



## AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY

Tracy Letts, 2008

### Contexte et objectifs

- Niveau : B1
- Classe : début de 2<sup>nd</sup>e, axe possible : *Vivre entre générations*
- Objectifs :
  - grammaticaux
    - voix passive
    - présent simple (révision)
    - expression du reproche
    - expression de la répétition : KEEP + (ON +) V-ING
    - structures comparatives
  - lexicaux
    - analyse d'une pièce de théâtre
    - adjectifs formés à partir du préfixe UN- + verbe + suffixe -ABLE
    - adjectifs et noms dérivés d'un nom / verbe / adjectif + suffixe -FUL
    - adverbes
    - expressions idiomatiques
  - culturels et littéraires
    - les nations indigènes
    - le théâtre américain

### Anticipation du type de texte et d'éléments d'énonciation

#### Repérage de la mise en page et du paratexte

**Look at the page layout and the paratext with the different typefaces, special punctuation and capital letters.**

*We can see names in capitals on the left, followed by a colon and some text. We can see a few sentences in italics and in brackets (lines 10, 21, 39, for example). The paratext indicates the title of the work, which contains three capitals and is August: Osage County, written by Tracy Letts in 2008.*

**Apport professeur** *colon, brackets, stage directions.*

#### Émission d'hypothèses quant au type de document et à la situation d'énonciation

**What can you deduce as to the type of document, and its setting?**

*Judging by the line and page layout, the document must be taken from a play, which is confirmed by the mention of Act 1, scene 2 in the paratext. The extract is therefore taken from near the beginning of the play. The title includes words in capitals (therefore names): the name of a month, so we can guess that the action of the play takes place in the summer, as well as Osage County, which must be the name of a place, probably the setting of the play: we can guess that the scene takes place in Osage County.*

**Apport professeur** *Osage County is in Oklahoma. The Osage are a Native American tribe or nation whose ancestral domains included areas of present-day Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri and Arkansas.*

*Tracy Letts is a dramatist / playwright and actor from Tulsa in Oklahoma. He won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for his play August: Osage County.*

## Personnages de la scène et sujet apparent

### Repérage des noms en majuscules au début de chaque ligne Spot the words in capital letters at the beginning of each line.

The names in capital letters in the left-hand margin are Bill, Violet and Barbara.

### Émission d'hypothèses quant aux personnages présents dans la scène What can you deduce from these names?

Bill, Violet and Barbara take turns speaking, hence they are the characters present in the scene. Any other person in the scene will only be mentioned.

### Repérage de la fréquence des noms propres repérés Among these names, pick out the ones which appear most frequently.

Violet and Barbara are the most frequent names in the scene.

### Émission d'hypothèses quant à la récurrence de ces noms What does there being more Violets and Barbaras tell you?

Violet and Barbara are the two main characters. The scene will focus mostly on the interaction and relationship between them.

### Repérage de la relation familiale entre les deux protagonistes. Let's try to define that relationship between Violet and Barbara, then. Pick out the family relationship between the two.

Barbara says Mom (l. 39)

### Émission d'hypothèses quant à leur relation What can you deduce?

Violet is Barbara's mother.

### Repérage du premier mot du discours du troisième personnage Let's now focus on the third character: Bill. Pick out the first word he says.

Bill says Vi (l. 1), which is short for Violet.

### Émission d'hypothèses quant à la relation de Bill avec les autres personnages What can you deduce as to Bill's connection to the other two?

Bill is not a direct part of the family, since he doesn't use a word related to family relationship but calls Violet by her first name. He's rather close to her, though, since he uses the nickname Vi instead of using her full first name. So he might be Barbara's close friend, or partner, or husband.

**Apport professeur** Bill is Barbara's *husband* in the play.

### Repérage du possessif en début et fin de texte (donc en position importante) So there are three characters interacting in this text: a mother and a daughter mainly, as well as the daughter's husband. But who or what are they talking about? Spot the possessive or personal pronoun at the beginning and end of the text.

his recurs at the beginning (l. 1) and end (l. 65) of the text.

### Émission d'hypothèses quant au sujet de la conversation What can you deduce as to the identity of the person they are discussing?

They are all talking about a man.

### Repérage de la relation familiale présente dans le texte

#### Spot the family relationship related to a man recurring in the text.

Barbara says Dad (l. 11), and Violet says Your father (l. 55) and your daddy (l. 62)

### Émission d'hypothèses quant à l'identité de la personne autour de laquelle tourne la conversation

#### What can you deduce as to the person they are discussing?

The conversation revolves around Barbara's father i.e., Violet's husband.

### Repérage du co-texte droit du pronom / possessif masculin de troisième personne chez Violet

#### Let's focus on the two main characters' perceptions of this man. Let's start with Violet's perception.

#### Pick out what comes right after *he* or *his* in her lines.

**Apport professeur** The character's words in a play are called their *lines*.

Violet says: he just left (l. 4), his mystery (l. 12), he was the smartest (l. 13), his face (l. 14), He hired this woman (l. 17), He didn't ask me (l. 17), he left (l. 17-18), he hired a cook (l. 34), his heart (ll. 55, 65).

### Émission d'hypothèses quant au caractère du père

#### What can you deduce as to the father's personality and behaviour?

On the one hand, Violet uses words that are positively connoted: her husband is mysterious and clever. On the other hand, we learn that his behaviour to her is inconsiderate: he left her, which is important because it is repeated, and he hired a [female] cook without consulting with her first. All in all, he is a rather ambiguous character, but Violet seems to accept it.

### Confirmation par le co-texte gauche du mot *Dad* utilisé par Barbara pour le désigner

#### Confirm this ambiguous aspect in Barbara's line, with what comes right before the word *Dad* she uses to refer to him.

unfathomable (l. 11)

**Apport professeur** The word *unfathomable* means that can't be understood.

Travail lexical sur la formation d'adjectifs sur ce modèle : **UN-** (negative prefix) + **verbe** + **-ABLE** (capable of / given to)  
This combination is highly productive, and the words produced mean that what is described cannot be + past participle of the root verb.

Spelling: the final 'e' of the verb usually disappears when the suffix is added, but not always and less often in British spelling. It is always kept after 'g' and 'c' to soften the consonant.

Root verb	Derived adjective (UN- + verbe + -ABLE)	Meaning
fathom	unfathomable	that cannot be fathomed (= gauged or understood)
accept	unacceptable	
achieve	unachievable	that cannot be achieved = attained, done, reached
afford	unaffordable	
alter	unalterable	
attain	unattainable	
bear	unbearable	
believe	unbelievable	
break	unbreakable	
do	undoable	impossible to do, that cannot be done

Root verb	Derived adjective (UN- + verbe + -ABLE)	Meaning
detect	undetectable	
employ	unemployable	
envy	unenviable	
favour	unfavourable	that does not favour
foresee	unforeseeable	
forget	unforgettable	
forgive	unforgiveable	
fashion	unfashionable	originally meant 'that could not be shaped or fashioned'. Came to mean 'not in accordance with current fashion'
imagine	unimaginable	
get at	ungetatable	hard to reach, inaccessible
govern	ungovernable	
justify	unjustifiable	
know	unknowable	
like	unlikable / unlikeable	not easy to like
love	unlovable	not easy to love
live	unlivable / unliveable	that cannot be lived in
manage	unmanageable	
measure	unmeasurable	
mention	unmentionable	
mistake	unmistakable	
name	unnameable / unnamable	
notice	unnoticeable	
predict	unpredictable	
profit	unprofitable	that cannot be benefited from
print	unprintable	
quench	unquenchable	
question	unquestionable	
reason	unreasonable	
repeat	unrepeatable	
sell	unsellable (unsaleable [UK] or unsalable [US] also exists, formed from the noun.)	that cannot be sold. (also fig.) An idea is unsaleable if people cannot be persuaded to buy it / accept it
teach	unteachable	
think	unthinkable	

Root verb	Derived adjective (UN- + verbe + -ABLE)	Meaning
touch	untouchable	
trace	untraceable	
utter	unutterable	
use	unusable	
verify	unverifiable	
warrant	unwarrantable	that is unjustifiable
work	unworkable	that is not practical, that cannot be carried out

### Trace écrite

In this early scene taken from Tracy Letts' Pulitzer Prize-winning play August: Osage County, we meet three characters: Violet, her daughter Barbara and Barbara's husband, Bill.

The three characters are talking about the disappearance of Violet's husband and Barbara's father. We soon realize that the three people having the conversation do not understand why Violet's husband has left. Barbara and Bill question Violet to try to find some explanation but she seems to be as bewildered as they are. The missing man's character **is sketched out**. He **is described** as being unfathomable, mysterious or unknowable and his behaviour **is shown** to be unpredictable. An example of his unpredictability **is given**: the fact that he has employed a Native American woman as a live-in cook without consulting his wife.

**PRL** : **voix passive** au présent

**LEXIQUE** : **adjectifs** en **UN-** + **V** + **-ABLE**

## Premiers signes de tension

### Repérage du co-texte droit du pronom *she*

**Let's concentrate on the other character mentioned: the woman the father hired as a cook. Spot what comes right after the pronoun *she*, used to refer to her.**

she's doing (l. 20), She's a stranger (l. 20), She may be an Indian (l. 31), she makes the best goddamn apple pie (l. 31).

### Émission d'hypothèses quant aux informations dont l'on dispose à propos de cette personne, et notamment de l'information nouvelle

**From the words you have picked out earlier, what information can you deduce about the woman. Concentrate on what is new, versus what we already know.**

We already know that she cooks (Barbara thinks that she makes a killer apple pie), and that she was hired recently (she's still a stranger to Violet). We learn that she's Indian.

### Repérage des effets typographiques sur cette information nouvelle

**Spot the different typographical effects on the word *Indian*. In whose lines can you see them?**

In Violet's lines, the word Indian is used in italics (l. 20), and placed between inverted commas (l. 28).

### Émission d'hypothèse quant à la signification de cette mise en relief typographique

**What can you deduce as to Violet's state of mind when uttering this word?**

The italics mean emphasis, and Violet additionally highlights the word with unnecessary quotes. Saying Indian seems unnatural or displeasing to Violet. She seems to be prejudiced against Indians.

### Repérage des co-textes gauche et droit de l'autre répétition du mot *Indian*

**Violet repeats Indian one more time (l. 22). Spot the sentences coming before and after hers.**

BILL (Laughing): You have some problem with Indians, Violet? (l. 21)

BARBARA: They're called Native Americans now, Mom. (l. 23)

### Émission d'hypothèses quant aux réactions des autres personnages

**What can you deduce as to Bill and Barbara's attitude towards Violet's prejudices?**

It seems that Bill and Barbara are trying to look the other way, even if Violet proves to be a racist:

- Bill is laughing (probably uneasily), so he's trying to make light of Violet's prejudice against Native Americans, softening the question in which he actually asks her if she is indeed prejudiced.

- Barbara calmly corrects her mother, telling her the new politically correct name for Indians is Native Americans.

### Repérage de l'effet typographique sur les mots *Native Americans*

**The words *Native Americans* also undergo a typographical effect. Spot which one, as well as the character who uses it.**

They are also written between inverted commas (l. 30). Again, it is Violet speaking.

### Émission d'hypothèses quant à la signification de ce nouvel usage des guillemets

**What can you deduce as to Violet's tone when saying that?**

It seems that, with quotes, Violet is ridiculing the word, highlighting it excessively.

### Confirmation avec le reste de la réplique de Violet

**Confirm with the rest of Violet's line (l. 30)**

Let's just call the dinosaurs "Native Americans": Violet chooses an example that is utterly ridiculous.

while we're at it: underlines the idea of ridicule, since Violet declares everything and anything to be possible.

=> Violet behaves stubbornly, and seems set in her racist ways.

### Trace écrite

The characters' conversation about the Native American cook that Violet's husband employed before disappearing **throws light on** the tension underlying in the protagonists' relationship. Both Violet's prejudice against Native Americans and her aggressive personality **become** apparent.

Violet **seems** to be trying to provoke Barbara and Bill with her **barely** disguised contempt for Native Americans and her stubborn or obstinate attitude. She **hardly listens** to what people are really saying and **ridicules** anyone who **disagrees** with her. Bill's uneasy laughter **shows** that he is trying to **make light of** Violet's racist attitude by **gently** teasing her. Barbara **merely points out** the politically correct term that **is** used to refer to Native Americans. At this stage, Barbara and Bill **avoid** real confrontation with Violet and only **hint** at her bigotry. They may be wary of provoking her because they **are** aware that she **is set in her ways** and belligerent.

**PRL :** rappel des **emplois du présent simple** (récit objectif, verbes d'état, généralités / caractéristiques)

**LEXIQUE :** **adverbes** de modalisation

**expressions idiomatiques** (to throw light on, to make light of, to be set in one's ways)

## Dispute entre mère et fille

### Repérage du signe de ponctuation fréquent dans le texte

#### Spot the most frequent punctuation sign in the text.

*We can see a lot of dashes at the end of lines.*

### Émission d'hypothèses quant à la signification de ces tirets

#### What do they mean? What can you deduce as to the contents of the conversation?

*A dash at the end of a line means the person speaking is interrupted / cut off. We know the mother was trying to provoke the daughter, so this could mean an actual row between them.*

### Repérage d'une fréquence accrue des tirets

#### Spot the line from which the end-of-line dashes become a lot more frequent.

*They become more frequent as of l. 41*

### Confirmation grâce à la didascalie voisine

#### Confirm with a stage direction you can find in the vicinity of l. 41

*(A warning) l. 39*

### Émission d'hypothèses quant au changement de ton de la conversation entre les deux femmes

#### What can you deduce as to the turn the conversation is taking between Violet and Barbara?

*Tension is now manifest between the two. If the provocation over the Native American cook was Violet's, Barbara has now taken the bait and warns her mother: the initial one-sided tension is now going to give way to real fighting between them. Barbara is warning her mother not to go too far, not to provoke her even further. She knows from experience that the situation is going to become more and more difficult, if her mother keeps on. She knows a terrible row / an argument is brewing.*

### Repérage des pronoms personnels utilisés lors de la dispute

#### Let's concentrate on Violet and Barbara's row, then (l. 39 onwards). Spot the pronouns that are used repeatedly, and who uses which pronoun more frequently.

*you, which is mostly used by Violet vs. I, which is mostly used by Barbara.*

### Émission d'hypothèses quant à la tournure que prend la conversation

#### What can you deduce as to what the two characters are saying?

*Violet is attacking Barbara: she makes reproaches over and over again (repetition of you). On the other hand, Barbara is trying to justify herself, to parry the accusations (repetition of I).*

### Tirets contenus dans les répliques de Violet : repérage des co-texte gauche (reproches de Violet) et droit (justifications subséquentes de Barbara)

#### In Violet's lines from l. 39 onwards, pick out what comes right before the dashes (i.e., what she says before Barbara cuts her off to justify herself), and right afterwards, Barbara's justification / excuse.

*You do not write— (l. 44) => I send presents on birthdays and Mother's Day*

*You go where you want— (l. 49) => I have a lot of obligations. I have a daughter starting high school*

*Last time I saw her she's grade school— (l. 51) => I won't talk about this*

### Émission d'hypothèses quant au contenu de la dispute

#### What can you deduce as to the arguments used by each party within the row?

*Violet blames Barbara for not writing to her. She tells her that she is free to go wherever she wants, implying that Barbara doesn't want to come and see her. So she accuses her of not wanting to visit her. She also blames her for not visiting her with her granddaughter.*

*Barbara, on the other hand, keeps interrupting Violet with ineffective rebuttals. Although she doesn't write, she sends presents. She can't do what she wants because she is very busy. She keeps trying to justify herself but Violet doesn't listen.*



### Trace écrite

The conversation between mother and daughter becomes **more and more** tense until it finally turns into full-blown row / argument. Violet **keeps attacking** Barbara for not caring about her parents until Barbara takes the bait. Barbara warns Violet not to go too far, not to provoke her even further. The conversation has got to the point where she is no longer willing to appease her mother. She must know from experience that the situation is going to get out of hand. A terrible row / argument is brewing and a clash is inevitable.

Violet starts by **blaming** Barbara **for** not **writing**, then she **accuses her of choosing** not to visit her and finally she **reproaches** her **with keeping** her away from her granddaughter. In short, Violet is resentful because Barbara has moved away from the family home to live her own life.

Although Barbara **keeps trying** to justify herself, her rebuttals are ignored. She fails to parry the accusations because her mother will not listen to her.

We can guess that this type of scene has been repeated **over and over** again over the years because Barbara warns her mother not to **keep on making** the same old reproaches, as the stage direction in line 39 shows. The family falls back into the same negative dynamic each time/whenever they meet.

**PRL:** expression du **reproche** (**BLAME** + s.o. + **FOR** + **V-ING** / **REPROACH** + s.o. + **WITH** + **V-ING** / **ACCUSE** + s.o. + **OF** + **V-ING**)  
expression de la **répétition** (**KEEP** + [ON +] **V-ING**)  
expression de l'**intensification par la répétition** (**MORE AND MORE, OVER AND OVER**)

## Nœud du problème

### Repérage des phrases de Violet contenant le pronom *you*

**Still in Violet's lines from l. 39 onwards, pick out the sentences which include the pronoun *you*, which probably make up another series of reproaches. Spot the repetition.**

When was the last time you were here? (l. 40)

Because you're "dutiful." (l. 46)

### Apport professeur traduction de *dutiful*

Travail lexical sur la formation de mots avec le suffixe **-FUL**.

Category	Composition	Examples
adjective	<b>noun + -FUL</b> (evokes / suggests the noun)	<i>dutiful, reproachful, hopeful, sorrowful, masterful, truthful, deceitful, disdainful, mindful, heedful, thoughtful, meaningful, graceful, joyful, fruitful, careful, successful, powerful, cheerful, resourceful, respectful, hurtful, skillful</i>
	<b>verb + -FUL</b> (apt to / accustomed to)	<i>watchful, forgetful, resentful, vengeful (from obsolete verb 'venge')</i>
	<b>adj. + -FUL</b> (full of / having the qualities of)	<i>grateful (from Latin adjective 'gratus' = pleasing), direful, rightful</i>
noun	<b>noun + -FUL</b> (a quantity required to fill the receptacle indicated by the noun)	<i>a cupful, a handful, a mouthful, a bucketful, an eyeful</i>

I don't care about you two, really. (l. 53)

But your father. You broke his heart when you moved away. (l. 55)

You know you were Beverly's favorite; don't pretend you don't know that. (l. 58)

I'm sure you'd prefer to think that Santy Claus brought you presents at Christmas, too, but it just isn't so. If you'd had more than one child, you'd realize a parent always has favorites. (ll. 60-61)

You were your daddy's favorite. (l. 62) is repeated.

### Émission d'hypothèses quant aux autres reproches que fait Violet à Barbara

#### What can you deduce as to the further reproaches Violet makes?

*Violet keeps attacking Barbara: she blames her for not visiting often enough, and reproaches her with feeling she has a duty to her instead of wanting to care for her. She blames her for being naïve, and for not knowing how parenting really works even though she has a child of her own. She finally reproaches her, twice, with being her father's favorite, which probably means it is important to her.*

### Repérage de l'autre répétition dans les répliques de Violet

#### Spot the other repetition in Violet's lines.

ll. 55, 65: *Barbara broke her father's heart when she moved away. Plus, it is the text's final words, so it must be important.*

### Émission d'hypothèses quant au reproche réellement formulé (en prenant en compte le départ du père)

#### What can you deduce as to what Violet really blames Barbara for? Remember the father has left.

*Both repetitions in Violet's lines seem to indicate Violet's thought process: Barbara was her husband (Beverly's) favourite child, and she left, therefore breaking his heart, which in her eyes accounts for Beverly leaving his wife without any kind of explanation. Violet blames Barbara for Beverly's leaving. She's pinning the responsibility for her husband's departure on her daughter. She wants to make Barbara feel guilty and she knows that this is a surefire way to hurt Barbara.*

**Apport professeur** In fact it is later revealed in the play that Barbara is Violet's favourite child. So Violet is not only trying to shrug off any responsibility she herself might have in her husband's leaving (and in fact in his suicide that she has guessed at) but she is also bent on punishing Barbara for abandoning her.

### Repérage de la réplique finale de Barbara

#### Pick out Barbara's final line, indicating her reaction to this double attack.

Great. Thanks. (l. 63) followed by the stage direction (Pause) (l. 64).

### Émission d'hypothèses quant à sa réaction

#### What can you deduce as to Barbara's reaction?

Barbara is at a loss for words. She can only utter single-word sentences, and then falls silent. She has no rebuttal to Violet's violent (pun intended) accusation. She can't believe her mother has resorted to blaming her for her father's disappearance. She is dumbstruck.

### Repérage des répliques de Bill au cours de la dispute

#### What about Bill in all this? Spot his cues.

All right, now— (l. 48)

Am I going to have to separate you two? (l. 57)

### Émission d'hypothèses quant à sa place dans la dispute

#### What can you deduce as to Bill's place within the argument?

He is first interrupted (cf. dash at the end of his line), then completely disregarded: nobody answers him or pays any heed to what he says. Mother and daughter keep arguing as though he weren't there. He can't alter the family dynamic. He's helpless.

**Apport professeur** The portrayal of problematic family relationships figures in the works of previous American playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee and Arthur Miller. Tracy Letts seems to be following in their footsteps.

### Trace écrite

The end of the text shows that Violet is set **on hurting** Barbara and she is more than willing to use any argument, however low, to upset her. Having failed to rile Barbara sufficiently with reproaches about her own unhappiness, she makes fun of her naivety concerning family dynamics and finally resorts **to using** the ultimate weapon at her disposal: blaming Barbara for Beverly's disappearance. She has no qualms **about doing** this in order to get her revenge. Violet's insistent vengeful destructiveness pays off at the very end of the extract, as Barbara is finally left at a loss for words. She is dumbstruck because she cannot believe that her mother would resort **to blaming** her for her father's disappearance.

Violet is not only trying to shrug off any responsibility she herself might have had for her husband's suicide but she is also bent **on punishing** Barbara **for abandoning** her. She insinuates that Barbara, far **from being** dutiful, respectful or thoughtful (as Barbara claims to be), is an ungrateful, neglectful child, and that finally Barbara is the one who is responsible for the disappearance of her father and so ultimately for the disintegration of the family.

The accumulation of the repeated attacks and the rising violence of the scene reflect the mechanism that must have ruled family relations over the years. **The further** we read into the scene, **the more oppressive** the atmosphere becomes, and **the more inevitable** the conflict is revealed to be. The repetitive structure of the scene, which is built upon Violet's provocations, Barbara's attempts to defend herself, and the ineffectual Bill's timid efforts to reconcile the women, illustrates the destiny of the Weston family: its members are caught up in a cycle of ever more destructive behaviour.

*In the extract, Tracy Letts depicts and dissects the dysfunctional American family. In this, he can be said to be following in the footsteps of the great American playwrights: Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee and Arthur Miller.*

**PRL :** emploi du **gérondif après une préposition**  
structures **comparatives** d'**accroissement parallèle**

**LEXIQUE :** **adjectifs** en (**UN-** +) **NOM** + **-FUL**