

Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County*: Addiction as a Symptom  
and Symbol of Postmodern Disillusionment

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المستخلص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة مسرحية أوغست : مقاطعة أوسج للكاتب تريسي ليتس ، الحائز على جائزة بوليتزر، بوصفها نموذجاً دالاً على تجليات الإدمان في سياق ما بعد الحداثة. ومن خلال توظيف المنظور النقدي لما بعد الحداثة، لا يفهم الإدمان في هذا البحث بوصفه حالة مرضية أو ظاهرة سريرية فحسب، بل باعتباره علامة ثقافية ورمزاً لانهايار اليقينيات الكبرى وتفكك المنظومات القيمية.

تركّز الدراسة على تحليل الإدمان بوصفه آلية بقاء تعكس فراغاً وجودياً عميقاً نتج عن تآكل قيم أساسية، مثل تماسك الأسرة، واستقرار المعتقدات، وفكرة "الحلم الأمريكي". وانطلاقاً من أطروحات كل من جان فرانسوا ليوتارد و إيرفنج غوفمان تستكشف الدراسة كيف ينخرط أفراد عائلة ويستون—لا سيما فيوليت وباربرا، إلى جانب رب الأسرة بيفرلي—في أنماط متعددة من الإدمان، بحثاً عن "تعويض" مؤقت يمكنهم من التكيف مع واقع يفتقر إلى الأصالة والمعنى. كما تُحلّل الدراسة الأسلوب الدرامي المميز لليتس، الذي يجمع بين "البلاغة المظلمة" و"التوظيف الكوميدي الغرائبي"، بوصفه استراتيجية جمالية تسهم في تفكيك البنية التقليدية للدراما الأمريكية. وفي هذا السياق، لا يُنظر إلى الإدمان باعتباره انحرافاً فردياً، بل كفعل بنيوي منظم للتفاعل الإنساني في زمن تسوده النزعة التشاؤمية، حيث تفشل القيم التقليدية في صون الروابط الاجتماعية، ويُستعاض عنها بأدوار سلوكية متكررة ومشوّهة تمكّن الأفراد من الاستمرار ضمن واقع يومي مضطرب. وبناءً على ذلك، تخلص الدراسة إلى أن الإدمان في خطاب ما بعد الحداثة يتحول إلى ممارسة ثقافية مهيمنة، تكشف عن أزمة المعنى والهوية في المجتمع المعاصر، وتعيد تعريف العلاقات الإنسانية في ظل انهيار معاني التواصل الإنساني .

الكلمات المفتاحية: ما بعد الحداثة، الادمان ، التشظي ، المسرح الأمريكي

## Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County*: Addiction as a Symptom and Symbol of Postmodern Disillusionment

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### Abstract:

The core of interest in this paper is a Pulitzer Prize winning play: *August: Osage County* by Tracy Letts. Utilizing the postmodern critical scope, the consequences of addiction are explored as both a symptom and symbol of postmodern disillusionment. The aim is not to present addiction from a clinical perspective, but to shed light on the indicative surviving mechanism for profound void resulted from the failure of ethical values, such as family stability, beliefs and American Dream. Depending on the theories of researches such as Jean-François Lyotard and Erving Goffman, the study analyzes how the Weston family members, specifically Violet, Barbara, and the family patriarch Beverly, are involved in numerous forms of addictions in order to acquire their definite kind of “fix” to live in a world lacking genuineness and truth. Furthermore, the paper investigates Letts’s distinguishable approach in his writing style, characterized by “dark eloquence” and the “comic embrace of the grotesque”, which serves as deconstruction of the traditional American drama. Ultimately, the study suggests that in our current time, addiction has become an act of governing act for human interaction. This stems from a pervasive state of cynicism, where traditional values have failed to uphold familial connections as genuine social ties are discarded, and people instead adopt toxic, repetitive roles just to navigate through daily occurrences of our reality.

**Key words:** Postmodernism, Addiction, Fragmentation, American Drama

### Introduction:

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American actor and dramatist Tracy Shane Letts was born on July 4, 1965, Tulsa, Oklahoma. The playwright was known for his three-act play *August: Osage County*. The drama first premiered on Broadway at Imperial Theater in December of 2007 by the original Steppenwolf cast. His father, Dennis Letts, who was a college instructor later became an actor and participated as Beverly Weston in *August: Osage County* in the Chicago and Broadway premiers, though he had unfortunately passed just two months after the New York opening. As for Letts' mother, Billie, who became a best-selling author for the award-winning novel *where the heart is* (1995). *August: Osage County* (2007, later turned into a film 2013) had received quite the positive attention from on lookers and American drama enthusiast, winning him the Pulitzer Prize for drama and five Tony awards in 2008, one of them being For best play award which earned him the wide spread acknowledgment worldwide (Gale, Cengage Learning, 2018).

Growing up as a teenager, Letts as many teenagers growing up in America was often bullied and demeaned in school, making him long for a life away from his hometown in Oklahoma. And so the youth had embarked on his journey in 1983 to the big city of Dallas to pursue his acting career before finally settling in Chicago at the age of 20. The Steppenwolf Theater Company started as a dynamic non-profit theater that first opened its doors in the year of 1974, inviting many members to direct, design, and write, which later led Letts to start his Playwright career. At the time Letts was also suffering from his heavy drinking habits, trying to attain a comfortable living and maintain his job as a secretary. But in the late eighties to early nineties things have finally started to look up for Tracy as he started to write his first play.

He had used his emotions that he had bottled up of anger and frustrations into it, coming back hungover every day to finish what he was a trying to write

before finally succumbing and submitted his first rough draft of *Killer Joe* in the hopes of it getting accepted and considered. Initially however, Steppenwolf had rejected the play, expressing no interest in it whatsoever. It took Letts many years before his first play finally started production, premiering in Next Theater Lab on August 3, 1993 in Evanston, Illinois (Fahy, 1-3). This marked the turning point in Tracy's life for the better, introducing him in a new light of how we came to know him now.

Throughout his acting careers, Letts wrote many distinguishable plays, contributing a great deal to the American Theater as a playwright and dramatist while working under Steppenwolf, such as *Killer Joe* (1991), *Bug* (1996), *The Man from Nebraska* (2003), *Mary Page Marlowe* (2016) and *Linda Vista* (2017). In those works, Tracy Letts has proved that he is not a commonplace name in the American dramatic mainstream but a prominent, distinct and challenging voice in present-day American theater. His plays are frequently regarded as intense psychological lenses, constant inspections of household dysfunction, and a warningly comic indication of the grotesque. Accordingly, those endeavors have granted a unique place in the modern dramatic canon.

Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County* is more than just a play. Rather, it is an authentic, reflective image of familial dysfunctions; the real-life events each family goes through around the world. At first glance, the audience encounters a classic American family drama that is more suitable to postmodern theater. Postmodern fragmentation is manifested by a dysfunctional family full of secrets, fragmented familial bonds, fighting over the dinner table. Letts's contribution is to push forward a dramatic work that brings into prospect the breaking point of a family tries to fill the voids despite knowing it'll never be the same. So, addiction, though not taking a fixed aspect in the play, is the latitude they choose as an option.

Drugs, pills and alcohol are not the only forms of addiction in this play. Yet, it's the dominant allegory for how family members deal with the formidable

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consequences of the broken ties. Each character is addicted to something: a substance, a lie, a memory, the need to control. Their addictions are the symptoms of a profounder condition, an intense disillusionment with all the old stories that are supposed to give life meaning, like family, success, and love.

### **Theoretical Framework**

It is quite obvious that addiction is the projecting display of the moral and existential crisis within the family in Letts's *August: Osage County*. Accordingly, a critical approach is mandatory to expose the theoretical frameworks that illuminate this vital concern. This analysis highlights postmodern disillusionment as its principal lens, reinforced by theories of performativity and the American family drama tradition.

To put Postmodern Disillusionment into prospect is to denote that it mainly signifies the degradation of coherent values, such as faith, the stability of the family unit, and intelligible self-identity that characterized modernity. In the postmodern condition, as introduced by thinkers like Jean-François Lyotard, persons are devoid of collective truths or stable fundamentals, resulting in fragmentation, irony, and a profound sense of alienation and anxiety (Lyotard, xxiv). This disillusionment does not take the form of neither theoretical manifesto nor philosophical posture, but a shared experience that surfaces psychologically and socially. Within this framework, addiction can be theorized not simply as a biochemical dependency but as a symptomatic coping mechanism for this void. It functions as a performative ritual that fills the vacuum left by absent meaning, offering a temporary, albeit destructive, structure, identity, and purpose. Regardless of the type of addiction, whether to a substance or a lie, the addict's association with those substances or lies becomes a prevailing margin in a world

where traditional accounts (family, career, faith) have failed. The play's Oklahoma setting, far from the nation's symbolic centers of power, further positions it within an explicitly American experience of this disillusionment, the failure of the heartland dream.

Another crucial concept adopted here is the concept of performativity as it relates to family and self. Drawing from the work of sociologist Erving Goffman and later theorists, the family can be understood as a stage where roles of the grandmother, the compliant daughter, and the reckless son are being performed, often under powerful social expectation (Goffman, 163-164). In *August: Osage County*, these performances are notably deconstructed. The characters' addictions to pills, alcohol, sex, or deceit are both a disappointment of their performed roles and a new, uncontrollable performance that discloses the pretense of the original family script. Violet Weston's pill addiction, for instance, dismantles her performance as the family's pillar, even as her brutal, unfiltered speech constitutes a terrifyingly authentic performance of her fractured self.

### **The American Family Drama**

Though radically progressive, the dramatic framework of Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County* cannot be seen as a separate entity from the broader spectrum entitled family drama. . To formulate an understandable perspective about its spot-on effect and how it tackles addiction as a central symptom of cultural collapse, one must first settle it within this category. The American family drama emerged in the twentieth century as the primary theatrical mode for examining national identity, using the microcosm of the home to stage conflicts over legacy, value systems, and the corrosive gap between cultural ideals and lived reality (Cohn 40-43). This literary type offers the essentials of the reunion plot, the oppressive domestic setting, and the disentanglement of secrets that Letts employs not to sustain, but to deconstruct. However, *August: Osage County* is different. The diversity resides in that the play manifests the genre's turning point.

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The dramatic narratives of truth, functional and dysfunctional familial bonds that earlier plays presented as conflicts are exposed to be hollow, missing genuineness and honesty that families most often possess, leaving only the uncontrollable, addictive performances that briefly fill that emptiness.

It is hard to state that Letts is innovative or reformer in terms of the classic American family drama. He inherited a dramatic tradition already set by earlier modernist playwrights like Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller who were basically concerned with the socially dysfunctional American family. Those notable playwrights promoted fronted addiction in a variety of ways. In O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, addiction (to morphine and alcohol) is presented tragically as both shared poison and escape from agonizing truth. On the other hand, addiction to the "unreal" and the trans-generational past takes the leading role in Williams's families in a declining Southern propriety. Miller discussed the household, outlining familial failure as a straight result of the failed American Dream, as in *Death of a Salesman*, where Willy Loman's delusions are a kind of addictive description he cannot quit (Biggsby 371).

*August: Osage County* brings into prospect the classic three-act family drama designed not for purgative disclosure but to exhibit a limitless cycle of reproach and withdrawal. Here, the "grand narratives" that philosopher Jean-François Lyotard identified as non-functioning in the postmodern condition, the unifying stories of progress, faith, and familial solidarity are not just broken but are actively weaponized (Lyotard 61-64). Barbara's anxious chant, "Thank God we can't tell the future. We'd never get out of bed," is a witness of a world deprived from optimistic storyline, where the one inevitability is more agony (Letts 24). The play's measure and spoken ferocity evoke its predecessors, but its vision is



one of totalizing disillusionment, where the search for a dominant, shaping truth unavoidably leads only to more lies and dishonesty.

It is within this postmodern depth that addiction raises from a thematic element to an essential opinion. In the generic context of the family drama, addiction traditionally functioned as a symbol of individual weakness or a specific social ill. In Letts's postmodern iteration, it becomes the primary symptom of the vanished center and the dominant symbol of contemporary existence. Each character's dependency on a certain fixation. Violet on pills and control, Barbara beliefs of her own stability, Steve on alcohol and predation, Johnna on the routine of work is a performative ritual that fills the existential void. Sociologist Erving Goffman's concept of social interaction as performance is clear here. In the absence of authentic selfhood, the characters perform selves mediated by their addictions, which provide a script, a prop, and a motivation (Goffman 28). Violet's pill-fueled tirades are not a loss of control so much as they are her most authentic performance, brutally dismantling the performed roles of others.

Consequently, *August: Osage County* exceeds and achieves a general trajectory. It is the American family drama turned inward on itself, a play that uses the genre's own tools to dramatize the genre's irrelevance in a postmodern age. The sprawling, multi-generational conflict does not reveal a hidden moral order but confirms its absence. The end of the play is far from being merely described as tragic, but more likely fatigued, remote endurance personified by the presence of Barbara alone on the stage, Violet plainly heaving on the floor, the house vacant (Letts 89). In this situation, the cathartic effect is excluded as there is no pattern of compromise, no lesson learned, only the prolongation of addictive patterns in new locations, over and over again in a never ending cycle. By doing so, Letts decisively highlights addiction not as a personal deteriorating within a constant world, but as the crucial logic of a world where all constant meaning has softened. The play itself becomes a monumental symptom and symbol, holding



a mirror to an era of disillusionment and showing the hysterical, addictive presentations that rush in to take its place.

### **Symbolic and Realistic Analysis of Addiction in the Weston family:**

Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County* cannot only be seen as an exposure of familial breakdowns and faults, rather it is the planned method by which the writer has depicted these issues in both a realistic and metaphorical way for the audiences. In postmodern world, addiction is viewed as not only a biochemical need, but also as symptomatic coping mechanism to fill in the intense existential emptiness within each character. As the traditionally portrayed narrative of family, faith, and the original image of the ever impending shadow that is the "American Dream" and its inevitable collapse, the characters of the play are now left more defenseless to perform new, and often damaging identities throughout their obsessions. This chapter will be providing an in-depth insight and analysis of how these addictions manifest in the central characters of this play, utilizing the play's dialogue to illustrate the realistic struggles and disillusionment that these characters symbolize.

### **Violet Weston: The Absurdity of Performing the Truth**

Violet Weston, the mother who triggers the conflict in this play, her addiction to pills (pain medications, downers, etc.) proves to be an aspect of tragedy in the structure of her daily life. While her addiction has realistic foundation in her struggle with mouth cancer, it also functions symbolically as a "performative ritual" that seemingly allows her to dismantle the social masks of those surrounding her.

As we follow the notable studies of addiction, Violet's drug-induced state allows her to break the "social expectations" of the matriarch family. Instead of providing stability for her condition, she uses her "pills", her addiction, to perform a brutal and cold form of "truth-telling". This is most evident during the infamous dinner scene after Beverley's funeral. When violet's daughters attempt to maintain a façade of mourning, as each of them face different situations and emotions, violet sherds the performance and any attempt of their at decorum:

***VIOLET:** "I'm just a truth-teller... but you can't handle the truth. Nobody in this family can handle the truth... I'm a drug addict. I'm a pill-popper. I take pills. I like 'em. They make me feel better. And they make me feel like I can tell you exactly what I think of you."*

In this moment, violet's addiction became more dominant, her narrative spiraling and switching to the "drunken-truth" from all the pressures she suffered from and still do, and perhaps even a deep hidden pool of guilt that she hides by consuming the very "pills" that started these issues. The drugs themselves do not merely numb her pain, the serve a higher purpose of empowering her in order to weaponize the vicious eloquence that Letts's is known best to wield. And to bring upfront the irony of her mouth cancer, the very organ she uses to tell the said truth is the one rotting, decaying, the cause of her now pain, realistically and metaphorically. Her addiction in the play is seen as the most authentic and precise performance to be witnessed and experienced because it reveals the "fractured self" behind the matriarchal mask (Zieger 52).

### **Barbara Weston: The Addiction to Control and the Failure of a Legacy**

Barbra Weston, later Fordham through her marriage to Bill Fordham, is the eldest daughter in her family, representing a different king of dependency: The addiction to chasing stability and the role of the "Dutiful daughter". Barbara arrives first to her family house upon hearing about the missing of her father

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Beverly, carrying the badge of the ever responsible eldest daughter and believing she can manage the chaos that is her family, but she quickly realizes that the old stories of family responsibilities is not present anywhere near hers, and that it is lacking sincerity and honesty in this postmodern age.

Barbara's addiction could be seen as an compulsive performance, a cry for control that she desperately chases within her life, yet all we see is the crumbling walls of it as her husband, Bill, is leaving her and her daughter for a younger woman, after all the sacrifices she had given and hopes she had poured into the now broken family. Even her daughter Jean is seemingly retreating into her own world of substances with her newly found addiction for smoking marijuana behind her parents back, with her father Bill thinking it was merely tobacco. Barbara's realization of the emptiness that has overtaken her family, lives in the haunting mantra captured. *Barbara: "Thank God we can't tell the future. We'd never get out of bed."* (Letts 101). This line in the play serves as a testimony to a world stripped of hope.

As the play progresses however, Barbara's addiction to control things around her turns violent. In act II, when she physically tackles Violet to seize her pills, she shouts "*I'm in charge now!*" having had enough with how everything was turning into. She isn't just taking the drugs away, she is attempting to seize the "script" of the family, to throw away the mask of the "dutiful daughter". However, by the end of the play, we witness Barbara as she is left on stage all alone, mirroring the isolation she felt by the absence of her father, her husband, and all those she holds close. Her addictive pattern of seeking to seize control had led her to being emotionally and mentally exhausted, her pursuit is surviving the harsh isolation of those who are dear to her had manifested in the final scene

where everything turned black and cold, a window of her soul bared to the audience.

### **Beverly Weston: The Philosophical Retreat into Alcoholism**

While Violet and Barbara had been seen fighting for control over their house, Beverly Weston, the family patriarch, was the one who led everyone else's addictions to manifest by the doing of his own shortcoming, his retreat to addiction that started it all. His alcoholism was not portrayed as a mere vice compared to the other characters, but as a philosophical stance, a statement against the all-consuming disillusionment that became his life. A former writer and a poet, Beverly had used alcohol as a way to numb the obvious signs of life closing up on him. His ever present awareness to the postmodern abyss and the struggles of dwelling on his past success. In the play's prologue, Beverly explains his "contract" with violet to their newly hired housekeeper, Johnna:

***BEVERLY:** "My wife takes pills and I drink. That's the bargain... a state of matter. We've reached a settlement. And she's a lot of fun, I tell you. She's a hoot. But she's a pill-popper. And I'm an alcoholic."*

Beverly's addiction can be seen as a tragic state of shared poison that serves as an escape from an unbearable truth that is hard to swallow. By quoting T.S. Eliot's *The Hollow Man*, he aligns himself with the fragments that define the postmodern condition. His inevitable suicide is the ultimate act of an addict who had realized that he had the wall of conscience, where he cannot go back and fix his failed marriage and career. His death isn't just a meaningless plot point to start the play, but it is a catalyst that forces their family to confront their own demons in the hopes of overcoming their addictive and compulsive nature.

### **Steve and Johnna: Their Effect**

To further point out the pervasive and important nature of addiction in *August: Osage County* and how it is illustrated through the secondary characters who represent the lesser but still impactful role on others in the play their vices.

- **Steve Heidebrecht:** Steve's addiction is one of alcohol and intake of marijuana. He represents a more brutish presence where the moral boundaries are dissolved. His attempt to seduce the underage Jean with marijuana and alcohol is a move that lacks all the ethical bases of social and moral foundations.
- **Johnna Monevata:** The Cheyenne housekeeper is the only character who seems "grounded", yet even this quiet and control portrays a more prominent addiction of the routine work. She simply avoids the surrounding chaos in the Weston household by busying herself with chores that at times appear unplanned and unprompted. The lack of the reliable self in the Weston family brings into prospect the much required structure that Johnna unknowingly brought forth. She is the silent witness, her quiet routine through the Weston house brings front the sterile hint to the chaotic arena the Westons have undoubtedly created.

Employing these characters, Letts had recognized that addiction is a central logic of a world where all unwavering meanings seem to be chased away on an impulse of drunken acts. The Weston household is but a small indication into a society that has used its very own secrets against itself in self-destructive way, a coherence ruined. The characters are not seeking to heal, but they seek a quick "fix", through pills, a bottle, or even a last desperate attempt at grasping power to fill the existential void of the postmodern existence.

## Letts's Style: The Vicious Eloquence and the Postmodern Grotesque

While the themes of addiction and disillusionment are providing the base foundation for *August: Osage County*, it is Tracy's stylistic approach that truly elevates the work to exceptional status in contemporary American drama. Letts does not only describe the downfall of the Weston family, but he forces the audience to experience it through a specific aesthetic of vicious and unapologetic nature that is grotesque in its nature. By playing around the themes and structure of a "well-made play" and bending the rules, Letts creates a style that is both a tribute and a deconstruction to the great American family tragedies of the twentieth century.

Letts is an exceptionally gifted writer in that he utilizes the three-act structure in drama, which is historically associated with playwrights Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams to serve a postmodern agenda. As we mentioned in the structure of the "well-made play", a structure codified by French playwright Eugène Scribe in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was essential to mainstream theater for over a hundred year

Thus, secrets are revealed, tensions peak, and a form of catharsis or moral resolution is reached. However, that comfort is denied by Letts using his traditional scaffold with characters who have no interest in redemption, only in "surviving decimation". One of Letts's most distinctive stylistic choices of his is the "vicious eloquence." The characters of *August: Osage County* are highly articulate and fledged out on their own accord, which makes their biting cruelty all the more devastating. The writer uses his language not to build bridges, but to perform attacks on the vulnerabilities of others. This is a departure from the "gritty naturalism" of the many modern plays, and instead, it is hyper-articulate form of verbal combat, one that the established writer Mark Pizzaro identifies as the hallmark of the "postmodern gothic" genre (Pizzato 67).

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Letts is brilliant for his use of cruelty and how he blends it with black humor. The audience often find themselves perhaps in an awkward laughing moment of profound pain, technique that creates that “uncomfortable irony”. This stylistic choice bring into line the postmodern dismissal of sincerity, which suggests that a world without meaning leaves only a bitter laugh to be offered.

**Conclusion:**

The all-inclusive analysis of Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County* exposes a work that serves as an ultimate roadmap for the breakdown of the American family in the twenty-first century. By inspecting the Weston family through double lenses of the postmodern theory and performativity, this research has verified that addiction is far more than a subplot; it is the vital shaping principle of the play, the ultimate reason to uncovering the truth. Letts utilizes the architecture of the traditional America family drama, a genre defines by many giants of the American playwright history, such as O'Neill and Miller. Only to systematically deconstruct it, by proving that the grand narratives that many go by, such as the heritage of the family, domesticity, and shared truth have all been replaced by a prevalent and ever consuming disillusionment.

As established in chapter two, the addictions of the Weston family represent a structural response to a world where stability has been destroyed by false ideals. Violet Weston's chemical dependency is the most literal symptom of this perpetual void, transforming her into a brutal, uncaring, and out of control “truth-teller” whose only truth is imminent destruction. Her insistence on pill addiction despite her mouth cancer could be seen as surgical strike against the social masks that her children hide behind. Similarly, Barbara Fordham's addiction to control and Beverly Weston's philosophical retreat into alcoholism illustrate that every



member of this family seeks the numbing agent as an escape to mask the absence of human connection.

Furthermore, the research in chapter three highlighted the true brilliance of how Tracy Letts wields his style in a way that not many others before him had been able to, to combine between dark humor, realistic life tragedies, and deep heartfelt dialogues in the postmodern era is a unique and sure way he inspired with many writers following in his footsteps. *August: Osage County* concludes that when “old stories” of progress, family, and faith are exposed to fallacies, the resulting vacuum is filled by the frantic, cyclical, and self-destructive performances of the true textbook addict. The piece does not only stand as a piece of drama, but as a monumental symptom and symbol of a struggling society that cannot find its footing in a landscape defined by loss.

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