that he will never be enough. This ironically may be the moment in which Clay decides to leave, as he has been granted permission by the patriarch.

In a play, there exists a point of no return for the characters in which there is no going back, an event has happened that a character or characters cannot return from, and the events of the story change due to this point being reached. While I do acknowledge that it happens earlier than many other plays, the stealing and burning of Clay's acceptance exists as a moment in which the characters cannot return from, but Mitch in particular. While he has been shown to be a brutish man that carries strong opinions about how his brother should exist, this moment takes him to another level of maliciousness. By destroying this letter and blowing the ashes into the face of the one who helped make it happen, he shows the three other characters just how

unwilling he is to relinquish the power he has over Clay. The letter was his ticket out, essentially, and it was destroyed by the “old” ways of thinking and being.

This altercation becomes explosive as Mitch finally stops ignoring the siblings, and they are able to “converse”. When Mitch finds out that Clay has applied for university, been accepted, and plans to leave with the others, he guilties Clay by using what he has done for him against this. This is a toxic parenting skill used within Appalachia (one that I as an Appalachian know all too well) and just goes to show how little care the elder brother really had for Clay. He was held up as an object to flaunt, something that exists only as an extension of himself rather than a person completely separate from himself. Clay is not just an object to own, but a worthy object at the communal level. In his monologue that Clay gives against Mitch, he states that he does exceptionally well in school, he works a nearly full-time position as a minor in his downtime, he attends church every Sunday and complains about none of it. Clay’s place in the community is a silent child, and he does in fact live up to it. For Mitch, however, this is still not up to par with the lofty standard of “perfection” that Appalachian children are taught to strive for. Clay knows it well that he will never live up to the standards from Mitch, and by extension, MeeMaw. Mitch believes that Clay must simply try harder and comply, but this won’t be enough, nothing ever will be. The one fact that Mitch seems to deny and refuse in this scenario is that MeeMaw is in fact deceased. The standards she held for the others to make their presence in her home worthwhile no longer exist, nor do they need to. The history for Clay is to ensure the audience is questioning Clay’s history and considering just how he was treated by MeeMaw compared to

how he was treated by Mitch. Another factor for the audience to consider is how MeeMaw treated the others in comparison to how she treated Clay.

When Mitch refers to Bridget throughout the play, they intentionally never have moments together the way the other brothers do. When he does refer to her, it's usually in a degrading manner referring to her refusal to abide by his definition of her gender role. His feelings against her never tend to go away but instead become secondary as surviving the snowstorm that traps them within the home.

When this instance occurs, he is able to shift from an aggressive being to one of absolute savvy. He knows what to do as snowstorms and power outages are a frequent occurrence during Appalachian winters. He is seen at the very beginning of the play planning for this storm, but rather than complete the planning he is instead too busy antagonizing his elder siblings. When the power goes out and the cold begins to truly set in, he is seen as far more silent and far less aggressive. He embodies a positive aspect of a family patriarch and that is of the protector. He never stops feeling the negative thoughts he has against the others, but he does his best to keep them all alive by using a defensive strategy.

During this storm, Mitch begins to break down a bit and he becomes perceptive to the others, especially Teddy. He is able to calmly tell him just how little external family is regarded in Appalachia (something Teddy already knows from firsthand experience) but takes it upon himself to remind Teddy of what Clay will in fact go through. While it isn't exactly a truce of sorts, Mitch does go through a type of character development. He begins to see just where his siblings come from in terms of why they left, he sees the true potential that Clay has outside the

family and community regarding his acceptance into the pre-Dentistry program at New York University, and he begins to see that death is entirely possible at this moment.

The mountains of Appalachia excel when it comes to insulation, both in the proverbial sense and physical sense. As Act II progresses, the home begins to get colder and colder until the risk of dying from hypothermia. When this moment occurs, the explosive nature of Mitch transfers to the true eldest of the quartet in which he concludes:

TEDDY

Do you guys ever wonder where they are?

MITCH

It's best not to think of that, Teddy.

BRIDGET

I looked to see if I could find them before, but no leads.
Wherever they are, they're hiding and good at it.

MITCH

We don't need them-

TEDDY

(interrupting) Yes, we do. There is no gray area about it, they were supposed to be here for all of us! If we freeze to death up here, it'll be their fault!

MITCH

It would be the weather's fault. The season's fault. They may be at fault for a lot, but they don't control the weather-

This moment is meant to invoke the stakes of the situation: the siblings may realistically die from the weather, and due to the parents' original abandonment and neglect of the quartet, nobody would even know to look for them. The cold becomes a symbol as a loveless existence that the four are thrust into living through. The cold begins almost immediately when the play begins but it's manageable, light. It grows as the conflict grows and becomes a force to be reckoned with during the absolute height of the conflict. The siblings initially are able to ignore the cold or to live with it, but this type of cold can only be resisted for so long before it takes a hard toll on a human body that requires warmth for survival. This lack of warmth (or in this context, love) has slowly been strangling the family for years at the time the play takes place and ends by not only trapping them in a dwelling in which they were abused and neglected but could potentially kill them in this same place.

Mitch is able to deal with the cold due to his role in Appalachian culture: the one who gets little to no love or warmth. He is the powerful figure in the story that even the audience is supposed to initially dislike and has learned through trial by fire to deal with it on his own. Bridget and Teddy are at the most risk as they are used to being warmed by their fans on a superficial level and Clay as the youngest is able to deal with the lack of warmth due to his place in the culture as well. He is only warm when he has something to offer. The characters handle the cold differently but are nonetheless affected by it.

Chapter Four: Clay, The Malleable

The character of Clay/ Clayton in this piece is representative of the uncertainty the Appalachian youths face in terms of leaving their culture or staying. He is named for Clay in *Dutchman* by Amiri Baraka however this incarnation of Clay differs in a multitude of ways. The Clay within *Holler* is a server through and through. He is roughly seventeen years old, a chronic overachiever and peacemaker in the home at the cost of his own well-being. He, like Baraka's Clay, is trapped within a system that he cannot escape from with the forbidden fruit being the object that damns him through the lens of his own culture. He is meant to be seen as the most naïve character compared to the jaded Mitch or the worldly elders and acts as a maintainer of the crossroads between the two worlds. He is meant to make the choice of staying or leaving, but intentionally never does before the play ends.

Clay takes his name from a character of *Dutchman* by Amiri Baraka, and mirrors that incarnation of Clay in his opportunity to take the forbidden fruit. In Baraka's work, Clay refuses to take the bite of the apple from the Eve-esque character, however this specific incarnation of Clay seemingly wants another type of forbidden fruit: the Big Apple. His desire to go to New York City is intentional as he does in fact want to take the bite of forbidden fruit and go elsewhere to live out his dreams. By dashing these hopes and in essence, taking the apple away, Mitch becomes a godlike character to Clay. This, ironically enough, is more than blasphemous considering he himself is meant to be an ambassador of God, not an imitation of him. Clay's age furthers the meaning of malleability by showing him as little more than a naïve youth. He wants an image of what New York City is (something more than likely fed to him by his affluent older

brother), making Teddy the temptation-bearing serpent of the creation story allegory in this piece.

Clay is first described in a youthful way with one outlier: his uniform. In his opening scene, he is described in the following way:

ENTER CLAY. A young man, roughly seventeen or eighteen years old. Dark blonde hair meticulously combed and groomed. He wears a black coat, white button-up, black slacks, black slip-on shoes, and carries a full-frontal apron. He instinctively slips his shoes off, hangs his apron and coat on the coat rack and heads towards the couch.

From the get-go the audience is introduced to this idea of ritual. Clay is used to immediately coming in after work, putting the slip-proof shoes in their place and the apron on its rack. He has become a mechanism of sorts, moving through the motions of his life without much time to process the happenings within life. He mentions in a blasé fashion that he gets hit on by women old enough to be “the” mother, and by the end of the scene he is shown hiding his money. It’s revealed that Clay has been planning on attending New York University for their world-renowned Pre-Dentistry program with an undergraduate major in Chemistry, but these plans come at the behest of his elder brother and de-facto guardian who believes that Clay is not suited for the world outside the holler. Using this mindset, the audience is forced to consider how similar they believe to Mitch in terms of their children: Clay is essentially Mitch’s son, and Mitch toxically urges him to keep from rocking the proverbial boat. Clay, however, has been

molded by their eldest brother, Teddy who has helped him apply for this program. Teddy and Mitch work at different ends of the spectrum in terms of overwhelming control: while Mitch attempts to keep Clay from leaving to reinforce his own amount of control, Teddy is doing what he can for Clay just to spite Mitch and to potentially hold Clay up as a trophy, a golden child the same way Mitch does already. This leads to resentment and burnout on the part of the youth who is trapped in this cycle.

Throughout the play, Clay acts as the voice of reason and ironically enough can be the only mature person in the conversation with a balanced view. This is a common factor in homes in which the guardian suffers from mental illness and the child learns to act as the parent figure for the inadequate guardian. Clay has raised himself, and only really has himself to depend on. Mitch helps because he must for image's sake. According to the image, Mitch will appear godly and benevolent to the community for caring for Clay and will use it against Clay whenever possible.

Clay matters little more to Mitch than a shiny trophy or a first-place ribbon. Good youths in Appalachia are held with high esteem, regardless of how "good" they actually are. Clay is shown to be the only character used to Mitch's verbal and emotional abuse, stated in one simple stage direction:

CLAY knows this song and dance. He stays silent hoping to let it diffuse.

Clay's only method of dealing with his brother is to stay silent. He knows from how frequent this happens that Mitch will only escalate the situation, and with the incoming

characters of Teddy and Bridget he already foresees the collision. Rather than confront Mitch on this attitude against his own siblings, he lets it go. For many years, it's been "let go" out of self-preservation and a fundamental human need to survive. This is a trauma response that abused peoples learn in order to survive an abusive home life the way Clay has.

Clay manages to rebel against Mitch in his own little ways, showing the audience that he isn't necessarily a "good" or "bad" person but rather he is a gray character, such as the others. He lies to Mitch, he hides his earnings and plans to run away to Teddy's home in New York just to get away from Mitch, and everything that Mitch represents. In the stage directions, it's stated:

CLAY is alone in the living room. He lifts a backpack from behind the couch and pulls out a textbook. He pulls a wad of cash from his sock and stashes it in the book with even more cash. He looks around nervously before replacing the book.

In this direction, Clay is seen by the audience both lying to Mitch about his tip amount (he initially states fifty dollars but it's obviously more) but has also lied about his plans for the future knowing fully that he doesn't intend to stay under Mitch's control forever. This plan goes up in smoke (quite literally) when Mitch discovers the letter from New York University and reduces it to ash, blowing that ash in the face of the "serpent" figure of the piece.

Clay's naivete reads through the piece in a multitude of ways, but one example in particular comes to mind when considering just how little he knows in terms of the world. Clay states to Teddy upon his arrival:

CLAY

Her train is late. You should know at this point how unreliable transport is Mr. British Broadway.

TEDDY

(laughs) They prefer "West End" across the pond. *(Looks at watch nervously)* I hope she gets here soon. I wish she'd taken a plane. It's pricier but much better on the time.

While this moment could be played by the actor to be sarcastic or humorous, it's meant in a genuine fashion. Clay doesn't know that the correct term is "West End" and when Teddy corrects him, it showcases the difference between their two worlds. While Clay does receive an education and is shown to be intelligent enough to get into a world-renowned science program, it's all too possible that the adultification he has suffered has hindered his attention considering his proverbial plate is consistently full and overflowing. Clay exhibits a limited knowledge of the world not due to his lack of intelligence, but rather lack of access to uninhibited time for learning. This exemplifies the role of youths in Appalachian families due to their need to work to help support the family. The critique lies not with a minor who has little time to pursue age-appropriate endeavors but rather with a culture that treats youths as adults that must be responsible for the adults in their lives

Clay goes further with the idea of adultification through the group concern of getting the education paid for. When the siblings are overjoyed at the acceptance into the program, they mention:

CLAY

Wait, what? (*He scans the letter*)

BRIDGET

(*uneasy*) What does that mean exactly?

TEDDY

It means we'll find a way to get the money, that's what. We found it for me, we found it for you (*to BRIDGET*), and we'll find it for you (*to CLAY*).

CLAY

But...it's so much money-

This is meant to be a critique of the financial gatekeeping that occurs at the higher education level, but the lens is through the perspective of an Appalachian family. Acceptance into a program at this caliber is a high accomplishment in itself but the funding is implied to come from the future selling of the family house (the home in which the home takes place). The home is meant to be an expressionist idea of their home and by selling it, the idea is that the heritage and familial history is being sold off to afford the hyperinflated price of a necessary

education. This is juxtaposed against Mitch's desire to send Clay to community college (far more affordable, but costly nonetheless) where he would learn a set of more vocational skills. While these skills are useful in society, nobody should be forced to endure an education and subsequent career that they never wanted in order to merely survive in a society.

Clay wants to be a dentist, which is an inside reference in itself. Within Appalachian culture (something that is easily missed by those that don't stem from this culture), the idea is that poverty and healthcare pricing ravages people in this area so badly that they lose their teeth at a higher-than-average rate. By vying to become a dentist, the idea is that Clay is turning his back on his own community by choosing to do something that wouldn't help the community. This vicious stereotype is rampant throughout overarching American culture, fitting neatly into the "hillbilly" archetype that pervades American culture. By using dental imagery as a cultural symbol, it becomes clear that Clay takes more from Teddy than Mitch in an ideological way. This difference in ideology comes out thoroughly when the other siblings arrive and embolden Clay against Mitch in a bombastic moment.

Through his monologue, Clay tells Mitch just how badly the expectations have ravaged his mental health, much to Mitch's dismissal. Clay says to Mitch:

CLAY

They're my brother and sister too! I don't give a damn what you think of them, but you will *not* speak to them like they ain't blood! I am sick to death of your treatment! What did I ever do to you?! I break my back at school to get honor roll every

month, I break my neck at work to do good, I do my damndest to go to church every Sunday. When will I be enough for you, Mitch? Huh? What will be enough for you?

This is the moment in which the dam breaks in a proverbial sense. Clay voices true feelings that have been bubbling and stagnating under the surface for an undisclosed number of years, and Mitch becomes the target of them. While Mitch himself isn't the true culprit, he has passively allowed the culture of toxic perfection to rule the household from the time he inherited the patriarchal power, but it cannot be known Mitch's age or history in which he himself grew victim to this very same mindset. It begins at a young age in which Appalachian children are taught that play or "wasting time" are inappropriate and thus, they begin a long process of adultification which may be the cause for immature behavior later in life when the physical age matches the prescribed mental age.

All of the siblings are affected by this type of traumatic upbringing in a way that leaves them with very little knowledge of what it truly means to be an adult. Teddy is caught in the confines of the limelight always playing other people without assurance of who he truly is (even going so far as to eradicate his true appearance in lieu of an idealized yet artificial version of himself) while Bridget understands just how disadvantaged she is in terms of being born both an Appalachian and a woman. Her adultification came from the idea that she had to care for the family before settling down, having a home then caring for another family before she was legally old enough to consume alcohol. Mitch and Clay were most affected by this adultification as both had to grow up and care for themselves in a less than nurturing home with potentially dismissive

guardians. Clay is the only one in the quartet of siblings that understands how wrong it is and shows it in this moment when he stands against Mitch, arguably the representative of a suffocating culture.

The final moment at the end of the play in which Clay asks Teddy if another acceptance letter can be possible is meant to show just how viciously the cycle of intricate abuse and neglect is, and how it will in fact continue. In the very end, the dialogue and stage directions read:

CLAY

(nods) Do you think it'll be possible to get another acceptance letter from NYU?

TEDDY

It will be.

MITCH

We will talk about that later *(he gives CLAY an oppressive glance, and CLAY looks away)*

The very end of this play goes to show just how oppressive Mitch, and by extension, the culture is. Once the elder siblings have said goodbye and have left the dwelling once more, it can safely be assumed through the stage directions that Clay will once again fall to Mitch's wrath. Clay desiring another letter after Mitch burned the previous one shows that Clay did in fact want to go to New York City, to take the bite of the forbidden fruit. Mitch acting as God in this instance seems to halt his ambitions of ever leaving. While the ending of this specific

conversation is intentionally left ambiguous, I believe from the angle of the playwright that Clay would in fact be afforded the chance to take a bite of the proverbial fruit of knowledge. This belief comes from Mitch's closing dialogue: the prayer for the dead that stems from Psalms. In this scene, Mitch opens the tattered bible from the beginning and reads:

MITCH

(Reading from passage) Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over.

MITCH exits.

Blackout.

While the play was initially meant to end after they return from the funeral, this specific ending in which Mitch reads the prayer for the dead can become applicable to a multitude of concepts hit within this work. Mourning the grandmother is one way of looking at this reading however it isn't necessarily the only interpretation of the lines. Another way it could be interpreted is for Clay himself: Mitch says in his earlier lines to Teddy that a family member "unbleeding" themselves through departure is one way of signifying death. Another option for this specific passage could be the death of the family unit. In short, it is no longer existent.

The beginning conflict saw Clay planning to break this unit through his desire to be educated in New York, but this was hindered by the literal destruction of the letter which afforded him this opportunity. By getting a new letter, he is in essence giving new life to his previously hindered desires while metaphorically murdering Mitch's desire to keep at least one immediate relative close by. This is another "death" that Mitch could be mourning by reading these lines from his bible. The "death" Mitch could be mourning is the death of the power that he exercised over others for so very long, with Clay's foreseeable departure being the final nail in the coffin for Mitch.

Clay acts as the play's symbol of the youth within Appalachia, and the crossroads at which they exist. The option to stay or leave Appalachia in order to get farther in life is one decision that many must make, especially today as the job prospects continue to fall for those trapped within the cycle of poverty in Appalachia. The character is never seen to make a solid choice as to which way he will go to leave his fate ambiguous to the audience. Whether he stays in Appalachia and continues his education at the noted community college before continuing to work the low pay serving job or whether he makes it to New York City to study at an elite university, lives with his eldest brother and becomes a dentist, is irrelevant. The point of this character is to show the oppression he faces at the hands of a pseudo-guardian to further his lot in life. His choice to stay or go will have consequences no matter which way he chooses to go.

Conclusion

Holler ends the way it begins: Mitch is alone with only his religion to console him. The elder siblings are gone (along with Clay) and Mitch is left alone in the decaying, decrepit house. By placing Mitch in the solitary imagery, the audience is able to see the (hopeful) future of Appalachian toxicity: it is cornered, closed off from the rest of the youthful population who must not be negatively affected by it. Furthermore, the characters are not granted what they all desired in one form or another, which is closure. Currently, in media the newer generations have popularized media which features elders who both acknowledge and apologize for the harm they have inflicted onto the youth. *Holler* is meant to be a realistic portrayal of how that works in Appalachian culture: there is no acknowledgement of wrongdoing, and the cyclical nature of this harm is continued. By not portraying the grandmother (MeeMaw) as a living person but rather a memory all the siblings share, it solidifies the notion that nothing will ever be accounted for. The parents will never apologize to the siblings for their abandonment and neglect, and the grandparents will never again have the ability to acknowledge their failures and apologize for it. While the letters in the scrapbook box do provide some comfort to the siblings, none of them will ever hear it from MeeMaw's own lips.

The siblings are never meant to be seen as good or bad, but rather beings who have been scarred by their upbringing. Teddy will always bear the scars of never being good enough (through the surgical scars he will always wear). Bridget will always bear the inferior skillset she was granted as a woman in Appalachia, no matter how excellent she is at her position in political journalism. Mitch will always bear the scars of his upbringing on top of the scars still forming

from carrying the weight of the community (like Teddy, shown on his physical being). Clay may be the only one of the four who will not bear the same scars from the cultural upbringing the others experienced. He will, however, bear the scars of growing up under Mitch's authority, of never being good enough. None of the characters survive the events of the play unscathed, nor were they unscathed before the events of the play. Featured in this work are, in essence, four traumatized individuals who will always be traumatized individuals.

By using the format of a play, my immediate goal is to let an audience see the events in real time unfolding. Everything, from the bible verse in the beginning to Clay hiding the money, to the elders consuming cannabis to the snowstorm that knocks out the power and traps them inside, is meant to be shown in real time in order to force the audience to go through what the others do. The story could have easily been formatted into a screenplay or novel, but neither of those formats involve considerable real-time action. Audiences could easily look away, stop reading or avoid it altogether if the story were adapted into novel form. By forcing non-Appalachians to see the events, it becomes akin to the gawkers on an interstate: no ability to look away from the flaming vehicle on the road shoulder.

Initially, this project was meant to be a response to *Hillbilly Elegy* by J.D. Vance. Vance's work portrays Appalachia in a vastly different way, but the simplistic way of seeing the unique hardship offers little in terms of solution to the long-standing problems. Appalachian youths need more than tired "bootstrap" rhetoric and should never be forced to choose between home and opportunity. The characters in my own work were all forced to make this decision, and

all suffered for it. The decision to stay or go is one that nobody should have to make if it can be helped.

The project, however, has changed from a response to Vance and rather an examination of the toxicity of Appalachian culture, the performative nature of interaction we are taught from early ages, and deconstructs the notion of “family over everything else”. By featuring a sole family in this work, the issues are able to seem smaller and digestible to an audience, despite how much wider they range.

By the end of *Holler*, the audience is not meant to empathize with the characters of the story but rather, consider the issues and how their own culture could share the toxicity of Appalachia’s culture. Through careful consideration, the audience would be encouraged to look at their own ways a bit closer through a new lens, knowing the characters in the play (albeit exaggerated at times) could be their own children, or children they know. Fortunately, we as a society have begun to acknowledge intergenerational trauma and its cyclical nature for the true antagonist that it is. While there is still a long way to go, I thoroughly hope the work is able to get through to those who may be perpetuating the same cycles as MeeMaw, or Mitch.

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Vita

David Michael Powell was born on October 29, 1996 in Cabell County, West Virginia and is an American citizen. He graduated from Cabell Midland High School, Ona, West Virginia in 2015. He received his Bachelor of Arts in theatre from Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia. He will graduate from Virginia Commonwealth University with a Master of Fine Arts in Theatre in May 2022.