



# ***Play Guide***



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The Mahaffey Company

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# ***American Stage Theatre***

American Stage is Tampa Bay's best professional regional Equity theatre. Founded in 1977, the company's mission is to create the most satisfying live theatre in the Tampa Bay area, accessible to all members of the community. The vision of American Stage is



to preserve the greatest human stories from our past, while creating the most defining stories and storytelling of our time.

American Stage presents its six-play Mainstage Series in its, 182-seat Raymond James Theatre each year. The very popular American Stage in the Park celebrates its 27th Anniversary. The theatre's other programming includes: "After Hours" Series, School Tour, and camps and classes for children and adults.

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It is American Stage Theatre Company's goal to share the enriching experience of live theatre. This play guide is intended to help you prepare for your visit to American Stage. Should you have any comments or suggestions regarding this study guide, or if you need more information about scheduling trips to see an American Stage production, please feel free to contact us:

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*August: Osage County* play guide was compiled and written by Meg Heimstead.

# ***August: Osage County***

## ***Exploring the Play***

### **About the Playwright – Tracy Letts**



Actor and playwright, Tracy Letts, was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1965 to writer and educator, Billie Letts, and the late actor and college professor, Dennis Letts. He grew up in Durant, Oklahoma where his parents taught at Oklahoma Southern University. He graduated from Durant High School in the early 1980s. Letts has two brothers, Shawn, a jazz musician and composer, and Dana. His mother, Billie Letts, is the best-selling author of the Oprah Book Club selection, “Where the Heart Is.” Her parents also served as the model for the characters of Beverly and Violet Weston in Lett’s play, *August: Osage County*. His father, Dennis Letts, played Beverly Weston in the original Steppenwolf and Broadway productions but died of lung cancer only a few months into the Broadway run.

After graduating from high school, Letts moved to Dallas where he waited tables and worked in telemarketing as he pursued an acting career. At the age of 20 he relocated to Chicago where he eventually found an artistic home at the famous Steppenwolf Theatre Company. “I fell in love with the city.” Letts says of Chicago, “I fell in love with the theatre scene and I loved being out alone in the world. But, you know, along with that freedom comes – certainly in your twenties – a lot of bad, crazy behavior.” It was clear from his teenage years, that Letts had inherited his grandmother’s addictive personality. “I’m a born addict. I can’t say where the problem started. I’ve always been a bit of a depressive, I’m afraid. It was the tortured teenage years – normally tortured, nothing extreme.”

## About the Playwright – Tracy Letts (continued)

In 1991 Letts wrote his first play, *Killer Joe*. According to Letts, “It was a family drama, exceedingly violent and difficult, a strong cup of coffee.” Two years later the play premiered at the Next Lab Theatre, followed by the 29<sup>th</sup> Street Rep in New York City. One Chicago critic wrote, “Such a hideous carnival of brutality and degradation that it leaves you numb and dirty.” Richard Christiansen, Chicago’s most powerful reviewer at the time, was intrigued enough to invite the young author to his office for a chat. The play eventually transferred to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and then onto London where it was well received.

*Killer Joe* also marked the moment that Letts decided to clean up his own act. Within weeks of the Chicago premiere, he sobered up and has been sober ever since. “There are a lot of blinding revelations about getting sober. It’s not just about alcoholics or addicts of any kind; it’s about people realizing patterns of behavior in their lives that are unhealthy and distressing.”

While Letts was finding his identity as a writer, he was also finding himself as an actor. 1993 was also the year that he was first hired by Steppenwolf as an understudy. According to Letts, the lead fell ill and Gary Sinise thrust him onto the stage. He was then invited back for another understudy assignment.



“I turned ‘em down, said Letts in a March 2011 Washington Post interview. “It was a time when I really needed the job, too. But I thought, they’re gonna think that I’m the understudy if I keep doing this. I don’t want to be the understudy.”

Eventually he was hired to play the bartender in Steve Martin’s play *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*. 10 years after that first understudy assignment, Letts became a company member at Steppenwolf. He has premiered three of his own plays with the company and performed in 17.

In 1996 while in London, Letts wrote *Bug* shortly after hearing about the Oklahoma City bombings. It was first produced at the Gate Theatre in Notting Hill, London. He later wrote a screenplay for the film version starring Ashley Judd. The mid 1990’s also marked a time where Letts moved to Los Angeles to see if he had any leading-man potential. “I didn’t,” Letts says in the Washington Post article. “Way too tall and I don’t have a great face for the camera. It sounds like sour grapes, but I came to realize that I hated doing that work. The worst play I’ve ever done is more evocative for me than four days on a set where people don’t know my name.”

## About the Playwright – Tracy Letts (continued)

In 2001 Letts moved back to Chicago to star in Steppenwolf's production of *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Chicago and Steppenwolf Theatre have remained his home base ever since.

Letts received an unexpected Pulitzer nomination in 2004 for *The Man from Nebraska*, the story of an insurance agent's loss of religious faith. Although he did not win the Pulitzer that year, the play represented a departure from Letts' previous shocking, blood and guts material.

In 2007 Letts premiered *August: Osage County*, a profane epic of incest, substance abuse, manipulation and neglect. Letts would go on to win a Tony and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *August*. The play has been compared to works by O'Neill, Shepard and Albee.

*Superior Donuts*, a much lighter work by Letts, opened on Broadway in 2009, shortly after *August* closed. Although it had a limited Broadway run, the play was widely produced in regional theatres throughout the 2010-11 season. Letts felt the need to "put something hopeful into the world," after the death of his father.

Currently, Letts lives in Chicago with his girlfriend. He was recently seen in the Steppenwolf and Arden Theatre's production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

## *August: Osage County* - Introduction

*August: Osage County* premiered at the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago on June 28, 2007. Its Broadway debut was at the Imperial Theatre on December 4, 2007 and transferred to the Music Box Theatre on April 29, 2008. The Broadway show closed on June 28, 2009 after 648 performances and 18 previews.

The show made its UK debut at London's National Theatre in November 2008. A US tour began on July 24, 2009. A film production of *August: Osage County* is being prepared by producers Harvey Weinstein and Jean Doumanian. The film stars Meryl Streep as Violet and Julia Roberts as her eldest daughter, Barbara.



# ***August: Osage County***

## **Awards & Nominations**

### **2007 Jeff Award (Chicago)**

Best New Work – Play

Best Production – Play

### **2008 Drama Desk Award**

Outstanding Actress in a Play (Barbara) – Amy Morton

Outstanding Actress in a Play (Violet) – Deanna Dunagan – (WINNER)

Outstanding Costume Design – Ana Kuzmanic

Outstanding Director of a Play – Anna D. Shapiro (WINNER)

Outstanding Featured Actor in a Play (Bill) – Jeff Perry

Outstanding Featured Actress in a Play (Mattie Fae) – Rondi Reed

Outstanding Play (WINNER)

### **2008 Drama League Award**

Distinguished Production of a Play (WINNER)

### **2008 Drama Critic's Circle Award**

Best Play (WINNER)

### **2008 Outer Critics Circle Award**

Outstanding New Broadway Play (WINNER)

### **2008 Pulitzer Prize**

Drama – Tracy Letts (WINNER)

### **2008 Theatre World Award**

Deanna Dunagan (WINNER)

### **2008 Tony Award**

Best Actress in a Play (Barbara) – Amy Morton

Best Actress in a Play (Violet) – Deanna Dunagan (WINNER)

Best Direction of a Play – Anna D. Shapiro (WINNER)

Best Featured Actress in a Play (Mattie Fae) – Rondi Reed (WINNER)

Best Lighting Design of a Play – Ann G. Wrightson

Best Play (WINNER)

Best Scenic Design of a Play – Todd Rosenthal (WINNER)



# Characters

## Beverly Weston

- The father and the patriarch of the Weston family
- Age 69
- An alcoholic and former poet

## Violet Weston

- The mother and matriarch of the Weston family
- Age 65
- Addicted to several prescription drugs, mostly depressants and narcotics
- Suffering from mouth cancer
- Sharp tongued and shrewd



## Barbara Fordham

- The eldest daughter of the Weston family
- Age 46
- Mother of Jean and wife of Bill
- College professor in Boulder, Colorado
- Has an intense need to control everything around her as it falls apart

## Ivy Weston

- The middle daughter of the Weston family
- Age 44
- The only daughter to stay in Oklahoma
- Teaches at the local college

## Karen Weston

- The youngest daughter of the Weston family
- Age 40
- Newly engaged to Steve
- Lives in Miami, Florida

## Bill Fordham

- Barbara's estranged husband
- Jean's father
- Age 49
- A college professor who is having an affair with one of his students

## Characters (continued)

### Jean Fordham

- Bill and Barbara's 14 year old daughter
- Smokes pot and cigarettes
- A vegetarian
- Loves old movies
- Bitter about her parent's separation

### Steve Heidebrecht

- Karen's fiancé
- Age 50
- A businessman in Florida

### Mattie Fae Aiken

- Violet's sister
- Charlie's wife and Little Charles' mother
- Age 57
- Just as jaded as her sister
- Belittles her husband and son constantly

### Charlie Aiken

- Mattie Fae's husband
- Age 60
- Upholsters furniture for a living
- Lifelong friend of Beverly
- Struggles to get Mattie Fae to respect Little Charles

### Little Charles

- Son of Mattie Fae and Charlie
- Age 37
- Unemployed

### Johnna Movevata

- Native American
- Age 26
- Is hired by Beverly as a housekeeper shortly before he disappears



The original Steppenwolf cast

# Themes

By Wade Bradford

## **Mothers and Daughters**

In Letts' play, mothers and daughters are more likely to verbally and physically abuse one another rather than exhibit kindness. In Act One, Violet continually asks for her eldest daughter. She depends on Barbara's emotional strength during the family crisis. Yet, at the same time, Violet cruelly points out Barbara's advancing age, her evaporated beauty, and her failed marriage – all issues that Barbara wishes to be left unspoken. Barbara responds by putting a stop to her mother's pill addiction. She rallies the rest of the family into intervention mode. This action is less tough love and more of a power play on Barbara's part. During Act Two's climatic diner scene, Barbara throttles her mother and then declares, "You don't get it, do you? I'M RUNNING THINGS NOW."

## **Two Types of Husbands**

If *August: Osage County* is a reflection of reality, then there are two types of husbands: A) Docile and unmotivated. Violet's missing husband, Beverly Weston appears briefly, only during the play's beginning. But in that scene, the audience learns that Beverly has long since ceased to communicate with his wife in a healthy manner. Instead, he accepts that she is a drug addict. In turn, he drinks himself into a spiritual coma, becoming a very docile husband whose passion for life has fizzled out decades ago.

Beverly's brother-in-law, Charles, is another timid male character. He tolerates his unpleasant wife for almost forty years before he finally puts his foot down, and even then he is rather polite. He can't understand why the Weston family is so vicious towards each other. However, the audience is left wondering why Charles has stayed around for so long.

Little Charles is a 37-year old couch potato. He represents another example of an unmotivated male. For some reason his cousin Ivy finds him heroic despite his simple-minded lethargy. Perhaps she admires him so much because he presents a sharp contrast to the more devious male characters.

B) Philandering and unreliable. Bill (Barbara's husband – the college professor who is sleeping with his student) represents middle aged men who want to feel more desirable so they abandon their wives for younger women. Steve, Karen's fiancé, represents the opportunistic male who takes advantage of the young and naïve.

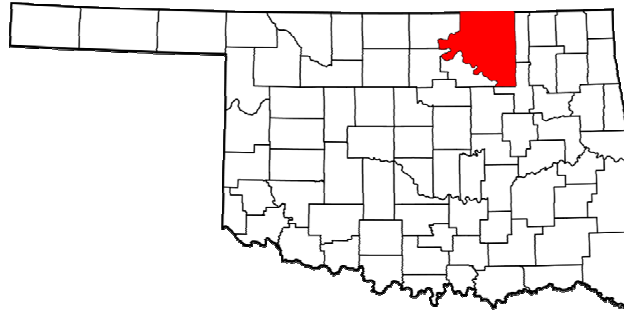
## **What Goes Around Comes Around**

Most of the characters dread the notion of living alone, yet they violently resist intimacy, and most seemed doomed to a sad, solitary existence. The final lesson is harsh but simple: be a good person or you'll taste nothing but your own poison.

# **August: Osage County**

## **Exploring the Context of the Play**

### **Osage County**



Osage County is 2,251 square miles and is the largest county in Oklahoma. It is home to the Osage Indian Reservation and the federally recognized Osage Nation. As of 2000, the population was 44,437.

Welcome Message from the Osage County Visitor's Bureau –

*OSAGE COUNTY remains largely unchanged as the original Wild West with true cowboys, proud Osages, unspoiled prairie, pristine lakes, and rich traditions.*

*Think that is a lot to roll into one county? Well, it's a big county ~ the largest in Oklahoma. Larger than either Rhode Island or Delaware, and Osage County's people, history and culture will create a memorable visit for you and your family.*

*Adventure awaits you at colorful powwows, crowd-pleasing rodeos, and small town festivals. Tap your toes to nationally recognized bluegrass bands, and sit tall in the saddle riding our many equestrian trails. Enjoy world-class museums, thrilling casinos, and eclectic shops, and tickle your tastebuds with some savory home cookin' or fine dining cuisine. Seek solace in deep blue lakes and wooded state parks, then relax in one of our cozy cabins or a bed and breakfast surrounded by wide open spaces dotted with bison and wild horses.*

*Osage County rewards visitors of all ages with real western experiences all year long, so come roam our hills and scenic byways and find an adventure to call your own. At over 2200 square miles, there's plenty of room for everyone!*

*See you in the Osage!*

## ***Pawhuska, Oklahoma***

Pawhuska is a city of 3,589. It is the county seat and the capital of the Osage Nation. It was named for the 19<sup>th</sup> century Osage chief, Pawhuska. The name Pawhuska means White Hair. It is located 63 miles from Tulsa.

According to the 2000 census, the racial makeup of the city is 65% White, 3% African American, and 25% Native American. The median household income is \$25,682. 15% of Pawhuska's residents, age 25 or older, have a bachelor's or advanced college degree.

The downtown district in Pawhuska houses the Constantine Theatre, built in the 1880's by Mr. C.C. Constantine who sought to establish it as the grandest playhouse in the southwest. It also houses a monument honoring Reverend John Mitchell, a missionary priest from England, who organized the first Boy Scout Troop in America in 1909.

Lake Pawhuska sits three miles west of Pawhuska. It is 96 acres large and provides trout fishing from November to March.



Main Street in Pawhuska, Oklahoma

## ***Cheyenne Umbilical Cord Tradition***

*From the Denver Art Museum's Cheyenne Visions II Exhibit*

### **No More Searching – Ne-saa eva tesvoeta**

According to Cheyenne custom, the umbilical cord of a newborn child is preserved and sewed into small round or diamond-shaped pouches stuffed with sweet grass. The child wears this navel amulet on his or her belt or keeps it in a safe place. It is said that children who do not have navel cords prepared in the Cheyenne traditional way will always be searching for their souls.

Girls' navel amulets are beaded with turtle designs. The turtle is known as the one who carried the dirt from the bottom of the ocean. From this dirt, the earth was created. Turtle brought the Cheyenne patience and mystery, and reminded the Cheyenne to take their time when traveling to faraway places. "I may be very slow," said the turtle, "but I always get to wherever I'm going."

Boys' amulets are decorated with lizard designs. Lizards and turtles are used because they are strong and long-lived, attributes that Cheyenne families wish for their children.



# ***August: Osage County***

## **Exploring Poetry References in the Play**

### **T.S. Elliot**

From poets.org



Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in Missouri on September 26, 1888. He lived in St. Louis during the first eighteen years of his life and attended Harvard University. In 1910, he left the United States for the Sorbonne, having earned both undergraduate and masters degrees and having contributed several poems to the *Harvard Advocate*.

After a year in Paris, he returned to Harvard to pursue a doctorate in philosophy, but returned to Europe and settled in England in 1914. The following year, he married Vivienne Haigh-Wood and began working in London, first as a teacher, and later for Lloyd's Bank.

It was in London that Eliot came under the influence of his contemporary Ezra Pound, who recognized his poetic genius at once, and assisted in the publication of his work in a number of magazines, most notably "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in *Poetry* in 1915. His first book of poems, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, was published in 1917, and immediately established him as a leading poet of the avant-garde. With the publication of "The Waste Land" in 1922, now considered by many to be the single most influential poetic work of the twentieth century, Eliot's reputation began to grow to nearly mythic proportions; by 1930, and for the next thirty years, he was the most dominant figure in poetry and literary criticism in the English-speaking world.

As a poet, he transmuted his affinity for the English metaphysical poets of the 17th century (most notably John Donne) and the 19th century French symbolist poets (including Baudelaire and Laforgue) into radical innovations in poetic technique and subject matter. His poems in many respects articulated the disillusionment of a younger post-World-War-I generation with the values and conventions—both literary and social—of the Victorian era. As a critic also, he had an enormous impact on contemporary literary taste, propounding views that, after his conversion to orthodox Christianity in the late thirties, were increasingly based in social and religious conservatism. His major later poems include "Ash Wednesday" (1930) and "Four Quartets" (1943); his books of literary and social criticism include *The Sacred Wood* (1920), *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), *After Strange Gods* (1934), and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1940).

## T.S. Elliot (*continued*)

Eliot was also an important playwright, whose verse dramas include *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Reunion*, and *The Cocktail Party*.

He became a British citizen in 1927; long associated with the publishing house of Faber & Faber, he published many younger poets, and eventually became director of the firm. After a notoriously unhappy first marriage, Eliot separated from his first wife in 1933, and was remarried, to Valerie Fletcher, in 1956. T. S. Eliot received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948, and died in London in 1965.

## “*The Hollow Men*”

*August: Osage County* begins and ends with characters quoting from “The Hollow Men” by T.S. Elliot.

### **The Hollow Men**

T. S. Eliot

Mistah Kurtz—he dead.

A penny for the Old Guy

I

We are the hollow men  
 We are the stuffed men  
 Leaning together  
 Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!  
 Our dried voices, when  
 We whisper together  
 Are quiet and meaningless  
 As wind in dry grass  
 Or rats' feet over broken glass  
 In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without colour,  
 Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

Those who have crossed  
 With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom  
 Remember us—if at all—not as lost  
 Violent souls, but only  
 As the hollow men  
 The stuffed men.

## II

Eyes I dare not meet in dreams  
 In death's dream kingdom  
 These do not appear:  
 There, the eyes are  
 Sunlight on a broken column  
 There, is a tree swinging  
 And voices are  
 In the wind's singing  
 More distant and more solemn  
 Than a fading star.

Let me be no nearer  
 In death's dream kingdom  
 Let me also wear  
 Such deliberate disguises  
 Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves  
 In a field  
 Behaving as the wind behaves  
 No nearer—

Not that final meeting  
 In the twilight kingdom

## III

This is the dead land  
 This is cactus land  
 Here the stone images  
 Are raised, here they receive  
 The supplication of a dead man's hand  
 Under the twinkle of a fading star.

Is it like this  
 In death's other kingdom  
 Waking alone  
 At the hour when we are  
 Trembling with tenderness  
 Lips that would kiss  
 Form prayers to broken stone.

## IV

The eyes are not here  
 There are no eyes here  
 In this valley of dying stars  
 In this hollow valley  
 This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms

In this last of meeting places  
 We grope together  
 And avoid speech

Gathered on this beach of the tumid river

Sightless, unless  
 The eyes reappear  
 As the perpetual star  
 Multifoliate rose  
 Of death's twilight kingdom  
 The hope only  
 Of empty men.

V

Here we go round the prickly pear  
 Prickly pear prickly pear  
 Here we go round the prickly pear  
 At five o'clock in the morning.

Between the idea  
 And the reality  
 Between the motion  
 And the act  
 Falls the Shadow  
 For Thine is the Kingdom

Between the conception  
 And the creation  
 Between the emotion  
 And the response  
 Falls the Shadow  
 Life is very long

Between the desire  
 And the spasm  
 Between the potency  
 And the existence  
 Between the essence  
 And the descent  
 Falls the Shadow  
 For Thine is the Kingdom

For Thine is  
 Life is  
 For Thine is the

This is the way the world ends  
 This is the way the world ends  
 This is the way the world ends  
 Not with a bang but a whimper.

## **Harold Hart Crane**

*From poets.org*

Born in 1899 in Garrettsville, Ohio, Harold Hart Crane was a highly anxious and volatile child. He began writing verse in his early teenage years, and though he never attended college, read regularly on his own, digesting the works of the Elizabethan dramatists and poets—Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Donne—and the nineteenth-century French poets—Vildrac, Laforgue, and Rimbaud. His father, a candy manufacturer, attempted to dissuade him from a career in poetry, but Crane was determined to follow his passion to write.

Living in New York City, he associated with many important figures in literature of the time, including Allen Tate, Katherine Anne Porter, E. E. Cummings, and Jean Toomer, but his heavy drinking and chronic instability frustrated any attempts at lasting friendship. An admirer of T. S. Eliot, Crane combined the influences of European literature and traditional versification with a particularly American sensibility derived from Walt Whitman.

His major work, the book-length poem, “The Bridge”, expresses in ecstatic terms a vision of the historical and spiritual significance of America. Like Eliot, Crane used the landscape of the modern, industrialized city to create a powerful new symbolic literature. Hart Crane committed suicide in 1932, at the age of thirty-three, by jumping from the deck of a steamship sailing back to New York from Mexico.

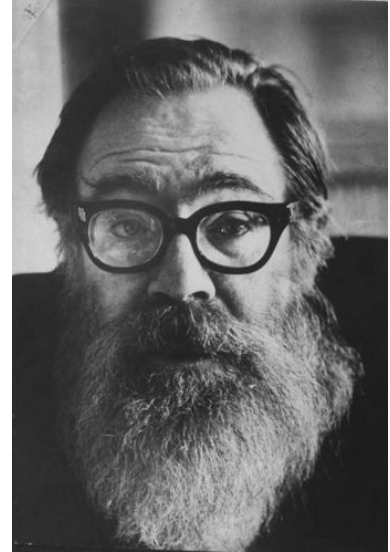


## John Berryman

*From poets.org*

John Berryman was born John Smith in McAlester, Oklahoma, in 1914. He received an undergraduate degree from Columbia College in 1936 and attended Cambridge University on a fellowship. He taught at Wayne State University in Detroit and went on to occupy posts at Harvard and Princeton. From 1955 until his death in 1972, he was a professor at the University of Minnesota.

His early work was published in a volume entitled *Five Young American Poets* in 1940 and reflects the influences of the Irish and British poets William Butler Yeats, W. H. Auden, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the Americans Hart Crane and Ezra Pound. Tremendously erudite and a brilliant teacher, Berryman in his early work—*Poems* (1942) and *The Dispossessed* (1948)—displayed great technical control in poems that remained firmly rooted in the conventions of the time.



It was not until the publication of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* in 1956, when he was already in his forties, that he won widespread recognition and acclaim as a boldly original and innovative poet. Nevertheless, no one was prepared for the innovation that would follow, a collection that would seal Berryman's reputation as an essential American original: *77 Dream Songs*, which was published in 1964 and awarded a Pulitzer Prize, unveiled the unforgettable and irrepressible alter egos "Henry" and "Mr. Bones" in a sequence of sonnet-like poems whose wrenched syntax, scrambled diction, extraordinary leaps of language and tone, and wild mixture of high lyricism and low comedy plumbed the extreme reaches of a human soul and psyche. In succeeding years Berryman added to the sequence, until there were nearly four hundred collected as *The Dream Songs*.

But the psyche that had been plumbed could not bear the strain; Berryman, who never recovered from the childhood shock of his father's suicide, was prone to emotional instability and heavy drinking throughout his life. Tragically, in 1972, he died by throwing himself off a bridge in Minneapolis.

John Berryman was elected a Fellow of The Academy of American Poets in 1966 and served as a Chancellor from 1968 until his death.

# ***August: Osage County***

## ***Discussion Questions After the Play***

- How realistic is the portrayal of the Weston family? Do their values and behaviors reflect “real life” families of today?
- In what respects does each of the children in the play resemble his/her parents? In what areas has each made a decision to diverge from the parental example?
- Is Beverly’s drowning accidental or suicidal? Make your case.
- Compare and contrast the different generations in the play. What differences in perspective do characters exhibit based on the eras in which they were raised? What other influences might have effected how each character views the world?
- “Nothing is stronger than me”, Violet declares by the play’s end. In what ways is she right? In what ways is she wrong? How does Violet conceive of strength? How does Barbara? Ivy? Karen?



# ***August: Osage County***

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