Sweat

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LYNN NOTTAGE

Lynn Nottage was born in 1964 in Brooklyn to schoolteacher and principal Ruby Nottage and child psychologist Wallace Nottage. She attended Fiorella H. LaGuardia High School (which specializes in visual and performing arts), during which time she wrote *The Darker Side of Verona*, her first full-length play. Nottage went on to earn her bachelor's degree from Brown University, followed by an MFA from the Yale School of Drama in 1989. After this, Nottage worked at Amnesty International's press office and went on to write several plays—most notably *Intimate Apparel*; *Ruined*; *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*; and *Sweat*. She earned her DFA from Brown in 2011 and has received honorary degrees from Julliard and Albright College. Nottage is married to Tony Gerber, with whom she has two children; she and Gerber are cofounders of Market Road Films production company. Nottage won Pulitzers for both *Ruined* and *Sweat*, making her the first and only woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama twice. She's also the recipient of a MacArthur "Genius Grant" Fellowship, a Merit and Literature Award from The Academy of Arts and Letters, and a Guggenheim Grant, among several other awards and honors. Nottage is currently a professor of playwriting at Columbia University.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sweat is set in the real-life city of Reading, Pennsylvania, centering on a fictionalized working-class community of laborers who work at steel and textile mills. In 2011, Nottage began research for the play by interviewing residents in Reading, which at the time was one of the U.S.'s poorest cities with a poverty rate of over 40 percent. In particular, Nottage was interested in how the early 2000s downturn in the manufacturing industry destabilized both the economy and race relations in Reading. Nottage has likened her conversations with former steel workers in Reading to those she had with workers in the English Midlands during the 1984 miners' strike. In this way, *Sweat* speaks to a prolonged history of working-class struggle both in the U.S. and abroad. The play also references the 2008 recession, in particular the contrast between how big banks were bailed out versus how ordinary Americans suffered financially during this time. First performed in 2015, critics lauded *Sweat* for its raw portrayal of blue-collar Americans. The play has specifically been praised for the insight it gives into the culture of the Rust Belt, the Northern region of the U.S. that was the country's hotspot of heavy industry up until the late 20th century.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As a play concerned with the everyday lives and struggles of blue-collar Americans, *Sweat* is a kind of contemporary extension of Britain's 20th-century "kitchen sink realism" movement, which sought to portray the often-grim realities of working-class life. John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* are two well-known kitchen sink plays that focus on the social issues facing young, working-class Britons in the 1950s. *Sweat* is also similar to Philipp Meyer's novel *American Rust* and J.D. Vance's memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*, which both paint honest and nuanced portraits of the American Rust Belt region where *Sweat* takes place. Additionally, as a play that tackles a wide range of social issues—including financial hardship, racial animosity, addiction, and fraught relationships—*Sweat* is comparable to Annie Baker's *The Flick*, Quiara Alegría Hudes's *Water by the Spoonful*, Arthur Miller's classic *Death of a Salesman*, and Nottage's own *Intimate Apparel*. Also relevant is Langston Hughes's "Let America Be America Again," the poem which Nottage chose as the epigraph to the play and which encapsulates the critique of the American Dream that echoes throughout *Sweat*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Sweat
- **When Published:** First performed at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2015
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** Reading, Pennsylvania, alternating between 2001 and 2008
- **Climax:** While Jason and Chris are attacking Oscar at the local bar, Jason accidentally hits Stan in the head with a baseball bat, leaving him permanently disabled with a traumatic brain injury.

EXTRA CREDIT

Reading Rainbow. In 2017, Nottage and a team of fellow artists put on an experimental multimedia experience called *This is Reading* in Reading, Pennsylvania (where *Sweat* is set). The project mixed live performance and visual media with the goal of weaving individuals' unique stories of struggle and success into to a unified narrative about the city.

A Book by its Cover. Although Nottage's writing often portrays the daily lives and hardships of marginalized people, she's stated that she doesn't want her plays to be judged based on her race or gender in a way that her white male counterparts'

work isn't.

PLOT SUMMARY

In September 2008, Jason, a man with white supremacist facial tattoos, meets with Evan, his African American parole officer. Jason is uncooperative when Evan asks him simple questions about his living situation and employment, and their tense interactions culminate in an argument wherein Jason yells racial slurs at Evan. Finally, Jason breaks and admits that he recently ran into Chris, whom Jason tried to forget while he was in prison. The scene switches to Evan's parole meeting with Chris, a black man who's struggling to integrate back into society since his release because he's ashamed of being a felon and consumed with remorse over what he did. He tells Evan about how he recently saw Jason: the two men had hugged on the street despite their heightened emotions and Jason's offensive tattoos.

The play flashes back to January 2000. Tracey (Jason's mother), Cynthia (Chris's mother), and their friend Jessie are celebrating Tracey's birthday at a local **bar** in Reading, Pennsylvania. A drunken Jessie is passed out at a table while Tracey and Cynthia dance; they're clearly close with each other and with Stan, the bartender with whom they engage in flirtatious banter. Cynthia tells Tracey and Stan about how she recently kicked out her estranged husband, Brucie, again—he's been abusing drugs ever since he was locked out of his job at a local textile mill. They also discuss Freddy Brunner, an acquaintance who recently burned his own house down. He apparently did so due to the stress of his failed marriage, debt, and rumors of cutbacks at Olstead's Steel Tubing (the mill where Tracey, Cynthia, and Jessie also work). Though Cynthia and Tracey make light of such rumors, Stan is adamant that because of NAFTA, steel workers' jobs could easily be outsourced to Mexico.

During this conversation, Jessie wakes up and become belligerent when Stan won't serve her another drink. Oscar, the often-ignored Colombian American busboy, escorts her to the bathroom. Cynthia and Tracey worry that Jessie's problem with alcohol could get her fired. The two women begin talking about recent changes at Olstead's: there's an open position for Warehouse Supervisor, and to Tracey's surprise, Cynthia is thinking of going for the job. Stan is cynical about the disrespectful management at the plant, where generations of his family and he himself worked before he lost part of his leg in a work accident. Still, Cynthia and Tracey, who both have over 20 years of experience on the warehouse floor, are both set on applying.

In February, at the same bar, Jason, Chris, and Stan have a playful conversation about the motorcycle Jason wants to buy and about Chris's new girlfriend while Oscar listens in. Then, Chris reveals that he's been accepted to Albright College's teaching program, which shocks Jason—they both work on the floor at Olstead's, and Jason always assumed they would retire and open a business together. Jason is hurt that Chris didn't tell him until now, and he's adamant that Chris can't leave Olstead's because they're supposed to be a team. But Chris has his heart set on following his own path—it's just something he has to do.

The following month, Brucie sits at the bar and confides in Stan about the lockout at his textile mill, which has been going on for nearly two years. Brucie and the other employees refuse to give into concessions on their retirement benefits. Now, the plant is bringing in Mexican immigrants as temporary laborers. Stan commiserates with Brucie—he spent 28 years at Olstead's and is glad that his injury got him out of there. Brucie admits that he feels lost, and he recounts an incident of racism he recently experienced at the labor union. Then, Cynthia, Tracey, and Jessie enter, and Brucie harasses Cynthia until she agrees to talk to him. He tells her that he's in a rehab program, which doesn't impress Cynthia. Cynthia shares Chris's news about Albright, and Brucie disapproves of the tuition cost and of Chris leaving Olstead's. Brucie ends up begging Cynthia for another chance, but she stays strong with Tracey and Jessie's support.

In April, Cynthia has gotten the promotion to Warehouse Supervisor, and she and her friends celebrate at the bar. Tracey goes outside to smoke a cigarette, and Oscar comes out to ask her about working at Olstead's—he recently saw a job posting at the local Latino Community Center. This confuses Tracey, as she's adamant that they're not hiring. Besides, Oscar would need to be in the union and to know someone at the plant to get a job there. Changing the subject, Tracey tells Oscar that Cynthia only got the promotion because she's black and then makes an offhand comment about Latinx people like Oscar coming to Reading to get jobs—but Oscar says that he was born in Berks County just like Tracey was. However, Tracey is adamant that German immigrants like her own grandparents built the town. She tells Oscar that "Olstead's isn't for you."

A couple of weeks later, Jessie waits alone at the bar—Tracey, Cynthia, Jason, and Chris are all late to her birthday celebration. Eventually, everyone but Tracey shows up, and Cynthia and Jessie reminisce about their early days at the factory. Just as Jessie is vulnerably sharing her unrealized dreams of seeing the world as a young woman, Tracey bursts in. The mood becomes tense, and Tracey and Cynthia get into a spat: Tracey clearly resents Cynthia for getting the promotion over her. She's is upset that Cynthia seems to be ignoring her and sucking up to management. Cynthia understands, but she asks Tracey not to make things about race, and she promises to let everyone know if she hears anything about the rumored layoffs.

On July 4, Chris and Jason run into Brucie at the bar, and they tell him that Olstead's moved three mills out of the factory over the holiday weekend. Now, the company has posted a list of names on the front door, and Chris and Jason are in a hurry to

go see it for themselves. Brucie warns them that no machines means no jobs—he thinks they're about to be in the same situation he's in. He advises them to take any concessions that are offered to prevent a lockout from happening. Chris and Jason rush off to Olstead's.

The play flashes forward to October 2008, a couple of weeks after Jason and Chris's parole meetings. Jason has come to beg Tracey for money, but she's hostile and unwelcoming. Jason is horrified to realize that Tracey is high—it seems she developed an addiction to pain medication while Jason was in prison. At the same time, Chris goes to Cynthia's apartment, where he'll be staying. Cynthia, who lost her house and now works irregular hours at maintenance jobs, is warm and tearfully apologetic to Chris—though Chris doesn't think she has anything to be sorry for. She tells him that she and Tracey no longer speak after everything that happened. Chris shares that Jason is out too, and Cynthia angrily reflects that Jason is the one who got Chris into trouble. She asks Chris to tell her what happened back then, because she still doesn't understand.

The play flashes back to July 2000. In the bar, Stan and Oscar stand by as Tracey, Chris, Jason, and Jessie angrily demand Cynthia to tell them what's going on. Cynthia begs everyone to stop yelling, but she eventually reveals that Olstead's is going to renegotiate the floor workers' contracts: in order to save jobs, there will be a 60-percent pay cut and concessions on benefits. She says that the U.S. plant has gotten too expensive to operate, and because of NAFTA, Olstead's can easily outsource labor to Mexico. Tracey and the others are outraged. A month after this, Olstead's workers have rejected the deal they were offered, and the lockout goes forward. Cynthia spends her birthday alone in the bar, where she confides in Stan how stressed and guilty she feels about locking her friends (and her own son) out of the plant. Tracey and Jessie show up and get into an argument with Cynthia, calling her a traitor. However, Cynthia is adamant that she can't give up the opportunity she's been given; Tracey and Jessie don't understand what it's like to walk in her shoes.

In September, Jason and Chris run into Brucie (who's clearly high) at the bar, and Chris shares how his childhood memories of Brucie leading other men in a walkout at the mill inspire him to stay strong and keep protesting. However, Brucie tells him it's pointless—Chris should follow his dreams and get an education instead. The following month, Oscar tells Stan that he's taken on some temporary hours at Olstead's because it pays so well, but Stan warns him that doing so will anger the floor workers who've been locked out. Oscar doesn't care, though—everyone in Reading others him, so he feels no loyalty to them. Tracey comes into the bar while Oscar is in the back, and she tells Stan about how lost and humiliated she feels without a job. When Oscar returns, she hurls racial slurs and goes to lunge at him, but Stan holds her back. Oscar tells Tracey that him working at Olstead's isn't personal, but Tracey counters that to her, it *is* personal.

A week later, Chris, Jason, and other union members protesting on the line get into a physical fight with the Latinx temp workers at Olstead's. Afterward, they go to the bar—where Jessie is once again passed out at a table—and excitedly tell Stan about it, but Stan isn't impressed. He thinks Jason and Chris should move on and get out of Reading. Chris agrees—he doesn't want to end up like Brucie. While they talk, Oscar comes into the bar to get his things from the back and say goodbye to Stan just as Tracey comes out of the bathroom. Tracey, Jessie, and Jason make racist slurs and comments at Oscar, and Jason stands up threateningly. Stan slams a baseball bat down on the bar and orders Jason to sit, but Jason blocks Oscar from leaving and begins to beat him. Stan and Chris try to intervene, but Tracey and Jessie egg the fight on. Chris eventually becomes angry as well, and he joins Jason in beating Oscar. Jason grabs the baseball bat and hits Oscar in the stomach, and as he swings back to hit him again, he accidentally strikes Stan in the head. Stan falls, hits his head on the bar, and lies bleeding on the ground.

The play returns to Jason and Chris's separate parole meetings with Evan in October 2008. He encourages both men to let go of their shame and self-blame and to meet up with each other to talk. A few days later, Chris goes to the bar, where Oscar is now the manager. Jason shows up too, which initially alarms Oscar. Jason panics and goes to leave, but he stops when Stan enters to wipe down tables. Stan is now severely disabled with a traumatic brain injury; he struggles to hear or speak. Jason comments that Oscar is kind to take care of him, and Oscar replies that this is how things should be. Chris and Jason are clearly apologetic but can't yet bring themselves to verbalize what they're thinking. The four men uneasily wait for the next moment, together yet divided.

CHARACTERS

Chris – Chris is a young African American man; he's Cynthia and Brucie's son and Jason's best friend. In 2008, Chris and Jason are 29 years old and have just been released from eight-year prison sentences for assaulting Oscar, a busboy at the **bar** in Reading, Pennsylvania, that they frequented. During the beating, Jason also inadvertently hit the bartender, Stan, leaving him with a traumatic brain injury. Back in 2000, before the assault, 21-year-old Chris has followed in his parents' footsteps and gone to work at Olstead's Steel Tubing plant straight out of high school. But he has bigger aspirations than this: he's been accepted to Albright College's teaching program. However, this goes out the window when a lockout is instituted at Olstead's, and Chris is swept up into the collective outrage and union protests that ensue. Seemingly more thoughtful and less impulsive than Jason, Chris is conflicted between walking the line and moving on from Reading altogether—especially

having witnessed Brucie's descent into drug addiction during his own lockout at a local textile mill. Eventually, tensions flare between the locked-out floor workers at Olstead's and the Latinx temp workers who've been brought in (Oscar among them). Against his better judgement, Chris is swept up in Jason's violent rage and joins him in beating Oscar. After serving his sentence for this crime, Chris is consumed with shame and guilt and struggles to reintegrate into society. He turns to Christianity for solace, and his parole officer, Evan, encourages him to forgive himself. Chris and Jason ultimately reunite amicably, and they both take the difficult step of returning to the bar to make amends with Oscar and Stan. Introspective, hard-working, and riddled with conflicting emotions, Chris's character exemplifies how financial hardship can ripple outward to wreak havoc on people's lives, as well as how shame can be destructive and forgiveness can be healing.

Jason – Jason is a young white man of German descent; he's Tracey and Hank's son and Chris's best friend. In 2008, Jason and Chris are 29 years old and have just been released from eight-year prison sentences for assaulting Oscar, a busboy at the **bar** in Reading, Pennsylvania, that they frequented. During the beating, Jason also inadvertently hit the bartender, Stan, leaving him with a traumatic brain injury. Back in 2000, before the assault, 21-year-old Jason is an irreverent troublemaker who works alongside Jason at Olstead's Steel Tubing plant. Unlike Chris, he doesn't have big dreams beyond getting a motorcycle—so when a lockout is instituted at Olstead's, Jason feels utterly lost and consumed by violent rage over losing his job. Jason's anger becomes racially motivated when Latinx temp workers are brought into Olstead's (Oscar among them), and he ends up attacking Oscar at the encouragement of Tracey and her friend Jessie. After serving his sentence for this crime, Jason's anger and hatred still hasn't subsided—he acquired white supremacist tattoos in prison, and he lashes out with racial slurs at his African American parole officer, Evan. However, when he runs into Chris after they're both released, the two hug and seem to be on good (if complicated) terms despite the fact that Chris is black. Evan encourages both Jason and Chris to let go of their shame and move on, and they take an initial step to do so by returning to the bar to make peace with Stan and Oscar. Hot-headed and passionate yet troubled and disaffected, Jason's character represents the tendency for economic strife to exacerbate already present anger and racial tension, as well as the life-altering consequences of succumbing to such animosity.

Tracey – Tracey is a middle-aged white woman of German descent; she's Jason's mother and Hank's widow. In 2000, Tracey and her best friends, Cynthia and Jessie, have worked at Olstead's Steel Tubing in Reading, Pennsylvania, for over 20 years. They spend most of their downtime in the local **bar** socializing with one another and with Stan, the bartender (who often flirts with Tracey and playfully references their past sexual encounter). Tracey is a "*laugher*"—she uses humor as a means of escape and loves to drink, gossip, and dance. She's also a hardworking, traditional woman who dislikes the ways Reading has changed over the years. In particular, Tracey is bitter about Reading's growing Latinx immigrant population, whom she views as outsiders coming to steal away jobs. Her racist beliefs become even more pronounced when Cynthia gets a promotion at Olstead's, and Tracey resentfully claims that her friend was only chosen because she's black. After Olstead's institutes a lockout and hires Latinx temp workers (including Oscar, the busboy at the bar), Tracey becomes despondent and purposeless without her job and increasingly hateful toward Oscar. This culminates in Tracey encouraging her son Jason and Cynthia's son Chris to attack Oscar, an assault that inadvertently leaves Stan with a traumatic brain injury and lands Jason and Chris with eight-year prison sentences. When the play picks up with Tracey eight years after this incident, she's seemingly out of work, addicted to pain pills, and estranged from her former friends and from Jason. Tracey's unfortunate trajectory exemplifies how a combination of economic hardship, resentment, and prejudice can effectively destroy a person's life and the lives of those around them.

Cynthia – Cynthia is a middle-aged African American woman; she's Chris's mother and Brucie's wife. In 2000, Cynthia and her best friends Tracey and Jessie have worked at Olstead's Steel Tubing in Reading, Pennsylvania, for over 20 years. They spend most of their downtime in the local **bar** socializing with one another and with Stan, the bartender. Cynthia has been estranged from her husband, Brucie, since he got locked out of his textile mill and became addicted to drugs. This stress, along with the thankless hard labor she does on the floor at Olstead's, leaves Cynthia fed up. She decides to apply for an open Warehouse Manager position at the plant, and she ends up getting the promotion. However, this only creates more stress and tension in Cynthia's life: when Olstead's institutes a lockout, Tracey, Jessie, Chris, and Jason resent Cynthia for being part of the management that's put them out of work. Cynthia, like her son Chris, has deeply conflicted feelings: she's guilty about betraying her friends and son, but she's also been underappreciated and discriminated against for decades. To Cynthia, it would be a personal insult to walk away from the money and security that her newfound opportunity offers. However, when the play flashes forward to 2008, Cynthia is remorseful about her decision to keep the job, which she lost after Olstead's ultimately shut down. Now, her decades-long friendships are permanently ruined, and she believes that her complicity as a manager during the lockout makes her responsible for the assault that Chris and Jason committed against Oscar, a temporary laborer at the plant. Headstrong and principled yet ashamed of her perceived failures, Cynthia's character demonstrates the unfortunate ramifications that can arise from trying to get ahead in life.

Oscar – Oscar is a young Colombian American man; he's the busboy at the **bar** in Reading, Pennsylvania, where most of the play's scenes takes place. In 2000, as the only Latinx character in the story, 22-year-old Oscar is viewed as an outsider and ignored by the white customers who frequent the bar. Though Oscar is a *"quiet but alert presence"* in the background of nearly all the play's dialogue and action, he's usually only acknowledged by Stan, the bartender. However, as economic downturn hits Reading and tensions rise, people become increasingly hostile toward Oscar: Tracey, a longtime employee at Olstead's Steel Tubing, is adamant that Latinx people aren't welcome at Olstead's or in Reading. When Olstead's institutes a lockout and Oscar becomes a temporary laborer at the plant, Tracey and her friend Jessie hurl racist slurs and comments about Mexican immigrants at Oscar, despite the fact that he's Colombian and was born in Berks County just like they were. Oscar's father was similarly disrespected when he was a janitor at another local mill, so Oscar feels no loyalty to the white working class of Reading who've always looked down on him and his family. The racism Oscar faces culminates in Tracey's son Jason and his friend Chris (who've also been locked out of Olstead's) assaulting Oscar—and, in the process, accidentally hitting Stan and leaving him permanently disabled with a traumatic brain injury. Eight years later, Oscar has become the manager of the bar and looks after Stan, who now works as a busboy. He seems open to forgiving Jason and Chris when they come to make amends after being released from prison. Oscar's hard-won success conveys the hopeful message that minorities living in predominantly white, working-class communities can rise above discrimination and adversity to achieve upward mobility.

Stan – Stan is a white man of German descent in his fifties. In 2000, he's the bartender at the **bar** in Reading, Pennsylvania, where most of the play takes place. Stan became the bartender after losing part of his leg in an accident at Olstead's Steel Tubing mill, where he worked (like previous generations of his family did) for 28 years. Now, Stan serves as a beloved friend, confidant, and wise sage for his regular customers—including the play's other main characters, Chris, Jason, Tracey, Cynthia, Brucie, and Jessie. Stan is also the only one who's friendly to Oscar, the bar's Colombian American busboy. Stan is perhaps the most cynical of the play's characters: he distrusts white-collar management and career politicians, and he declares that it's "not a good philosophy to resist knowledge" or to blindly trust authority figures. But unlike most of the play's other characters, who hold staunch, polarized beliefs about personal and social issues, Stan seeks to understand and empathize with everyone who sits across the bar from him and confides in him about their problems. Sadly, Stan's concern for others has life-altering consequences for him: when he tries to intervene in a fight between Chris, Jason, and Oscar, Jason inadvertently hits Stan with a baseball bat. This causes Stan to fall and hit his head on the bar, sustaining a traumatic brain injury that permanently hinders his speech, hearing, and movement. Eight years later, Stan has become the busboy at bar, while Oscar is the new manager and weekend bartender. Stan's tragic fate is symbolic of how economic strife and racial animosity (the reasons behind why Chris and Jason attacked Oscar) can radiate outward to affect innocent people.

Jessie – Jessie is an Italian American woman in her forties; she's a close friend and coworker of Tracey and Cynthia. In 2000, Jessie and her friends have worked at Olstead's Steel Tubing in Reading, Pennsylvania for over 20 years. The women spend most of their downtime in the local **bar** socializing with one another and with Stan, the bartender. Having gone to work at Olstead's straight out of high school and given up her dreams of traveling the world to keep working and get married, Jessie is now divorced and dissatisfied with her life. As a result, she's seemingly developed a problem with alcohol abuse: she's passed out drunk during many of the play's scenes and even shows up to work reeking of vodka. Although Tracey and Cynthia feel that Jessie brings them down, they still love her—and Jessie loves and supports them in return, refusing to get caught in the middle of Tracey and Cynthia's feud over Cynthia's promotion. However, Jessie also has a dark side: when she's drunk, she taunts Stan for being a "gimp" and joins Tracey in hurling racial slurs at Oscar, the bar's Colombian American busboy. When the play flashes forward to 2008, Olstead's has closed, and it's never revealed what's become of Jessie since. This lack of closure perhaps implies that people like Jessie—a blue-collar laborer who succumbs to stagnancy, despair, and addiction—unfortunately tend to end up forgotten by the companies they serve, by the American public, and even by their own loved ones.

Brucie – Brucie is an African American man in his forties; he's Chris's father and Cynthia's estranged husband. In 2000, nearly two years after being locked out from the textile mill where he works, Brucie has become addicted to drugs and has resorted to stealing from Cynthia, which leads her to kick him out. Now, Brucie feels hopeless and purposeless as he attends rehab and accepts union handouts, all the while facing racism from white union members. Though Chris has fond childhood memories of Brucie standing strong like a "warrior" during union protests, he now worries about Brucie and reluctantly hands over cash to his struggling, strung-out father. When Chris and his friend Jason are similarly locked out of their jobs at Olstead's Steel Tubing, Brucie encourages them to take the concessions Olstead's offers and even to move on to bigger and better things rather than end up indefinitely unemployed like him. Brucie desperately wants Cynthia back, and he hopes that Chris will take advantage of the higher education available to him rather than waste his life away at a factory. As a downtrodden man who desperately wants to work and provide for his family, Brucie represents the existential malaise, psychological suffering, and addiction that can arise from

financial hardship.

Evan – Evan is an African American man in his forties; in 2008, he's Chris and Jason's parole officer after they're released from their eight-year prison sentences. Evan encourages Chris and Jason to be straightforward with him and to open up about their struggles reintegrating into society and coping with guilt as ex-convicts. However, he also has no patience for nonsense—for instance, when Jason is uncooperative and racist during his parole meeting, Evan threatens him with a drug test and a negative report, and he's vocal about his distaste for Jason's white supremacist facial tattoos. Ultimately, though, Evan serves an important role as a confidant and voice of reason for Chris and Jason. He teaches both men one of the play's central lessons: that shame is a destructive and counterproductive emotion and that the best course of action is to forgive oneself and others. As such, Evan is the catalyst for *Sweat*'s tentative resolution: at the end of the play, Chris and Jason take his advice, meeting up amicably and going to the **bar** to make peace with Oscar and Stan. Though the final scene leaves off with the four men standing in an ambivalent state of "*fractured togetherness*," Evan's guidance opens up the potential for reconciliation and sends the optimistic message that animosity, blame, and self-destruction can be overcome.

Hank – Hank was Tracey's husband and Jason's father. He passed away prior to the events that take place in 2000; it's implied that he was killed in a work-related accident at Olstead's Steel Tubing, where Tracey and Jason still work. As Tracey and Jason are ganging up on Oscar for taking temporary hours at Olstead's while they're locked out of the plant, Tracey asks Jason what Hank would have done in this situation in order to provoke Jason into physically attacking Oscar—an assault that culminates in Stan being inadvertently hit in the head and permanently disabled. In this way, though Hank is only mentioned a few times in the play, his memory is a catalyst for the play's central tragedy, exemplifying how grief can be a destructive force that drives people to act impulsively.

Freddy Brunner – Freddy is a mutual acquaintance of Tracey, Cynthia, Jessie, and Stan who works at Olstead's Steel Tubing. Near the beginning of the play, an article appears in Reading, Pennsylvania's local paper reporting that Freddy burned his own house down. Stan and the others theorize that this was due to Freddy's stress over his failed marriage and debt, as well as rumors of impending cutbacks at Olstead's. As such, Freddy represents the dire personal consequences that can arise from financial hardship.

Howard – In 2000, Howard is the manager of the **bar** in Reading, Pennsylvania, where most of the play takes place. He oversees Stan, the bartender, and Oscar, the busboy. In 2008, when Chris and Jason return to the bar after they're released from prison, they find that Howard has retired to Phoenix, Arizona, and that Oscar has taken over the bar as manager.

TERMS

Concession – Concessions are a form of collective bargaining in which a union agrees to certain stipulations (such as lower pay) in order for workers to secure their employment. In *Sweat*, **Cynthia** and **Brucie** warn the floor workers at Olstead's Steel Tubing that they'll have to accept concessions if they want to end the company lockout and get their jobs back.

Lockout – A lockout is a work stoppage in which an employer prevents employees from working (often by literally locking them out of company property), typically in response to labor union demands. Often thought of as the opposite of a strike, the goal of a lockout is generally to get employees to accept certain concessions, such as lower wages or reduced benefits. In *Sweat*, there is a lockout at Olstead's Steel Tubing where **Chris**, **Jason**, **Tracey**, **Cynthia**, and **Jessie** work (as well as one at the textile mill where **Brucie** works), the fallout of which leads to financial hardship, disillusionment, and rage among the plant employees.

North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) – The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was a 1994 agreement between the United States, Canada, and Mexico that created a free-trade zone in North America. NAFTA removed barriers to trade and invest—such as government restrictions and tariffs—with the goal of increasing North America's viability in the global economy. However, NAFTA enabled U.S. industries to outsource labor to Mexico, which resulted in widespread wage cuts and job loss in the Rust Belt region and other U.S. manufacturing hotspots. Reading, Pennsylvania (where *Sweat* takes place), is one such Rust Belt city that suffered after NAFTA was passed. As such, characters like **Stan** and **Cynthia** are cynical about jobs at the local steel mill being sent over to Mexico, and **Jason**, **Tracey**, and **Jessie** take this sentiment so far as to espouse racism toward Latinx people (like **Oscar**) in general.

Rust Belt – The Rust Belt is a region in the Northern U.S., primarily situated around the Great Lakes, that was once the backbone of the nation's steel production and industrial manufacturing industries. However, the region has been in decline since the 1980s as industrial jobs have been increasingly outsourced or automated. Reading, Pennsylvania (where *Sweat* takes place), is one such Rust Belt city. In the play, its economic center has long been Olstead's Steel Tubing plant, where most of the play's main characters work (as have previous generations of their families). The events in *Sweat* are largely put into motion by the negative impacts of NAFTA on the Rust Belt's economy.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-

coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

WORKING-CLASS DISILLUSIONMENT

Sweat is preceded by an excerpt from Langston Hughes's "Let America Be America Again," a poem that critiques the false promise of the American Dream and encourages poor and working-class Americans (among other marginalized groups) to rise up and "make America again"—essentially to "redeem" the oppression they've faced and the opportunities they've been cheated out of. However, *Sweat*'s cast of characters is anything but empowered: rather than resist the hand they've been dealt, they have little choice but to make ends meet by laboring in Olstead's Steel Tubing plant and to weather the early-2000s downturn of the U.S. manufacturing industry. Under these conditions, the play's main characters rapidly fall into personal decline that mirrors the economic decline affecting their hometown of Reading, Pennsylvania, and the rest of the Rust Belt. Whereas news coverage (such as the headlines included at the beginning of each act) tends to focus on how corporate leaders and stockholders are affected by shifts in the economy, *Sweat* serves as a case study in how working-class individuals are those most hurt by economic decline. The play argues that in such situations, communities like Reading bear the worst burden, as they're left financially destitute, outraged, and steeped in disillusionment.

The rise of industry that Reading, Pennsylvania, has experienced over the years has left the town largely unrecognizable to residents who were born and raised there. Tracey, a longtime employee at Olstead's Steel Tubing plant, bittersweetly recalls how Reading used to be when she was a child. She's adamant that her German immigrant family "built this town," and that her grandfather was a talented woodworker—back then, she says, "if you worked with your hands people respected you for it." However, now that large-scale industrial manufacturing has taken over Reading, Tracey and the rest of the working-class population are left longing for the former reverence that manual laborers and craftsmen enjoyed. Indeed, this feeling of underappreciation is a common sentiment in Reading. Stan, a local bartender and former Olstead's worker, is embittered by the new management at the plant. The clean-cut young men with MBAs who now oversee Olstead's refuse to "understand the real cost, the human cost" of labor, leaving floor workers feeling overlooked, exploited, and replaceable. Notably, many employees have essentially put their aspirations on hold to start at Olstead's straight out of high school—Tracey's friend Jessie, for instance, gave up on her dreams of backpacking in Alaska and Asia to start at the plant at 18. By 2000, when most of the play takes place, steel manufacturing is so ingrained in Reading's culture that people's very identities are defined by their roles in the industry.

However, the fall of industry is even more impactful than the rise: when Olstead's and other local mills begin cutting costs and instituting lockouts, workers turn to self-destructive behavior as they're left feeling distraught and alienated in their own hometown. When Olstead's begins relocating its equipment and transferring management, it's rumored that the company is taking advantage of NAFTA by outsourcing its labor to Mexico. This is never directly confirmed, but regardless, pay and benefits are cut—and the employees are locked out of the plant until they agree to these concessions. Literally overnight, Olstead's floor workers are left with no jobs and no answers, a situation that exemplifies how working-class communities are devastated by such downturns in the manufacturing sector. Olstead's is only one of multiple local plants that has locked out its employees, and in the wake of this mass unemployment, Reading's working-class community falls into despair. Brucie, who works at a textile mill that has been locked out for nearly two years, becomes dependent on drugs to numb the desperation and sense of hopelessness that comes with unemployment. His son Chris and Tracey's son Jason, who are locked out of Olstead's, alternate between protesting on the union line and seething with rage as they drink at the **bar** where Stan works. Tracey and Jessie—lost, aimless, and embittered—similarly turn to alcohol. Essentially, the community undergoes a kind of collective existential crisis when the industry to which they've dedicated their lives begins to crumble, resulting in their own self-destruction.

Ultimately, this community-wide sense of despair culminates in violence—a trajectory that exemplifies the negative chain reaction that economic downturn can have on working-class people. When Jason and Chris's wrath over losing their jobs finally reaches its breaking point, they lash out and physically attack Oscar, a busboy at the bar who's begun working at Olstead's for a lower wage while the regular employees are locked out. Oscar is, of course, not to blame for the lockout, but the fact that he has a job at the plant is too much for the other men to bear—a clear example of how economic strife can lead otherwise reasonable, hardworking people to desperately and senselessly lash out. However, Stan is the one who ends up injured in this altercation: Jason grabs a baseball bat from behind the bar and accidentally hits Stan in the head instead of Oscar, leaving Stan with a traumatic brain injury and landing Jason and Chris with eight-year prison sentences for the assault. This tragic chain of events shows just how devastating economic decline can be on working-class people, resulting not only in self-destructive behavior but in the ruining of an innocent man's life. The effects of downturn and job-loss radiate outward to affect not only businesses, but the psychological wellbeing of laborers and the integrity of the communities to which they belong.

Sweat doesn't end on an entirely pessimistic note, however. In 2008, after Chris and Jason are released from prison, Chris reveals his intentions to complete his bachelor's degree in lieu of the Albright College teaching program he dreamed of attending before his sentencing. Oscar, meanwhile, has worked his way up to become the manager of the bar. Years after the initial decline of the manufacturing industry, the play plants these seeds of hope to send the message that although economic changes and failing industries are inevitable, there are still other avenues by which ordinary, working-class people can "make America again."

RELATIONSHIPS, STATUS, AND RESENTMENT

The characters in *Sweat* have spent decades of their lives thanklessly laboring in Reading Pennsylvania's local steel and textile mills amid poor working conditions, disrespectful management, and union disputes. To combat this constant strain and underappreciation, the members of Reading's working-class community depend upon tight-knit relationships with one another as a means of stress relief, support, and fulfillment. However, several close relationships are challenged as characters try to pursue new opportunities and escape the very circumstance over which they bond with others. The play thus shows how changes in status—being promoted at work, reaching a higher socioeconomic class, or pursuing higher education—can create tension and resentment among people who are all struggling to make ends meet, driving a wedge between even the closest of friends.

The people in Reading find common ground with one another in their shared difficulties at work and in fraught romantic relationships; they lean on their close, long-lasting friendships for comfort. Most of the play takes place in a local **bar**, where friends like Tracey, Cynthia, and Jessie (a trio of middle-aged women who've all worked at Olstead's Steel Tubing plant for decades) gather to socialize with one another and with the beloved bartender, Stan. The bar itself is symbolic of the friendships that play out within it, as both the place and the relationships it facilitates are safe havens away from the stress of the outside world. The sheer amount of time that characters spend together in the "*lived-in and comfortable*" bar after work emphasizes just how important a similar sense of familiarity and comfort is in their relationships with one another. Tracey and Cynthia, in particular, are "*close friends who've shared many adventures*"—they console each other, cheer each other on, and encourage each other to stay positive and have fun rather than dwell on the stress of work. This kind of intimate friendship seems to be the norm rather than the exception in Reading: Tracey's son Jason and Cynthia's son Chris are also best friends who work at Olstead's and who depend on each other for solidarity and camaraderie. "We're a team," Jason says of himself and Chris, one of many sentiments that drives home the sacredness of close relationships for the play's struggling working-class laborers.

But when characters begin to distance themselves from the status quo and pursue different opportunities, these relationships gradually disintegrate as those left behind feel resentful of their friends' new paths. When Chris reveals that he'll be leaving Olstead's to study teaching at Albright College, Jason is blindsided—he'd hoped to work alongside his best friend for the foreseeable future and to eventually retire and open a business together. To cover up how hurt he is, Jason mocks Chris and tells him he'll never succeed in such a low-paying career before asking, "But seriously, man, why didn't you tell me?" Despite Jason's tough exterior, it's clear that he's genuinely upset by Chris's attempts to leave their shared lot in life behind and pursue higher education. Similarly, when Cynthia earns a promotion from floor worker to Warehouse Supervisor at Olstead's, Tracey becomes spiteful and downright cruel—even though she, too, applied for the job. She bitterly tells Oscar, the busboy at the bar, that she "know[s] the floor as good as Cynthia" does, and Jessie confirms that Cynthia's promotion has "pissed off a lot of people" even though she earned it fairly. All of the floor workers at Olstead's feel replaceable and worry about their job security, so Cynthia's bump in pay and benefits comes off as a slap in the face to her coworkers—one that drives a wedge between her and Tracey especially. In the world of the play, attempting to raise one's status and transcend one's current situation breeds resentment among the very friends who commiserated with that situation.

Tensions between friends come to a head when Olstead's begins making changes and floor workers face the threat (and, eventually, the reality) of a lockout—and the newly promoted Cynthia comes to be seen as a traitor. As Warehouse Supervisor, Cynthia has a newfound insider's perspective into the management side of the plant. Although Cynthia breaks the rules by warning Tracey, Jessie, Chris, and Jason that a lockout is imminent, they begin to see her as a betrayer rather than a trusted member of their inner circle due to her position of authority over them. "I'm on your side," Cynthia tells them, but Tracey challenges her: "Then act like it," she says. "You're making the same sorry excuses that they do. We're friends!" Both Cynthia and her loved ones feel hurt and misunderstood, further demonstrating the tendency for inequality in status to break apart relationships. After the lockout goes forward, Cynthia's friendship with Tracey completely disintegrates—and when the play jumps forward from 2000 to 2008, it's revealed that they've never reconciled. Their decades-long friendship ends in a seemingly insurmountable grudge, a heartbreaking reality that drives home the pain, jealousy, and hostility that can come about when one friend feels left behind by another.

The fact that everyone in Reading is trying to keep their heads above water seemingly makes them *less* encouraging rather

than more so when their friends try to get ahead. Ultimately, *Sweat* shows the interpersonal costs of raising one's station: when desperate people strive for more out of life, fellow desperate people—even, and especially, dear friends—will often respond with resentment rather than support.

ECONOMIC STRAIN AND RACE RELATIONS

Sweat takes place in Reading, Pennsylvania, a Rust Belt city whose predominantly white and largely working-class population is deeply affected by the early-2000s decline in the manufacturing industry. As a community already steeped in tradition and resistant to outsiders, this downturn causes Reading's white working class to become downright hostile toward black and Latinx people—even individuals they once called friends—because they believe minorities are stealing their jobs away. As such, the play shows how economic strain can worsen race relations between white and minority communities, creating desperation among blue-collar laborers that brings underlying racial tensions to the surface.

Even prior to the worst of the financial strife that the characters face, there is palpable tension between the community's different racial groups. Tracey, a middle-aged white woman who works at the local Olstead's Steel Tubing plant, is adamant that German immigrants like her grandparents built Reading from the ground up and made it what it is today. When Oscar, a Colombian American busboy at the **bar** Tracey frequents, expresses interest in working at the plant, she tells him outright that "Olstead's isn't for you." Although Tracey claims to hold no prejudice, and despite the fact that Oscar was born in Berks County just like she was, it's clear that Tracey views Reading—and particularly Olstead's—as a kind of in-group where Latinx people aren't welcome. This rarely spoken but ever-present prejudice isn't limited to Tracey. Seemingly all of the white people who frequent the bar purposefully ignore Oscar—no one but Stan, the bartender, acknowledges him despite the fact that he is a "*quiet but alert presence*" on the periphery of nearly every scene. As the only Latinx character in the play, Oscar's status as an outsider represents the broader experience of minorities in Reading: though rarely outwardly discriminated against, they're largely distrusted, marginalized, and ignored by the white community.

When Olstead's and several other local mills are hit by the early-2000s manufacturing downturn and begin to institute lockouts, already tense race relations further deteriorate in tandem with the economy. As Olstead's workers face the reality of being locked out of the company to which they've dedicated their lives, they're incensed that the plant is supposedly outsourcing manufacturing to Mexico and simultaneously bringing in cheap labor from across the border. This results in people like Tracey and her son Jason (who also works at Olstead's) lashing out at Oscar and the rest of the Latinx community. They hurl racial slurs at Oscar when they find out he's among the temporary workers who are replacing them during the lockout. "You better believe it's personal," Tracey tells Oscar, driving home the idea that racial divisions become more pronounced and indeed "personal" when people's livelihoods are at stake. When Tracey's best friend, Cynthia (a black woman), is promoted off the floor to Warehouse Supervisor at Olstead's just before the lockout, Tracey also turns on her. Despite Cynthia having earned the position fair and square, Tracey claims that "they wanted a minority […]. They get tax breaks or something." By writing off Cynthia's accomplishment as an affirmative action ploy, Tracey reduces her friend to her race, demonstrating how perceived economic inequality can bring out formerly nonexistent (or at least unvoiced) prejudice. Cynthia is deeply hurt by this insinuation: "Be angry, but don't make it about this," she says to Tracey as she points to her own skin. Although Tracey is perhaps understandably resentful over the lockout and Cynthia's complicity in it as a manager, her racism toward Cynthia is unwarranted and undeniably cruel. The gradual dissolution of their friendship shows how economic strife can breed racial tension not just among strangers, but between trusted friends.

The economic strain and subsequent racism that gathers steam throughout the play culminates in tragedy, driving home the severe consequences that can arise from such animosity. Distraught over losing their jobs at Olstead's, Jason, along with Cynthia's son Chris, attack Oscar (and, inadvertently, Stan) in a racially motivated hate crime. Jason and Chris go to prison for eight years for the assault, during which time Jason is seemingly initiated into the Aryan Brotherhood. His face is covered in white supremacist tattoos when he's released, despite the fact that Chris, who's black, was once his best friend. Jason's willingness to lash out at Oscar and his transformation to full-blown white supremacy demonstrates the slippery slope of racist sentiments that arise in response to desperate circumstances. However, the play ends on a hopeful note: after Chris and Jason are both released, they reunite amicably in spite of Jason's offensive tattoos, and they go back to the bar to make peace with Oscar and Stan. This suggests that while economic strife can certainly bring out the worst in people and exacerbate already present racism toward minorities, such racial tensions aren't necessarily insurmountable.

Critics have praised *Sweat* for the insight it provides into the American Rust Belt, a region that experienced a shift in ethnic demographics alongside severe unemployment and poverty with the fall of heavy industry in the early 2000s. In some areas, the Reading of the play included, this complex combination of circumstances has resulted in social and political animosity between the white working class and minorities—and the play certainly doesn't seek to excuse racist sentiments. Rather,

Sweat raises awareness of this real-life racial tension, shedding light on the economic and cultural factors behind the issue and adding nuance to the audience's perceptions of both minorities and the white working class. Ultimately, the play offers hope that reconciliation between these polarized groups is possible.

SHAME, REGRET, AND FORGIVENESS

Sweat's cast of characters reads as distinctly human: none are wholly good nor wholly bad, and nearly all make mistakes that hurt themselves or their loved ones. The play alternates between the same characters in 2000 and 2008, a plot structure that allows the audience to see how these choice pan out over time—and the shame and guilt that characters feel in response to their actions, even eight years later. By showing how people are consumed by regret over the course of nearly a decade, *Sweat* makes the case that shame is a powerful, self-destructive force, ultimately advocating for the healing power of forgiving oneself and others.

Sweat begins by introducing the audience to Jason and Chris, former best friends who are newly out on parole after 8-year prison sentences for their mutual involvement in a crime. The mystery of this crime becomes the central force driving the play, and though the specifics of the incident aren't revealed until the end, Jason and Chris's remorse is raw and palpable. It's eventually revealed that in 2000, Jason and Chris—fueled by racially and economically motivated hatred—assaulted Oscar, a busboy at the local **bar** they frequented. However, Jason also inadvertently ended up hitting Stan, the bartender, which left Stan permanently disabled with a traumatic brain injury. Leading up to this incident, Jason and Chris are portrayed as normal 21-year-old men with strong work ethic and an even stronger friendship. The fact that these seemingly average young men are capable of such a brutal crime sends the message that people who do evil things aren't wholly evil—anyone, the play shows, is capable of making terrible mistakes. Regardless, in 2008, Jason and Chris are still ashamed and tortured by what they've done. Evan, their parole office, has separate meetings with them in which both men reveal how much they're struggling. It's implied that Jason has turned to drugs to numb his emotions, and Chris is racked with guilt: he's "quite fidgety and anxious" and is having trouble sleeping and communicating with others. He reflects, "A couple minutes, your and I whole changes, that's it. It's gone. […] What if. What if. What if. All night. In my head. I can't turn it off." As both men are struggling to hold down jobs and integrate themselves back into society, it's clear that the shame they still feel over the assault is hindering them psychologically and leading them back down the path of self-destruction.

Jason and Chris aren't the only characters in the play who make decisions they're ashamed of: Chris's mother, Cynthia, is also hung up on the past. In 2000, Cynthia receives a promotion to Warehouse Manager at Olstead's Steel Tubing plant. While this is initially a point of pride for her, having worked at the mill for over 20 years, it quickly becomes a source of shame when her coworkers (who are also her dear friends) turn on her for her alleged complicity in a lockout at Olstead's. She confides in Stan, "Do you know what it feels like, to say to the people you've worked with for years that they're not welcome anymore? I haven't slept in…over a week." Though Cynthia knows she needs the money that comes with her new position, part of her regrets taking it because it means betraying her friends—again, the play shows that even those with good intentions can make regrettable decisions. Indeed, this remorse haunts Cynthia for years. By 2008, she's realized that taking the promotion wasn't worth it—she even apologizes to Chris when he's released from prison (when presumably he should be the one apologizing to her). This implies that she blames herself not only for the fallout with her friends, but for Jason and Chris's crime, since they attacked Oscar out of rage in reaction to the lockout that happened while she was a manager. Cynthia has since isolated herself and resigned herself to low-paying maintenance jobs, which suggests that she, too, is held back by the shame she feels over her past decisions.

However, the play's cautiously optimistic ending suggests that people are not doomed to live in shame and regret—they can and should move beyond past mistakes to forgive themselves and others. Toward the end of the play, Evan tells Jason and Chris that shame is "not a productive emotion. Most folks think it's the guilt or rage that destroys us in the end, but I know it's shame that eats us away until we disappear […] whatcha gonna do about where you're at right now?" With this, he encapsulates one of the play's central messages: that everyone makes mistakes and experiences shame, but it's ultimately futile and harmful to dwell on the past. This advice seems to resonate with Jason and Chris, as they ultimately reunite on good terms and go to the bar to make amends with Oscar and Stan. The play ends with this stage direction: "*There's apology in their eyes, but Chris and Jason are unable to conjure words just yet. The four men, uneasy in their bodies, await the next moment in a fractured togetherness.*" This sense of a tentative mending among the four men suggests that, although Jason and Chris are still mired in shame and unsure of how to navigate their newfound freedom, they've taken an important step toward forgiving themselves—and there's hope that Oscar and Stan will forgive them as well.

Importantly, Nottage doesn't aim to rationalize or excuse any of her characters' actions, particularly those of Jason and Chris. But by providing a nuanced picture of what led up to their mistakes and the aftermath of those decisions, *Sweat* shows that allowing oneself to be held back by shame is counterproductive for all parties involved. Rather, people should strive to forgive themselves and others, even if the first step is only "fractured togetherness."

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE BAR

The unnamed Reading, Pennsylvania, bar in which most of *Sweat*'s scenes take place symbolizes the disillusionment that the play's working-class characters experience and the escapism they seek out as a result. The "*lived-in and comfortable*" bar at the center of the play is a meeting place that facilitates the similarly familiar and comforting friendships—like the decades-long bond between Tracey, Cynthia, and Jessie—that take place within it. In this way, the bar is both a literal and symbolic safe haven from the outside world—it's the one place where characters can try to forget about work, speak their minds without fear of being reprimanded, and "stop complaining and have some fun." Additionally, drinking alcohol tends to loosen people's inhibitions and bring out underlying emotions—this is certainly the case for the bar's customers, who often confide in bartender Stan about their financial strife, relationship woes, and broken dreams. In this way, the bar in which this drinking takes place represents the hardships of blue-collar life and the resultant need for emotional release, community support, and leisurely distraction.

As a multigenerational staple of Reading's working class, the bar also represents tradition and the tendency for people to get stuck in the status quo. All of the play's main characters were born and raised in town, and most of them (like previous generations) have worked at the local steel mill and frequented the bar in their downtime for decades—all the while feeling stuck in their jobs and in their lives. Stan reflects that "nostalgia is a disease," and the bar, as a place where people both dwell on the past and fruitlessly dream about the future, symbolizes this idea. However, at the end of the story, Jason and Chris return to the bar after eight years in prison to find that it's "*refurbished, polished*" and that Oscar, the former busboy, is now the manager. The fall of heavy industry and ensuing economic downturn that drives much of the play's action changes everyone and everything in Reading, and the bar is no exception. But ultimately, its change in appearance and management in the aftermath of *Sweat*'s central crises represents the hopeful idea that communities doesn't have to stay mired in the past—instead, they can (and should) respond to hard times with resilience and adaptation.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Theatre Communications Group edition of *Lynn Nottage Sweat* published in 2017.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

CHRIS *(Escalating emotions)*: I dunno. A couple minutes, and your whole life changes, that's it. It's gone. Every day I think about what if I hadn't…You know…I run it and run it, a tape over and over again. What if. What if. What if. All night. In my head. I can't turn it off. Reverend Duckett said, "Lean on God for forgiveness. Lean on God to find your way through the terrible storm." I'm leaning into the wind, I'm fuckin' leaning […] What we did was unforgiveable…

Related Characters: Chris (speaker), Jason, Evan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Having just been released from an eight-year prison sentence, Chris attends a meeting with his parole officer, Evan. Both Chris and his former best friend, Jason, were convicted of assault after they attacked a busboy at the local bar. Here, Chris reflects on the guilt he feels over the crime. Having been a hardworking 21-year-old man with dreams of becoming a teacher prior to the assault, Chris now incessantly questions how his life would have panned out if he'd made different decisions, which introduces the idea that shame can be a destructive force on an individual's psychological wellbeing and ability to function. His turn to Christianity, "lean[ing] on God for forgiveness," indicates how desperate he is for others to forgive him for what he personally believes was an "unforgiveable" act. However, the fact that his guilt is still disrupting his sleep suggests that he's going about making amends in the wrong way.

In the play's penultimate scene, Evan advises both Chris and Jason to forgive themselves before reaching out to others, since making amends with those they hurt will be meaningless if they haven't already forgiven themselves and each other. Shame, Evan suggests, is an unproductive emotion that can destroy people if they let it take over. This is one of the most important messages in the play, and it's backed up by the struggles Chris is admitting to here. Ultimately, *Sweat* suggests that searching for forgiveness from other people, or even from God, isn't what's important—rather, those experiencing shame must forgive themselves in order to regain their sense of normalcy, move on, and do something positive with their lives.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

CYNTHIA: […] let me tell you something, once he started messing with that dope, I don't recognize the man. I know it's tough out there, I understand. Yeah, yeah, yeah. He went through hell when his plant locked him out, I understand, but I can't have it.

Related Characters: Cynthia (speaker), Tracey, Stan, Brucie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17-18

Explanation and Analysis

In the bar that *Sweat*'s main characters frequent, Cynthia explains her marital struggles with her husband, Brucie, to Tracey (Cynthia's best friend) and Stan (the bartender). She reflects on the hardships Brucie has experienced since he was locked out of his job at a local textile mill two years ago: Brucie has since begun using drugs and stealing, and he's become an unreliable and volatile person. This situation introduces the play's theme of working-class disillusionment, as Brucie is the character who's perhaps most directly impacted by the realities of life as a blue-collar laborer. Having dedicated his entire adult life to working for a particular company, Brucie is now barred from working and at risk of losing the pay and benefits he worked hard to earn.

Without the job he's held for so long, Brucie experiences a loss of identity and purpose along with his loss of livelihood, a phenomenon that's common among the play's other characters who go on to be locked out of Olstead's Steel Tubing. In this way, *Sweat* shows how common it is for working-class people to be underappreciated and cast aside by their employers, and how this experience has a tendency to bring about psychological turmoil and self-destructive behavior for unemployed people to the point that they're unrecognizable to their loved ones.

STAN: Says he got wind that they were gonna cut back his line at the plant. Couldn't handle the stress.

CYNTHIA: That rumor's been flying around for months. Nobody's going anywhere.

STAN: Okay, you keep telling yourself that, but you saw what happened over at Clemmons Technologies. No one saw that coming. Right? You could wake up tomorrow and all your jobs are in Mexico, whatever, it's this NAFTA bullshit—

Related Characters: Cynthia, Stan (speaker), Tracey, Freddy Brunner

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 19-20

Explanation and Analysis

At the bar, Stan, Cynthia, and Tracey discuss a mutual acquaintance, Freddy Brunner, who recently burned his own house down. It's rumored that this was due to marital and money problems, and here Stan suggests that it also had to do with potential layoffs at Olstead's Steel Tubing, where Freddy, Cynthia, and Tracey all work. This disturbing anecdote shows just how severely working-class people can be impacted by financial strain and unemployment. Such workers are typically already struggling to make ends meet, and when they're laid off or locked out after dedicating years of hard labor to their company, the stress is simply too much to bear. Cynthia and Tracey are sympathetic rather than judgmental of Freddy, as they go on to joke that they should burn their own houses down. This suggests that Freddy's experience isn't an anomaly—rather, extreme stress and job insecurity are common struggles faced by the working class.

This exchange also introduces the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as a point of contention among the working class in Reading, Pennsylvania (where the play takes place). NAFTA eliminated barriers to trade and invest among the U.S., Canada, and Mexico—and this allowed companies to more easily outsource business to Mexico, where labor and manufacturing costs are generally less expensive. As the play's resident cynic and skeptic, Stan warns the others that this could easily happen at Olstead's. Though Stan doesn't necessarily mean any harm by this, it implicitly sets up Latinx people as a collective threat to the white working-class community. And in a town like Reading that's already steeped in tradition and resistant to outsiders, such sentiments breed animosity toward the city's Latinx population as a whole. By pairing Freddy's story with Stan's comment about NAFTA, the play hints at how working-class disillusionment has a direct impact on race relations: when predominantly white, blue-collar laborers are laid off and left destitute, they're more likely to turn on outsiders (particularly Mexican immigrants) as scapegoats for their financial woes.

CYNTHIA: Who knows? I might apply.

TRACEY: What?! Get outta here.

CYNTHIA: Why the hell not? I've got twenty-four years on the floor.

TRACEY: Well, I got you beat by two. Started in '74, walked in straight outta high school. First and only job. Management is for them. Not us.

CYNTHIA: More money. More heat. More vacation. Less work. That's all I need to know.

Related Characters: Tracey, Cynthia (speaker), Brucie, Stan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

At the bar, Cynthia, Tracey, and Stan discuss managerial changes at Olstead's Steel Tubing, where Cynthia and Tracey have worked for over 20 years. One of the higher-ups has just been transferred, leaving a Warehouse Supervisor job open, and Cynthia is thinking of applying for the promotion. Both of the women's reflections about their many years at Olstead's reinforce the idea that working-class laborers often dedicate their entire adult lives to the same company—which makes it especially difficult when they're laid off or locked out, like Cynthia's husband, Brucie, was at his textile mill. Additionally, the fact that both women have over 20 years of experience yet haven't achieved any advancement in that time suggests that companies tend to underestimate their lower-level workers and keep them stagnant in the same positions. Tracey's comment that "Management is for them. Not us," further suggests that there's a stark divide between Olstead's white-collar and blue-collar workers. This likely contributes to the floor workers' feelings of being overlooked and exploited while management enjoys perks like "More money. More heat. More vacation. Less work."

It's also significant that Tracey's first reaction to Cynthia's intentions to apply is skepticism rather than support. The women have been friends for nearly as long as they've worked at Olstead's, so Tracey should ostensibly be happy for her friend rather than discouraging. The fact that Tracey isn't implies that she's threatened by the thought of Cynthia moving on and leaving her behind, and this sets up one of the play's central arguments: that among people who are all struggling, an individual's attempt to raise their station is often seen as a kind of betrayal rather than a commendable effort to better themselves.

Act 1, Scene 3 Quotes

JASON: […] But seriously, man, why didn't you tell me?

CHRIS: Cuz—

JASON: Shit, I just kinda thought we'd retire and open a franchise together. We're a team, you can't leave!!

CHRIS: Yeah, I can.

JASON: What about me?

CHRIS: What about you?

JASON: You coulda told me.

CHRIS: Dude, it's just something I gotta do.

Related Characters: Chris, Jason (speaker), Cynthia, Tracey, Stan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

Eight years prior to Act One, Scene 1, Jason and Chris are hanging out in the local bar that all of the play's main characters frequent. Chris has just shared with Jason and Stan his intentions to pursue teaching at Albright College, which surprises both of them. Prior to this exchange, Stan expresses disapproval on a practical level: he believes it's crazy to walk away from the sought-after high pay at Olstead's Steel Tubing (where Chris and Jason currently work). This attitude is a potential reason behind why working-class laborers tend to get stuck in jobs that are unfulfilling and underappreciated: they're afraid of disrupting the status quo and leaving behind the high pay that comes with dangerous factory work, even if the alternative they could pursue would be safer and more secure in the long term.

Jason, by contrast, is critical of the idea on a personal level. Though he mocks Chris for his lofty "aspirations" prior to this, his question of "But seriously, man, why didn't you tell me?" implies that he's genuinely hurt over Chris keeping his dreams a secret. Additionally, Jason's conviction that he and Chris are a "team" and that they're supposed to retire together mirrors Tracey's concern over Cynthia getting promoted to Warehouse Supervisor at Olstead's. Both Jason and Tracey are unsupportive of their respective friends because they're afraid of being left behind, again highlighting the tendency for struggling people to feel threatened and resentful when their loved one tries to get ahead—even if it's "just something [they] gotta do."

Act 1, Scene 4 Quotes

STAN: […] That's when I knew, I was nobody to them. Nobody! Three generations of loyalty to the same company. This is America, right? You'd think that would mean something. They behave like you're doing them a goddamn favor […] they don't understand that human decency is at the core of everything. I been jacking all them years and I can count on my hand the number of times they said thank you. Management: look me in the eye, say "thank you" now and then. "Thanks, Stan, for coming in early and working on the weekend. Good job." I loved my job. I was good at my job. Twenty-eight years jacking. And look at my leg! That's what I get.

Related Characters: Stan (speaker), Brucie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

As Brucie sits at the bar, he confides in Stan about how much he's been struggling since he was locked out of his job at a local textile mill nearly two years ago. Stan shares his own experiences working at Olstead's Steel Tubing, where he spent 28 years before losing part of his leg in a work accident. Stan's bitterness at his experience there is understandable: even after he and his family gave "three generations of loyalty" to Olstead's, the company was cold and thankless toward Stan despite his hard work. All Stan got in the end was a debilitating injury that permanently took him out of factory work—a disheartening outcome that's not all that uncommon among blue-collar laborers.

His experience adds another dimension to the struggles that working-class people face: while people like Brucie are affected psychologically by how poorly their companies treat them, factory workers are clearly risking their physical health as well. Stan's comment that "this is America" highlights the play's implicit critique of the American Dream, which promises to award hard work with financial prosperity—and, perhaps just as importantly, with respect. Instead, as Stan and Brucie's trajectories show, ordinary working-class people are often devalued and cast out in spite of their hard work, understandably leading to disillusionment among people of this socioeconomic class.

BRUCIE: […] this old white cat, whatever, gets in my face, talking about how we took his job. We? […] He don't know my biography. October 2nd, 1952, my father picked his last bale of cotton. He packed his razor and a Bible and headed North. Ten days later he had a job at Dixon's Hosieries. He clawed his way up from the filth of the yard to Union Rep, fighting for fucking assholes just like this cat. So I don't understand it. This damn blame game, I got enough of that in my marriage.

Related Characters: Brucie (speaker), Stan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37-38

Explanation and Analysis

At the bar, Brucie tells Stan about an incident of racism he experienced while in line for union handouts: a white man accused black people like Brucie of coming to Reading to take white people's jobs. Having presumably been laid off or locked out from his company, just like Brucie was, this man is likely experiencing similar psychological struggles and financial strain that Brucie has been suffering from for the past two years. It seems, then, that racial animosity between the white man and Brucie (and perhaps between white people and black people in general) is being brought to the surface by the external stressors of working-class life.

In response, Brucie reflects about how his father worked his way up from a cotton picker to a yard-worker to a Union Rep who fought on behalf of all labor union members, black or white. Particularly alongside this context, the white man's cruelty is unwarranted since Brucie has a long legacy of both living in Reading and standing in solidarity with the union. With this in mind, Brucie decries the "blame game" that people resort to when times are tough, again emphasizing how people tend to lash out and make entire groups of people into scapegoats—even if those people, like Brucie and his father before him, are in the same boat and are fighting for the rights of everyone.

Act 1, Scene 5 Quotes

TRACEY: […] I know the floor as good as Cynthia. I do. […] I betcha they wanted a minority. I'm not prejudice, but that's how things are going these days. I got eyes. They get tax breaks or something. […] I'm not prejudice, I say, you are who you are, you know? I'm cool with everyone. But I mean…c'mon…you guys coming over here, you can get a job faster than—

OSCAR: I was born here.

TRACEY: Still…you weren't born here, Berks.

OSCAR: Yeah, I was.

TRACEY: Yeah? Well, my family's been here a long time. Since the twenties, okay? They built the house that I live in. They built this town.

Related Characters: Oscar, Tracey (speaker), Cynthia

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 48-49

Explanation and Analysis

After Cynthia receives the promotion to Warehouse Supervisor at Olstead's (which she and Tracey both applied for), Tracey becomes bitter about the situation. She tells Oscar, the Columbian American busboy at the bar, that she has just as much experience as Cynthia and that Cynthia was probably only hired because she's black. This is another example of how economic strain can bring out the worst in people: rather than being supportive of people who are just trying to get by, Tracey and others react with resentment at not getting ahead themselves. Even worse, such financial struggles seem to make racism (which was previously either nonexistent or not openly expressed) come to the surface, as people like Tracey look for an easy scapegoat onto which they can channel their anger and frustration. As such, Tracey chalks up Cynthia's achievement to an affirmative action ploy rather than the result of Cynthia's hard-won qualifications for the job.

Tracey extends this racism further when she lumps all Latinx people together—"you guys"—and suggests that this group is only trying to take jobs away from the white working class. However, Oscar informs her that he was born in Berks County (where Reading, the story's setting, is located) just like Tracey was, thereby disproving Tracey's notion that all Latinx people are outsiders. However, Tracey's response that her family has been here longer than Oscar's and that "they built this town" suggests that she's unwilling to budge on her discriminatory beliefs (despite her claims that she's "not prejudice") because she's hung up on how Reading used to be and is resistant to those she perceives as invaders and as threats to tradition and job security. As such, the play shows how a complex interaction of different social issues—economic downturn, working-class discontentment, and shifting ethnic demographics—can breed resentment, distrust, and even racism.

TRACEY: […] It was back when if you worked with your hands people respected you for it. It was a gift. But now, there's nothing on Penn. You go into buildings, the walls are covered over with sheetrock, the wood painted gray, or some ungodly color, and it just makes me sad. It makes me…whatever.

OSCAR: You okay?

TRACEY: Listen, that piece of paper you're holding is an insult, it don't mean anything, Olstead's isn't for you.

Related Characters: Oscar, Tracey (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Outside the bar, Tracey and Oscar get into a conversation about Olstead's Steel Tubing, where Tracey works and where Oscar is hoping to get some hours. Here, Tracey looks back on how Reading, Pennsylvania (where the play is set) has changed since her grandparents first settled here in the 1920s. She bitterly reflects on how everything in town is drab and uniform now that mass manufacturing has taken the place of craftsmanship like that of her woodworker grandfather. Additionally, she's upset that blue-collar laborers like her are now unappreciated and disrespected—whereas back then, "if you worked with your hands people respected you for it." This reflects the broader disillusionment that the working class often feels: whereas manual labor was once considered a respectable profession, workers like those at Olstead's are now treated as disposable and replaceable.

Tracey takes this frustration with Reading's fall from tradition and with her own poor working conditions out on Oscar. As a member of Reading's Latinx community, Oscar is lumped in with those whom Tracey considers outsiders. Reading's predominantly white, working-class community generally holds the belief that NAFTA enables companies to

more easily outsource labor to Mexico and to bring in cheap labor from over the border. As such, it seems they've generally come to view all Latinx people—whether Mexican immigrants or Colombian American people who were born in Reading, like Oscar—as threats to their job security. As such, Tracey's comment that "Olstead's isn't for you" is a deeply racist and xenophobic sentiment: essentially, she's sending the message that Latinx people like Oscar aren't welcome at Olstead's (or, by extension, in Reading) because they don't belong to the community's racial in-group. The play thus shows—but doesn't excuse—how economic downturn and other social changes can be so unsettling as to provoke openly racist sentiments among the white working class.

Act 1, Scene 6 Quotes

❝❝ CYNTHIA: […] I don't deserve the things you've been saying. You've always been cool. Be angry, but don't make it about this…*(Points to the skin on the back of her hand)* Look at me, Tracey. You don't want to go down that road, we've got too much history between us. You got a problem, you tell me to my face.

Related Characters: Cynthia (speaker), Tracey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

After Cynthia receives a promotion to Warehouse Supervisor at Olstead's, Tracey reacts by suggesting that Cynthia didn't really deserve the job and that she was only given the promotion because she's black. Here, Cynthia pleads with Tracey not to make things about race. Her comment that "you've always been cool" implies that Tracey wasn't always racist (or at least not openly so), meaning that her prejudice has been brought out and exacerbated by the resentment she feels over Cynthia's promotion. This is particularly disturbing given that Tracey and Cynthia have been friends for decades. Tracey's sudden turning on Cynthia suggests that among people who are all struggling to make ends meet, one friend's success may be seen as a threat or a betrayal to another friend who wasn't awarded the same opportunity—even if they've had a close relationship for years. Through Tracey, the play shows that this kind of mutual struggle and bitterness can specifically result in previously nonexistent or unvoiced racial tension, as those who feel left behind or threatened are likely to misdirect their anger onto others and look for an easy scapegoat on whom they can blame their problems.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

❝❝ CYNTHIA: […] You know after everything. I wanna say that…

(Cynthia fights back emotions.)

I'm sorry.

CHRIS: For what?

CYNTHIA: It's just, I shoulda…

(Chris places his arms around Cynthia.)

CHRIS: C'mon. C'mon. I don't want this to be a big deal. Tell me about what's been going on. You hear from the old gang? Tracey?

CYNTHIA: Fuck her. After what went down. We don't really—

Related Characters: Chris, Cynthia (speaker), Oscar, Jason, Tracey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Act Two begins with a shift from 2000 to 2008, when Chris has just been released from his eight-year prison sentence. When he goes to visit his mother, Cynthia, she's warm and affectionate toward him, and she expresses her remorse about everything that happened all those years ago. Cynthia's apology and vague reflection that "I shoulda…" suggests that she blames herself both for the fallout with her friends (which happened as a result of her promotion to Warehouse Supervisor) as well as for Chris's crime. Jason and Chris's assault of Oscar was largely motivated by the lockout that happened at Olstead's while Cynthia was a manager, so Cynthia seems to consider herself complicit in the crime. The job that was once a point of pride for Cynthia is now something she deeply regrets taking. And given how Cynthia has suffered emotionally and financially in the past eight years (she's since lost her house and her job at Olstead's and is clearly racked with guilt), the play once again makes the case that shame is a toxic emotion that tends to keep people unproductively preoccupied with the past.

Further, Cynthia's admission that she and Tracey are no longer in contact reveals that the women never reconciled. Tracey became bitter and racist in reaction to Cynthia getting the promotion to Warehouse Supervisor over her, seemingly because Tracey feared being left behind while

her friend rubbed elbows with the very management who disrespected the Olstead's floor workers for decades. The sad reality of their ruined friendship shows the long-term consequences of this kind of conflict: when friends are resentful rather than supportive of one another's success, it can permanently destroy even cherished, decades-long relationships.

Act 2, Scene 3 Quotes

CYNTHIA: I've stood on that line, same line since I was nineteen. I've taken orders from idiots who were dangerous, or even worse, racist. But I stood on line, patiently waiting for a break. I don't think you get it, but if I walk away, I'm giving up more than a job, I'm giving up all that time I spent standing on line waiting for one damn opportunity.

TRACEY: You want us to feel sorry for you?

CYNTHIA: ...I didn't expect you to understand, babe. You don't know what it's been like to walk in my shoes. I've absorbed a lotta shit over the years, but I worked hard to get off that floor. Call me selfish, I don't care, call me whatever you need to call me, but remember, one of us has to be left standing to fight.

Related Characters: Tracey, Cynthia (speaker), Jessie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

After Cynthia's friends turn on her for being part of the management that locked them out of Olstead's, Cynthia spends her birthday alone at the bar. Tracey and Jessie eventually crash the evening and accuse Cynthia of being a traitor, and this exchange is how Cynthia defends herself. Although Tracey, Jessie, and the other floor workers view Cynthia's promotion to Warehouse Supervisor (which happened just before the lockout) as a betrayal, Cynthia explains that she's been devalued, disrespected, and put at risk by management since she was 19 years old—a sentiment that Tracey and Jessie should ostensibly sympathize with, since they've also been thanklessly laboring at Olstead's since they graduated high school.

However, this common experience of being disillusioned with Olstead's isn't enough to bring Tracey and Jessie over to Cynthia's side. Tracey sarcastically asks if Cynthia wants them to feel sorry for her, which suggests that she and Jessie don't view their shared struggle with Cynthia as a reason to sympathize with her. Instead, the fact that Cynthia has experienced the same working conditions is even *more* reason for her friends to feel betrayed, as they believe that Cynthia has stepped on them to get where she is. Additionally, they view Cynthia's new allegiance with management as a direct affront to their financial stability and job security. With this, the play shows how a personal triumph can become a source of tension among friends and loved ones—particularly those who are struggling themselves.

Further, Cynthia's defeated comment that "You don't know what it's been like to walk in my shoes" implies that despite the three women's shared work environment, Cynthia's experience at Olstead's has been different because she's black while Tracey and Jessie are white. As such, the play suggests that different facets of people's identity can further compound the hardships they experience as working-class people—in Cynthia's case, her status as a minority woman makes her more vulnerable to discrimination and abuse in a predominantly white and male workplace. With this in mind, Cynthia and Jessie are not only belittling Cynthia's hard work—they're also trivializing her unique struggles with racism, further highlighting the tension and misunderstanding that often exists between white and minority working-class people.

Act 2, Scene 5 Quotes

OSCAR: [...] I keep asking for some good fortune. That's it. A little bit of money. That's it. My father, he swept up the floor in a factory like Olstead's—those fuckas wouldn't even give him a union card. But he woke up every morning at four A.M. because he wanted a job in the steel factory, it was the American way, so he swept fucking floors thinking, "One day they'll let me in." I know how he feels, people come in here every day. They brush by me without seeing me. No: "Hello, Oscar." If they don't see me, I don't need to see them.

Related Characters: Oscar (speaker), Stan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

In the midst of the lockout at Olstead's Steel Tubing, Oscar takes on some temporary hours that have been made available since the regular floor workers have lost their jobs.

Stan warns Oscar that this will anger the locked-out workers, and this quote is how Oscar responds. He brings up the fact that his father was disrespected when he worked as a janitor in a steel factory—and now, Oscar is othered in a similar way by Reading's white working class who "brush by [Oscar] without seeing [him]." His scathing comment about "the American way" suggests that the American Dream of hard work and success isn't realistic for minorities like him. Instead of being respected and seen as a worthy member of the community, Oscar and the rest of Reading's Latinx population are viewed as outsiders who are threats to people's job security.

This is especially unfair given that Oscar is struggling to get by just like the locked-out workers are: he only makes $8 an hour at the bar, so making $11 at Olstead's could be life-changing for him. However, the other characters' terrible treatment of Oscar (they go on to berate him with racial slurs and even physically attack him) shows that widespread economic strain in the working-class community tends to exacerbate tension among people rather than encouraging solidarity. Ultimately, such conditions can bring about unfair discrimination against minorities like Oscar who are only trying to make an honest living.

Act 2, Scene 6 Quotes

JASON: […] Eleven dollars an hour? No thank you. They'll work us down to nothing if we let 'em. "Jacking ain't for softies!" But they know they can always find somebody willing to get their hands sweaty. And they're right. There will always be someone who'll step in, unless we say NO!

STAN: Look. Olstead is a prick. If he was here I wouldn't stop you. In fact I'd hold him down for you to give him a proper beating, but Oscar…he's another story.

[…]

JASON: […] All I'm saying is that he needs to understand the price of that dinner he's putting on his table.

STAN *(Shouts)*: What the fuck do you want him to do? Huh? It ain't his fault. Talk to Olstead, his cronies. Fucking Wall Street. Oscar ain't getting rich off your misery.

Related Characters: Stan, Jason (speaker), Jessie, Tracey, Oscar

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 101-102

Explanation and Analysis

While Jason, Tracey, and Jessie gang up on Oscar at the bar, Stan defends him. Whereas the Olstead's workers have branded Oscar as a traitor for taking on temporary hours at the plant while they're locked out, Stan argues that Oscar isn't to blame for the situation—he has nothing to do with the lockout and is only trying to make a living, just like they are. Stan's response to Jason's outrage at the Latinx temp workers (and particularly at Oscar, who's been made into a scapegoat) echoes the play's broader argument that the white working class's anger and discontentment is often misplaced: rather than blaming Latinx people (and particularly Latinx immigrants) for their job insecurity, they should be angry with big businesses and investors who exploit minority workers for low pay and profit while the working class suffers.

However, this isn't enough to convince Jason, who physically assaults Oscar shortly after this exchange. Jason believes that Oscar is essentially stealing food out of his mouth by taking the hours at Olstead's, and this deep-seated anger over being cast out and left with nothing drives Jason to take things out on an innocent person. As such, the play shows that individuals tend to decline when their community's economy declines, turning to self-destruction, hatred, and even violence in reaction to the perceived injustices they're facing.

Act 2, Scene 7 Quotes

EVAN: I've seen enough guys in your situation to know that over time it's…it's crippling. I'm not a therapist, I'm not the right dude to talk to about any of this. But what I do know, is that it's not a productive emotion. Most folks think it's the guilt or rage that destroys us in the end, but I know from experience that it's shame that eats us away until we disappear. You put in your time. But look here, we been talking, and we can keep talking—but whatcha gonna do about where you're at right now?

Related Characters: Evan (speaker), Stan, Oscar, Chris, Jason

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

Having just served eight years in prison for assaulting

Oscar, Chris and Jason are struggling to cope with their emotions as ex-convicts. Near the end of the play, Chris and Jason's parole officer, Evan, advises both of them to let go of their shame. With this advice, Evan encapsulates one of the play's central themes: that shame is a counterproductive emotion and that people should forgive themselves in order to move on and make the most of their lives. This is particularly pertinent for Chris and Jason, who are so ashamed of the assault they committed that they're struggling to integrate back into society or even to function on a basic level.

Evan's question, "whatcha gonna do about where you're at right now?" is also important, as it prompts them to focus on how they can best utilize the present moment rather than staying hung up on the past. Evan and Chris go on to take Evan's advice, meeting up amicably and returning to the bar to make amends with Oscar and Stan (who was also injured in the assault). While the play ends before they can verbalize their apologies, the fact that they go at all suggests that they are taking steps to forgive themselves and make things right. By ending *Sweat* on this thematic note, Nottage sends the message that everyone makes bad decisions and experiences shame, and it's pointless and even destructive to obsess over past mistakes—instead, self-forgiveness is essential if people are to heal, mend their relationships with others, and make improvements in their lives.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

September 29, 2008. In the news, the Dow Jones Industrial Average has fallen 778.68 points—the worst single-day decline in stock market history. In a parole office, Jason, who has a black eye and whose face is covered in white supremacist tattoos, sits with Evan, his African American parole officer. Evan asks some questions about Jason's employment and living situation, and Jason gives reluctant, one-word responses. Evan manages to fish out that Jason has gotten a job making soft pretzels and is living at a local church shelter.

Nottage's choice to begin each act with a news headline sets up the idea that Sweat *is a play in conversation with the broader economic, social, and political events happening during the play's timeline. In particular, the inclusion of financial developments like the stock market decline orient the audience to the 2008 Great Recession, which had dire financial consequences for ordinary Americans—and particularly for struggling people like Jason. Though what Jason did to end up serving a prison sentence hasn't yet been revealed, it's clear that he's racist and distrustful of authority—characteristics that will surely cause conflict between him and Evan.*

Jason begins to fidget, and Evan asks him if he's going to tell him what happened. Jason continues to be uncooperative, which angers Evan—he doesn't want to be here any more than Jason does. Evan tells Jason that he isn't playing around and threatens to make Jason's life difficult by reporting that he's defiant and confrontational. Then, Evan repeats his question about what happened, and Jason responds that he didn't do anything. Evan counters this by asking if Jason gave himself a black eye and a cut lip, and Jason admits that someone sucker-punched him.

At this point, Jason doesn't appear regretful about whatever crime he committed, nor is he interested in improving his behavior. Rather, it seems he's a rather hateful person (given his white supremacist tattoos) who's angry at both himself and others. Jason is stuck in a cycle of defiance and denial, still putting himself in violent situations that risk him violating his parole.

Evan continues to question Jason and slowly drag information out of him, piecing together that a biker punched Jason in the bathroom of Loco's (where Jason knows he's not supposed to go) for looking at his girlfriend. Still, Jason maintains that he didn't do anything. Evan asks what the results will say if he drug-tests Jason's urine, and Jason responds that he's telling the truth even if Evan doesn't believe him. Jason refuses to pee into the cup, and they get into a heated exchange. Finally, Jason erupts, calling Evan an "asshole" and yelling, "Fuck you, nigga!"

Again, Jason doesn't seem particularly remorseful: he refuses to take responsibility for his actions and own up to the fact that he went somewhere he shouldn't have and associated himself with the wrong people. Lashing out at Evan with a racist slur further highlights how angry and hateful Jason is—he seems to be channeling his personal frustrations with his life into racial animosity against innocent people like Evan.

Evan stares Jason down, and Jason halfheartedly repeats "Fuck you!" Evan again orders Jason to pick up the cup, but Jason breaks and begs Evan to give him a break since he just got a job. Evan drops the issue and switches back to asking if there's anything Jason wants to tell him. Jason responds that he's following the rules, but Evan, incredulous, asks Jason if he wants to end up in prison again. He advises Jason to get rid of his offensive tattoos and openly admits that they make him want to knock Jason out.

The halfhearted way in which Jason yells at Evan further suggests that his hostility and racism toward others is at least partially a front for his own self-hatred. Regardless, Jason's tattoos and use of racial slurs are highly inflammatory and understandably create animosity between him and Evan. Jason's plea about keeping his (likely minimum-wage) job suggests that he's struggling to make ends meet—another potential contributing factor to his misplaced anger and prejudice.

Evan continues asking Jason what's going on even as Jason keeps resisting—he's not going to let Jason off the hook. Finally, Jason reveals that he recently ran into Chris; to his own surprise, he becomes emotional at this admission. Evan asks Jason what he's going to do, since Chris is out in the world and isn't going anywhere. But Jason doesn't know how to handle this—when he was in prison, he tried to repress everything that happened with Chris.

Jason's rare show of emotion implies that Chris was someone he was close with and that he deeply regrets how things transpired between them. Jason's admission that he tried to put what happened with Chris out of his mind perhaps suggests that he actually is remorseful about his actions—he's just afraid to show it.

Evan turns around, and the scene switches: he's now in a parole meeting with Chris, an African American man. Chris, visibly nervous, tells Evan that things have been tough and that he hasn't been sleeping well. He's struggling to relate to others and feels like he's always talking in circles. Chris has been attempting to get some clarity by attending prayer meetings at the church rectory where he's living. Chris tells Evan that he's discouraged by how low-paying the jobs he's been applying to are—and by the "barbed-wire fence" of "that damn question" on the applications. Chris is eight credits short of completing a bachelor's degree—he needs to earn some money and get his life together before he can finish, but Evan is encouraging about this plan.

Unlike Jason, Chris is straightforward about how guilt is affecting him as a parolee: his wellbeing is suffering, and his churchgoing implies that he's looking for forgiveness and a sense of meaning. His reference to "that damn question" that's like a "barbed-wire fence" suggests that he's having trouble getting hired due to the question on most job applications about felony convictions. Chris's unrealized goals in this regard are clearly contributing to the shame and psychological turmoil he's experiencing as an ex-convict.

Evan points out that Chris seems anxious, and Chris replies that he's angry with himself. He pauses introspectively before admitting that he recently saw Jason. Chris was surprised by how different Jason looked—Chris had encountered the Aryan Brotherhood in prison but was nonetheless unsettled by Jason's white supremacist tattoos.

Again, Chris is markedly more regretful and upfront about his self-blame than Jason is. Additionally, his surprise at Jason's white supremacist tattoos perhaps suggests that Jason wasn't always racist (or at least not openly so). Such beliefs may have been brought out and exacerbated by Jason's incarceration, as it's common for prisoners to divide themselves on racial lines.

Chris begins to emotionally spiral, telling Evan how he constantly thinks about what would have happened if he'd made different choices even though Reverend Duckett has encouraged Chris to forgive himself. He says that when he saw Jason crossing the street, he forgot everything he'd imagined saying to him. He felt his emotions well up and clenched his fists, but suddenly, he and Jason were hugging. Chris holds back tears and reflects that at that moment, for the first time in eight years, he felt like he could return home. Suddenly, Santana's song "Smooth" begins to blast, and the past seems to slash through the year 2008.

This passage further emphasizes how deeply Chris's shame plagues him and how his preoccupation with the past is preventing him from making progress. The emotional encounter between Chris and Jason is another hint that their relationship was once highly important to both of them, and that they're now missing the sense of camaraderie, familiarity, and support that their friendship once provided. Additionally, their affection for each other despite the fact that Chris is black suggests that Jason's racist sentiments are based in misplaced anger rather than any real ideological convictions.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

January 18, 2000. Eight years earlier. In the news, the income gap between the richest and poorest American families is widening, likely due to the booming stock market. At an old, cozy **bar**, Santana's "Smooth" is playing on a jukebox as a rowdy celebration winds down. Longtime friends Cynthia and Tracey, both middle-aged women, are drunkenly dancing with each other. The bartender, Stan, smiles as he watches on. Meanwhile, a woman named Jessie has passed out, face down, on a table.

Though the stock market is performing markedly better in 2000 than it does in 2008, poor and working-class Americans are likely to lose out in either scenario, as the rich and powerful are typically those who stand to gain from drastic changes in the global economy (hence the widening wealth gap). Meanwhile, the characters introduced here seem to be close friends who value their time together, much like Jason and Chris still clearly value each other, foreshadowing the importance of such relationships as the play progresses.

Cynthia and Tracey tease Stan as they dance seductively, prodding him to join them. Stan resists, and the song ends, after which Stan asks who's taking Jessie home. Tracey replies that Howard usually just closes up and leaves Jessie in the **bar**, yet somehow Jessie always makes it to work on time the next morning. They manage to startle her awake for a moment, which makes everyone laugh, but then she slumps back onto the table. Stan tells them that she can't stay at the bar, and he confiscates Jessie's keys out of her pocket.

Again, the camaraderie and ease among Stan and the bargoers emphasizes that they're close and comfortable with one another, and that this bar is a familiar safe haven for them. However, the fact that Jessie often attends work hungover introduces the idea that these characters come to the bar as means of (potentially self-destructive) escapism, likely because they're overworked or dissatisfied with their lives.

Stan offers Tracey another drink and smiles at her seductively, but she lightheartedly rejects his advances and tells him what happened between them was a one-time thing—it's not going to happen again. Stan counters that it happened twice, but Tracey laughingly retorts that the second time didn't technically count. Just then, Oscar, the busboy, comes in and starts wiping down the **bar**. Cynthia gets up to leave, saying that she has an early shift at work, to which Tracey replies that Cynthia has worked enough overtime. Cynthia, however, is determined to take a cruise on the Panama Canal this summer. Tracey urges Cynthia to have one more drink since it's Tracey's birthday, and Cynthia relents—but if she loses a finger in the mill, she says, it's Tracey's fault.

Stan and Tracey's flirtatious interaction further emphasizes the history that these characters share—it's clear that they've known one another for quite some time and that they likely rely on one another as a means of support. Especially given Cynthia's overtime hours at the mill and her desire for a vacation, it seems that the bar and the interactions that take place within it are sources of comfort and stress relief for its working-class clientele.

Stan comments on the successful night—lots of people turned out for Tracey's birthday party. Stan was hoping to see Brucie, but Cynthia reveals that she kicked Brucie out (again) after he stole all of her Christmas presents and her expensive fish tank. Then, on New Year's Eve, he showed up unannounced and clearly high. Brucie has been unrecognizable since he started doing drugs, and although Cynthia says she sympathizes because things have been tough since Brucie got locked out of his plant, she can't have him around in his current state. She and Brucie ended up getting into a fight that got Cynthia arrested for disorderly conduct. Tracey had to bail her out.

In a lockout, a company prevents employees from working as a means of demanding concessions like pay cuts or reduced benefits. The fact that Brucie's lockout has made him into someone unrecognizable to his own wife suggests that unemployment and the ensuing financial hardship can wreak havoc on an individual's wellbeing as well as their relationships with their loved ones. Brucie has seemingly lost his sense of self and purpose along with his job.

Changing the subject, Stan asks if the women heard about Freddy Brunner—this morning's paper reported that he burned his own house down. Freddy seemingly broke due to stress: his wife had left him, he was deep in debt, and he'd heard a rumor about cutbacks at the plant. Cynthia brushes off this rumor, but Stan warns that people's jobs could be outsourced to Mexico at any moment because of NAFTA. Tracey tries to make a joke out of this, but Stan cautions that it's unwise to keep oneself ignorant.

Freddy is another example of the ways in which the stresses of working-class life can effectively destroy a person: with no wife, no financial stability, and no home, Freddy is completely destitute. Stan's concern about NAFTA (a government policy which enabled U.S. businesses to more easily outsource labor to Mexico) underscores the fact that blue-collar laborers often don't have the luxury of job security—all of their hard work can be taken from them in an instant. Given this, Freddy's stress (if not his reaction to it) is understandable.

Tracey diverts, wondering aloud if it's illegal to burn your own house down. Stan thinks it's legal with a permit, and Cynthia sarcastically says that she should set fire to her own run-down house. Tracey says she'd hire someone else to burn hers. She asks Oscar who she should ask about this, since Puerto Ricans are burning things down all over Reading. Oscar replies that he's actually Colombian, and Stan and Cynthia squabble with Tracey until she drops the subject.

Tracey and Cynthia's casual banter about burning their own houses down implies that they, like Freddy, are under financial and interpersonal strain—in this way, the play implies that such stress is common among working-class people. Tracey's offhand comment to Oscar suggests that there is tension between Reading's white working class and its Latinx community that's perhaps exacerbated by economic strain.

Stan redirects the conversation, recalling that Freddy was the one who shut down the mill when Stan got injured. If it weren't for Freddy, Stan says, he would have lost his entire leg. Suddenly, Jessie wakes up and demands that Stan give her another drink, threatening to call her ex-husband if he doesn't. Stan reminds Jessie that she'll wake up her ex's new wife if she calls, which provokes Jessie to fling insults like "cripple" and "gimp" at him. Cynthia orders her to calm down, and Oscar escorts Jessie to the bathroom.

Stan's work injury, which cost him part of his leg, shows another potential cost of manual labor jobs: people's physical wellbeing is in jeopardy along with their mental health and financial stability. Additionally, it seems that Jessie's cruel, ableist slurs toward Stan are yet another example of a struggling person misdirecting their personal problems and anger onto someone else.

With Jessie gone, Cynthia tells Tracey she needs to talk to Jessie about her drinking problem—Jessie keeps showing up to work reeking of vodka. Tracey points out that she herself never abused alcohol even though her husband died. She asks Cynthia if she's going to report Jessie at work, but Cynthia replies that they're already looking for reasons to fire people since their supervisor is being promoted and transferred. To Stan and Tracey's surprise, Cynthia reveals that she's thinking of applying for the open position since they're going to hire someone from the floor. She has 24 years of experience, and now she wants the perks of a managerial job.

Here, the extent of Jessie's drinking problem is revealed: she seemingly uses alcohol abuse as a way to cope with the stresses of work (where significant changes are underway) as well to help her forget her romantic woes. Meanwhile, the fact that Cynthia has worked at the mill for so long but has yet to be promoted to a supervisor position is indicative of how blue-collar workers tend to be undervalued by management and prevented from advancing in status and pay.

Incredulous, Tracey points out that she's been working the floor for 26 years, since she graduated high school. "Management is for them," she says. "Not us." No one was ever promoted straight off the floor during Stan's 28 years at the mill, either. Still, Cynthia thinks she may as well apply, and Stan agrees that the worst that could happen is being told no. This gives Tracey pause; she thinks she may try for the job too. However, Stan cynically interjects that not much has changed since he left the mill in 1969 or even since his grandfather started there in 1922. Although Stan didn't like Olstead, he respected him because he was hands-on and involved. He points out that the younger men with MBAs are reluctant to get their hands dirty—they don't understand the real labor that goes into making their product.

Tracey's conviction that "management is for them" and Stan's opinions about the underappreciative higher-ups at Olstead's make the case that, at least in the world of the novel, managers and lower-level workers are viewed as entirely different stock with opposing ideologies. Therefore, Tracey likely has conflicted feelings about Cynthia applying for the promotion because she's concerned about her friend crossing the line and allying herself with management rather than maintaining her solidarity with Tracey and the other floor workers.

Suddenly, they hear a drunken commotion from the bathroom, and Cynthia and Tracey agree that Jessie is dragging them down even though they love her. They make snide comments about Jessie's outdated dress just as she comes stumbling in. Jessie again demands a drink, and Tracey warns her to get herself together—but Cynthia cuts them off and tells them to relax and have fun. Music begins to play, and they start laughing and celebrating again.

Cynthia and Tracey's simultaneous concern and scorn for Jessie again illustrates how important close, longtime friendships are to Reading's working class—but also how looking out for oneself is at the forefront of everyone's minds. Cynthia's desire to relax and forget about more serious matters drives home the role of the bar as a source of escape and much-needed leisure for laborers.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

February 10, 2000. In the news, Steve Forbes drops out of the Republican Primary after having invested $66 million into his own campaign. Jason and Chris stand at the **bar**, tipsy, while Oscar works and listens in the background. Jason shows Chris and Stan a photo of the Harley motorcycle he's thinking about buying, brushing off Stan's concerns about what Jason's mom will think—she made it clear that she's done parenting Jason when she kicked him out after his 21st birthday last October. Stan comments that this does sound like Tracey.

The headline about Forbes, who has $66 million of personal wealth at his disposal, serves as a stark contrast to the play's main characters, who are struggling just to get by. Clearly, there are people getting ahead despite (or even because of) the working class's plight. Meanwhile, this portrayal of Jason and Chris eight years prior to Act One, Scene 1 provides more insight into their pre-prison relationship: they—like Tracey, Cynthia, and Jessie—are clearly close friends who come to the bar to relax and escape from the pressures of daily life.

Jason estimates that he can afford the bike after another month and a half of saving, complaining that he has little money left over because the union appropriates most of it for benefits. Chris commiserates with Jason—between his new girlfriend, high taxes, and the temptation to buy things like expensive sneakers, Chris is struggling to save money for school. Jason is surprised to hear Chris mention school, but Chris reveals that he's been accepted to Albright College's teaching program. Stan congratulates Chris, but Jason mocks him, teasing that he won't last as a teacher and that he'll come begging for his old job at Olstead's back.

Jason and Chris's money woes are telling: despite how hard it is to work at Olstead's (as evidenced by the serious injury Stan sustained on the job), they scrimp by without much discretionary income. Jason's dismissive and mocking reaction to Chris's news indicates that he likely feels jealous or insecure about his own future—whereas Chris has big dreams, Jason is only focused on short-term and relatively frivolous goals like getting a motorcycle.

Stan reluctantly agrees with Jason—it's unwise to walk away from Olstead's given how high the pay is and how in-demand jobs at the plant are. Chris counters that he has aspirations and wants to do something different than his parents. Jason teases him about these aspirations, asking if it's Black History Month (Chris replies that it is, actually) and says that it should be called "Make White People Feel Guilty Month" instead. Stan refuses to back Jason up on this.

Stan's cynicism about giving up the sought-after pay at Olstead's implies that even when working-class people have the opportunity to raise their station in life and take a safer job, they often choose not to do so because of the uncertainty and break with tradition that it requires. Jason's taunting reinforces his insecurity about Chris's aspirations, as it's clear he resorts to casual racism out of his own discomfort and jealousy.

Chris continues to defend his decision to leave Olstead's, complaining about the loud machines and reasoning that their jobs could easily be automated. He asks Jason if he has a backup plan, but Jason is set on retiring from the plant at 50 with a pension. Suddenly, Jason seems hurt and questions why Chris didn't tell him about the teaching program until now. Chris can't leave, Jason says—they're supposed to be a team that retires and opens a Dunkin' Donuts franchise together. Chris says that this is just something he has to do, and Jason begrudgingly accepts this before asking Stan to pour Chris a shot to shut him up.

Jason is hurt that Chris didn't tell him about Albright before now, and he's disappointed at the thought of his best friend leaving him. This is similar to Jason's mother Tracey's discouraging reaction to Cynthia going for a promotion at Olstead's: clearly, neither wants to be left behind while their friend attempts to get ahead in life. Chris is understandably afraid of getting stuck at Olstead's (like Chris and Jason's parents have), as such work is high-paying but dangerous, insecure, and devoid of much potential for advancement.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

March 4, 2000. In the news, a brass hardware maker plans to open a 280,000-square-foot factory in Leesport, Pennsylvania. Brucie sits sipping a drink at the **bar**, where the Republican debate between Keyes, McCain, and Bush is playing in the background. Stan asks Brucie who he favors, but Brucie thinks it doesn't matter because "they'll all shit on us in the end." Oscar enters and begins restocking the bar, listening in on the conversation. After some small talk, Stan asks Brucie how long he's been locked out of the textile mill, and Brucie replies 93 weeks. Brucie and the other employees didn't want to accept a new contract that would take away their retirement benefits; even after the employees offered a 50-percent pay cut, the company still won't budge.

Leesport is located in the same county as Reading, so the opening of an enormous new factory suggests that the Rust Belt's economy is volatile: some industries are booming, while others (like textile manufacturing, in the case of Brucie) are struggling. Hearing Brucie's side of the story adds nuance to Cynthia's prior conversation with Stan and Tracey—his distress (if not his substance abuse) is understandable given how long he's been locked out and the loss of pay and benefits he's up against if he and the other workers concede.

Brucie complains that he's worked at the mill since he was 18, and now the company expects them to be "wage slaves" for a lifetime. Stan asks if the mill has brought in temporary workers, and Brucie says they're bringing in Mexican laborers who are willing to work "to the bone" before being replaced by "a fresh batch" three months later. Brucie is only holding out because he hopes standing strong with the union will result in a big payout—but he also recognizes that his years of hard work have been pointless.

Brucie's feelings of being trapped, underappreciated, and undercompensated at the mill highlight the difficult reality of being a blue-collar laborer, as he's seemingly worked hard for his entire adult life only to be turned away and denied what he was promised. His comment about Mexican temp workers also adds insight to the racial tensions that exist among Reading's white, black, and Latinx populations: white and black working-class people likely feel threatened by the presence of Mexican immigrants in their community, as they perceive such individuals as a threat to their own job security.

Stan sympathizes with Brucie: he says he's thankful he got injured because it allowed him to escape the prison of Olstead's. Three generations of his family had worked there, yet he was "nobody to them" in spite of his 28 thankless years on the floor. Brucie feels the same way, and he confides in Stan that he no longer knows what his purpose is. He recently had an encounter at the union with a white man who claimed that black people like Brucie came north to take people's jobs. Brucie is tired of this "blame game."

Stan's reflection that he was "nobody" to Olstead's again helps explain the disillusionment that most of the play's characters feel, as they're consistently devalued and cast aside by the very companies to which they dedicate their lives. Brucie's experience with the racist "blame game" shows that Reading's black residents are discriminated against in a similar way to Latinx people—and that economic strife like the union members are experiencing has a way of bringing this racial animosity to the surface.

Just then, Cynthia, Tracey, and Jessie enter the **bar**. Cynthia and Brucie have a tense exchange, and Tracey and Jessie encourage Cynthia to ignore Brucie's attempts at charming her. Finally, after relentlessly harassing the women at their table, Cynthia marches up to Brucie and demands to know what he wants. He tells her that he's in a program, but Cynthia is unimpressed since having a drink in a bar doesn't seem to align with rehab. Cynthia tells Brucie the news about their son Chris's acceptance to Albright, urging him to be supportive even though Brucie think tuition is too expensive and that Chris is a fool to walk away from Olstead's.

Brucie's unenthusiastic reaction to Chris's pursuit of higher education echoes Jason and Stan's skepticism: Brucie is similarly discouraging about the notion of giving up the competitive pay at Olstead's despite his own struggles in the manufacturing industry. This once again highlights the common phenomenon of working-class people (like those in Reading) getting stuck in unfulfilling jobs, as well as the tendency for people to respond with disapproval rather than support when their loved ones attempt to break from the status quo.

The conversation then turns to the promotion to Warehouse Supervisor that Cynthia and Tracey are both going for. Brucie offends Cynthia with a joke that Olstead's must be desperate to consider them, after which he apologizes for what happened in December and claims that he's getting clean. He begs for another chance, but Cynthia remains skeptical—though she does give into his smooth ploys for a kiss. This angers Tracey and Jessie, who yell at Brucie to either get clean or leave Cynthia alone. Brucie becomes emotional and again begs Cynthia to take him back, but Cynthia denies him.

Again, Brucie's rude reaction to Cynthia and Tracey's earnest aspirations is likely based in resentment, as Cynthia and Tracey have the potential to make significant career progress while Brucie is prevented from even going to work. Meanwhile, Brucie is clearly remorseful over the choices he's made during the lockout, yet the fact that he's still drinking while he's in a rehab program suggests that his internalized shame over losing his job and failing his family is perhaps driving him to keep using substances rather than making any meaningful progress.

ACT 1, SCENE 5

April 17, 2000. In the news, the "tech bubble" has recently burst, causing a record 617-point drop in the Dow Jones. Tracey is smoking outside the **bar**, and Oscar steps out to ask her for a cigarette. She denies him, and they get into a tense spat and hurl insults at each other. Finally, Tracey breaks and gives Oscar a cigarette. Oscar asks Tracey a series of questions about what it's like to work at Olstead's, finally revealing that he saw a job posting at the Latino Community Center and that he's thinking of applying. He shows Tracey the poster, but she doesn't believe it's real—Olstead's isn't hiring, she says. Further, she tells him that he'd have to be in the union and would have to know someone at the plant to get hired.

The news headline in this act again emphasizes the volatility of the economy as a whole—even those working in the tech industry, who presumably make much more money than the characters in Sweat *do, are facing financial uncertainty at this time. The fact that Olstead's is seemingly turning to the Latino Community Center for job recruiting doesn't bode well for current employees like Tracey, who denies that the plant is even hiring. If Olstead's brings in Latinx (and particularly Latinx immigrant) workers who are willing to work for a lower wage due to a lack of opportunity elsewhere, this foreshadows potential tension between the Latinx community and the predominantly white Olstead's workers who are at risk of being replaced.*

Changing the subject, Oscar notes the loud party in the **bar**, and Tracey informs him that they're celebrating Cynthia's recent promotion. She tells Oscar that she's just as qualified as Cynthia is and that Olstead's only promoted Cynthia because they'll get tax breaks for having a manager who's a minority. Oscar is doubts this, but Tracey is adamant that this is just the way things are—but she reassures him that she's not prejudiced. Then, Tracey makes an offhanded comment about "you guys coming over here" to get jobs, but Oscar tells her that he was born in Berks County just like she was.

Rather than supporting her friend, Tracey reacts to Cynthia's promotion with jealousy and spite. She even resorts to racism, which was seemingly not an issue in their relationship until now. This, along with the offhand racist comment that Tracey makes about Latinx people, suggests that she feels threatened by others getting ahead while she remains stagnant, and that such a situation can create or exacerbate racial tension.

Tracey responds that her family has been in Reading since the 1920s—"they built this town." She tells Oscar that her grandfather was a German craftsman who was a talented woodworker and a respected figure in the community. She remembers how back then, Reading's downtown was beautiful and people used to dress up to go shopping. Manual laborers and craftsmen were respected—now, Tracey is saddened by how ugly and generic all of the buildings in town look. Oscar asks if she's okay, to which Tracey curtly replies that "Olstead's isn't for you."

Tracey's reflections about how Reading used to be gives more context for her cruel behavior: she's clearly disillusioned and cynical about how the working-class community is now undervalued rather than respected for their hard work. As a result, she feels particularly threatened by those she perceives as outsiders who could potentially replace her—and this manifests in racism toward Oscar and Latinx people in general, whom Tracey is adamant don't belong at Olstead's or in Reading.

ACT 1, SCENE 6

May 5, 2000. In the news, U.S. unemployment reaches a 30-year low; the city of Reading fires several employees as the city faces a $10 million deficit. At the **bar**, Stan prepares a gimlet for Jessie, who's eyeing a birthday cake on the counter. Oscar plays a handheld video game behind the bar. Jessie tells Stan that Tracey and Cynthia were supposed to meet her here an hour ago. Stan asks if something is going on, and Jessie tells him that Cynthia's promotion is creating a lot of tension with Tracey. Tracey is pretending it's not a big deal, but she's also spreading a rumor that Cynthia only got the job because she's black. Stan thinks it's ridiculous that people at Olstead's are angry about the promotion since Cynthia earned it fair and square—they're just resistant to change.

The contrast between the national headline and the local one shows that despite overall economic prosperity in the U.S., there are still communities like Reading that are struggling financially. This likely contributes to characters' sense of injustice as they struggle to make ends meet despite their hard work—to people like Tracey, it probably seems as though everyone else is getting ahead while she's underpaid and underappreciated. Jessie's comment that there are a lot of people mad at Cynthia for her new job reinforces this: rather than supporting their longtime coworker, people feel resentful and even more disillusioned with the system given that they will likely never receive promotions of their own.

Jessie says she's sick of being stuck in the middle between Tracey and Cynthia; she gives up on waiting and asks Stan to get a knife for the cake. Jessie blows out the candles, and Stan affectionately wishes her a happy birthday. Just as Jessie begins to cut the cake, Cynthia rushes in and apologizes for being late—she got stuck in a meeting. She gives Jessie her birthday gift, a Cher CD, and the two of them hug and sing a few lines from "Believe" together. Cynthia tells Jessie about her meeting with the other Olstead's supervisors, all of whom have big ideas for how to run the floor more efficiently despite never having operated the plant's machines.

Unlike Tracey, Jessie is supportive of Cynthia and refuses to get in the middle of her friends' conflict. This could be due to the fact that Jessie is more apathetic about Olstead's (as evidenced by how she shows up to work drunk), which might make her less resentful of those who get ahead. Tracey, on the other hand, cares very much about being acknowledged and respected for her work, so it's a slap in the face that Cynthia has advanced while Tracey is stuck in the same job.

Stan comments that it must feel great to be a manager after so many years on the floor, and Cynthia confirms that it is—she has an office with a computer, and she no longer has to stay on her feet for 10 hours without air-conditioning. She reflects how, despite working at Olstead's for 24 years, she never spoke to anyone else in the office part of the plant before now. Suddenly, Chris and Jason burst into the **bar**, immediately infecting the room with energy. They wish Jessie a happy birthday, and Chris tells everyone that they just took a spin on Jason's new motorcycle. Jason asks where his mom is, but Jessie doesn't know; Jason reassures her that Tracey will show up.

Cynthia's experience as a new manger is telling: it seems that Olstead's white-collar workers rarely if ever interact with the blue-collar laborers, an atmosphere that explains why the floor workers feel overlooked and disrespected. The poor working conditions (long hours with no air-conditioning) likely also contribute to the floor workers' discontent, as management is comfortable and insulated while those on the floor suffer physically, financially, and emotionally.

Chris comments on how professionally Cynthia is dressed, and Cynthia and Jessie reminisce about how they looked when they first started at Olstead's: Cynthia had an Afro and platform heels, and Jessie had hair down to her bottom. Jessie recalls how she started at the plant when she was 18 (Jason bets that she was hot back then, and Stan confirms that she was). Jessie only planned on working long enough to save the money she needed to backpack in Asia along "hippie trails" with her boyfriend. But that never happened—she met Dan, her now-ex-husband, and got caught in the "riptide" of working. Now, Jessie regrets not getting out and seeing the world. She becomes emotional, and Stan shares that he saw some of the world after he was in the Vietnam War and reassures her that sometimes "not knowing" is better.

Jessie's unrealized dreams show the long-term consequences of getting stuck at a factory like Olstead's: rather than saving enough money to achieve her goals, Jessie ended up stuck in a cycle of work in which she essentially forfeited her dreams and dedicated her life to a company for little in return. However, Stan's wisdom about the downsides of seeing the world suggests that it's counterproductive to look back on the past with regret—and sometimes, it's better to stay with what's comfortable and familiar rather than branch out and risk experiencing traumatic things.

Just then, Tracey rushes into the **bar** and announces that the party can begin. She and Cynthia get into a spat about how late she is, and Tracey brushes Jessie off when Jessie asks if she's okay. Jessie notes that the gathering suddenly doesn't feel like a celebration. When Tracey avoids sitting next to Cynthia, Cynthia confronts her: they've been friends for a long time, she says, so Tracey should speak her mind instead of creating tension if she has a problem. She tells Tracey that she doesn't deserve what Tracey has been saying and asks her not to make the promotion about race.

Tracey's rude behavior toward Cynthia is driving a wedge in their decades-long friendship. This is particularly hypocritical given that Tracey went for the same job and likely would have taken the promotion if she had been offered it. Clearly, Tracey is acting out because she feels jealous of Cynthia and left behind by one of her oldest friends.

Tracey admits that she's hurt because Cynthia is rubbing elbows with management while ignoring Tracey on the floor. Cynthia understands, but she asks them all to cut her some slack since she's under so much pressure. At this, Tracey asks if there's something Cynthia isn't telling them and if there are going to be layoffs, which alarms Jason and Chris. Cynthia hesitates to answer. She admits that there's been talk of cutting overhead, and Tracey makes her promise to tell them if she hears anything definitive. She calls Oscar over to read Cynthia the job posting from the Latino Community Center.

Tracey's admission of how hurt she is drives home the idea that people tend to react with resentment rather than support when they feel left behind by their love ones—even, and especially, if they're all in the same boat of trying to stay afloat in life. Meanwhile, the revelation about potential layoffs gives legitimacy to the job posting at the Latino Community Center: it seems that Olstead's may indeed be going behind their employees' backs to look for replacements who are willing to work for lower pay.

ACT 1, SCENE 7

July 4, 2000. In the news, the pay gap between men and women is narrowing; Reading cracks down on a recent increase in violent crime and takes measures to combat urban blight. As Chris and Jason rush out of the **bar**, Brucie (who's smoking a cigarette outside) asks Chris if his mom is inside. Chris says she isn't and tells Brucie to give Cynthia some space. Then, Brucie begs Chris for money until he hands over $10. Chris and Jason are in a hurry: they tell Brucie that Olstead's moved three mills out of the factory over the long weekend. Management posted a list of names (including Chris and Jason) on the door that no one was supposed to see until tomorrow, so Chris and Jason are rushing over to read the list for themselves.

Again, while society as a whole is seemingly progressing, Reading is still facing social and economic problems, emphasizing how working-class communities often don't experience any benefits when other socioeconomic groups undergo a positive upswing. Meanwhile, the fact that Olstead's has gotten rid of machines and posted names on the door doesn't bode well for the workers—it seems the company is going forward with cutting overhead and is beginning to cast its employees out in an underhanded manner, which will only add to people like Chris and Jason's sense of disillusionment with the system.

Brucie laughs cynically and warns Chris and Jason that this is only the first step; he advises them to take the small concessions they're offered before there's a lockout and temporary labor is brought in. This is the situation Brucie is in—he and the other textile mill workers walked out, and there hasn't been a resolution in the nearly two years since. Brucie gives Chris his $10 back and warns them that no machines means no jobs. Chris and Jason run off to Olstead's.

As a drug addict who's resorted to begging his own son for cash, Brucie is a prime example of how far people can fall when they're locked out and their livelihoods are stripped away from them. His comment about temp workers also raises a red flag, as it reaffirms the possibility that Olstead's is recruiting people from Reading's Latinx community as temporary labor, which will certainly worsen the racism already being espoused by people like Tracey.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

October 13, 2008. In the news, the Dow Jones has a record-breaking gain, and global government-funded bank bailouts are approved; Berks County, Pennsylvania, experiences a 111-percent rise in power shutoffs. Jason has come to visit Tracey, and he's disappointed that his mom isn't happy to see him—she forbids Jason from sitting down and tells him that his facial tattoos are stupid. Tracey hands over $5, and they get into an argument about her not offering him more money until Jason suddenly notices that Tracey is strung out on drugs. He asks how long this has been going on, but Tracey denies that she has a problem—she claims she only takes medicine for back pain. However, she snatches the $5 back, clearly desperate for a fix. Jason, horrified, asks Tracey how this could have happened.

In 2008, much the world is in the midst of the Great Recession. While big businesses are recovering and banks are being bailed out, poor and working-class people (like those in Berks County, where Reading is located) are struggling to pay basic expenses like electricity bills. Tracey, who's clearly addicted to drugs and can hardly spare $5, is a clear example of how this economic inequality can cost people their livelihoods and their wellbeing.

The scene switches to Chris, who's come to visit Cynthia at her barren apartment. Chris asks when she moved, and Cynthia (who's wearing a maintenance worker uniform) gives a vague answer about falling behind on her house payments. She asks Chris why he didn't tell her he got released, and he says he didn't want to bother her—but Cynthia is adamant that Chris stay with her. She notices the Bible Chris is holding and says she heard he got "churchy," but Chris replies that this book saved his life.

Cynthia has lost her house (and seemingly her Warehouse Supervisor job at Olstead's), again showing how the global recession has disproportionately affected working-class people and left them destitute. Meanwhile, Chris's conviction that Christianity saved his life suggests that he has extended at least some level of forgiveness to himself, and that this attitude is what has allowed him to keep pushing forward rather than being destroyed by his shame and guilt.

Changing the subject, Cynthia invites Chris to sit down and relax, and they each comment on how different the other looks. Cynthia tells him that she's been working some hours doing maintenance at the university and at a nursing home. She apologizes for not visiting Chris in prison recently because it got too expensive. Suddenly, Cynthia becomes emotional and again apologizes to Chris, saying "I shoulda..." though Chris doesn't think she has anything to be sorry about. Chris asks about Tracey, but Cynthia says tells him they're not in contact anymore "after what went down." Chris then shares that Jason is out too, which angers Cynthia—she reflects that Jason is the one who got Chris into trouble. She could have killed him, she says. Cynthia asks Chris what happened back then—she's still trying to understand.

Cynthia's apology to Chris and vague comment that "I shoulda..." implies that on some level, she blames herself for whatever situation landed Chris and Jason in prison. However, Jason's belief that she shouldn't be sorry suggests that Cynthia's self-blame is unwarranted—and it's likely holding her back and causing her unnecessary emotional pain. Additionally, the fact that Cynthia is no longer friends with Tracey shows the long-term consequences that can happen when one friend feels left behind by another: in their case, a decades-long friendship was thrown away seemingly because Tracey was resentful rather than supportive of Cynthia's upward trajectory.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

July 17, 2000. Eight years earlier. In the news, easing eligibility requirements allows more Reading families to receive free and reduced school lunches. Several large U.S. corporations develop more leadership opportunities for minority employees. In the **bar**, Stan and Oscar look on as Tracey, Chris, Jason, and Jessie yell at Cynthia, demanding to know what's going on. Cynthia pleads with them to stop shouting and says that she's been fighting for them—she had no idea Olstead's was going to ship off the three machines. Tracey accuses her of avoiding them, but Cynthia says she's been in meetings trying to get answers—she'd lose her job if management knew she was talking to them.

Again, the contrast between local and national headlines shows that despite general progress being made in the U.S., communities like Reading are struggling financially both in 2008 and 2000, emphasizing the unique hardships that the working class continually faces. Tracey and the others' anger at Cynthia exemplifies the toll that this financial struggle can take on people's personal lives. Additionally, the fact that most of Reading is feeling this strain makes others less *supportive of Cynthia achieving upward mobility for rather than more so—desperation seems to breed resentment rather than solidarity.*

Cynthia reluctantly reveals that Olstead's is going to renegotiate the floor workers' contracts, and they're prepared to fight for significant concessions. Tracey says that they're not afraid to strike in response, and Jason and Chris agree. Cynthia says that long-time employees are at risk of being fired because they get paid the most, and Olstead's can't afford this "burden." This outrages Jessie and the others, but Cynthia explains that due to NAFTA, Olstead's could simply move the factory to Mexico, where workers will happily work longer hours for a lower wage.

Olstead's sudden and rather callous demand for concessions (likely reduced pay or benefits) shows the fickle nature of blue-collar work: despite their hard labor, the floor workers at Olstead's can have their livelihoods diminished or eliminated without notice. Additionally, Cynthia's comment about NAFTA foreshadows potential hostility between the white workers and Reading's Latinx community, as the latter are likely to be stereotyped as a collective threat to the former's job security.

Jason and Chris try to reassure the others that the union will fight for them, but Cynthia counters that the union can't bring the machines (which she believes were sent to Mexico) back. Management is saying that it's too expensive to operate the U.S. plant, so Cynthia urges her friends to meet them halfway unless they want to lose their jobs entirely. Tracey is incensed—she demands that Cynthia back up her claims that she's on their side with action.

Again, it's understandable why the Olstead's workers feel so incensed and disillusioned with the company—they're seemingly being sacrificed for the sake of profits despite their often decades-long dedication to the company. Tracey's outrage at Cynthia shows just how personal this kind of situation can be: when people's livelihoods are at risk, perceived betrayals between old friends are even more serious.

Cynthia goes on to break down what's going to happen: floor workers will take a 60-percent pay cut and concessions on their benefits to save jobs, and Olstead's will lock them out if they don't accept. At this, Tracey exclaims, "Fuck you! Fuck them!" and declares that she'd sooner burn the factory down than allow Olstead's to take away her livelihood. Jason and Chris back her up. Cynthia says that now that they know what's coming, they must decide how they'll vote.

The specific concessions highlight just how dire the situation is: the floor workers will have to sacrifice nearly half their pay as well as some of their benefits to keep their jobs, essentially validating the workers' feelings of being disrespected and undervalued by the company. It's significant that Tracey lashes out at Cynthia ("you") specifically before Olstead's as a whole ("them"): since Cynthia is Tracey's closest tie to management, it seems she's become the scapegoat for the higher-ups who actually made the call to lock the employees out.

ACT 2, SCENE 3

August 4, 2000. In the news, Republican presidential candidate George Bush begins a campaign trail across the Midwest. Cynthia, sitting alone at a table in the **bar**, tells Stan she'd rather be on a cruise on the Panama Canal. Stan replies that that's a good way to spend a birthday and asks if Cynthia is alright. She confides in him that she was hoping her friends would show up, but Stan reminds her that they don't have much of a choice. Cynthia reminisces about how she felt special and accomplished when she first started at Olstead's—but now that she's gotten the managerial job she always coveted, she's been wracked with guilt over watching her friends be locked out.

Cynthia's experience after her promotion shows that sometimes, increases in status aren't entirely positive: in this case, Cynthia's added responsibility has seemingly made her even more stressed and overworked than she was as a floor worker. Her self-professed guilt, along with the fact that she's spending her birthday alone, is further evidence of how such life changes can cause conflict in one's relationships—even among beloved friends and family.

Cynthia wonders if the plant gave her the promotion on purpose so that she'd have to take the heat of the lockout, and she regretfully admits that she needs the money. She'd thought that the floor workers would take the deal they were offered. Stan reminds her that it's their friends who are locked out—many people in town wouldn't even want him serving Cynthia. Cynthia tells him to drop the attitude. She had to lock out her own son, so she fully understands the gravity of the situation. However, she also thinks that getting Chris out of Olstead's could be a silver lining.

The workers' collective disillusionment and distrust of management is justified if Cynthia's suspicions are correct, as this would mean that Olstead's promoted Cynthia just to make her a scapegoat during the lockout. However, despite Cynthia's guilt and the way her loved ones have turned on her, she seems to sense that wallowing in this isn't productive—instead, she's focusing on how the lockout could be a good thing in the long term.

Sensing how distraught Cynthia is, Stan reassures her that it's not her fault—many of Stan's customers are in Cynthia's position as other local plants institute layoffs and lockouts. He bitterly comments that politicians have no idea what's going on in the world, which is why he isn't voting. Cynthia agrees, and she suggests that maybe Freddy Brunner wasn't so crazy to burn his house down.

Stan's reassurance reflects the widespread nature of situations like what's happening at Olstead's: it seems that no one in Reading's working-class community has job security at this time. As such, it makes sense that Stan and Cynthia are cynical about career politicians and are sympathetic to Freddy. A distrust of authority and a tendency toward self-destruction seem inevitable when workers are treated as disposable and their livelihoods are thrown into question.

Just then, Tracey and Jessie enter the **bar**. The mood immediately darkens; Tracey accuses Cynthia of being a traitor, and Jessie asks Cynthia how it feels to betray her friends. Cynthia reminds them that they could have taken the deal, but Tracey says she'd rather be locked out and dependent upon union handouts than give up everything she's worked for. Cynthia replies that she didn't make the policy, but Tracey won't hear of it—she accuses Cynthia of not being on their side. She tells Cynthia how humiliating it is to be locked out, and Cynthia sympathizes but explains that she's in a difficult position.

Cynthia has been presented with the dilemma of either retaining her source of income or standing in solidarity with her friends—a choice which reflects just how unfairly Olstead's employees are treated, as they're essentially forced to pick between their financial security or their personal life. Choosing the former results in resentment among loved ones, whereas choosing the latter leaves people destitute and unstable like Freddy Brunner—either way, people in Cynthia's position lose out despite the ostensible career progress they've made.

Still, Tracey refuses to hear Cynthia out and scoffs at the idea of taking the deal. She tells Cynthia about the crowds lining up for handouts at the union office and admits that she feels lost without her job. Tracey has always been a hard worker, and now she wakes up with nowhere to go and is hesitant to spend any money or even to leave the house. She asks Cynthia why she even came to the **bar**, and Cynthia reminds Tracey that it's her birthday.

Tracey's struggles are yet another example of working-class disillusionment: having dedicated her entire adult life to Olstead's, Tracey has now essentially lost her identity along with her sense of purpose. As such, she's channeling the pain and betrayal she feels into resentment toward Cynthia—whether her friend truly deserves that treatment or not.

Tracey begins to reminisce about their trip to Atlantic City with Brucie and Hank for Cynthia's 25th birthday, when a drunken Cynthia viciously dug her nails into the fake breasts of a woman who was flirting with Brucie at the casino. This is the feisty friend Tracey misses—the friend who fought for what she loves. However, Cynthia tells Tracey and Jessie that she's been taking orders from idiotic or racist supervisors since she was 19—now that she's finally gotten a break, she can't give up the opportunity. Tracey asks Cynthia if they're supposed to feel sorry for her, and Cynthia replies that she didn't expect them to understand—Tracey and Jessie don't know what it's like to be in her shoes. Although they think she's being selfish, Cynthia believes that her job will enable her to keep fighting on behalf of her friends.

Tracey and Cynthia's conflict emphasizes the differences in their experiences: though they have similar histories as working-class laborers and have both suffered the hardships inherent to this life, Cynthia is black while Tracey is white. As such, Tracey doesn't understand the unique struggles of being a black woman overseen by presumably all-white management. Cynthia has clearly experienced racism on top of the experiences she and Tracey have in common, uniquely deepening Cynthia's disillusionment with the system and further compounding the divide between the two women.

ACT 2, SCENE 4

September 28, 2000. In the news, Venus and Serena Williams win gold medals in women's doubles tennis at the Summer Olympics; three Mexican migrant farmworkers in Reading are killed in a car accident. Jason and Chris stumble into the **bar**, where Brucie is slumped over at a table, looking high. Relieved to have found his father, Chris asks where Brucie has been. He tells Brucie that Cynthia is worried and that he needs to pull himself together. Brucie tells Chris and Jason to leave him alone, but then he begs Chris to listen to something that recently happened to him: Brucie was protesting on the union line when it started to rain, and but couldn't flee with everyone else because he felt paralyzed. Finally, someone pulled him into a tent, where he sat shaking. He felt completely out of control.

The contrast between the Williams sisters' triumph in this headline and Cynthia's admitted struggles in the previous act implies that while minorities are experiencing success in some realms, those in predominantly white and working-class communities still have hurdles to overcome. Meanwhile, Brucie's story of feeling literally paralyzed during the protest is symbolic of the figurative paralysis most of the play's characters are feeling: without any indication of when their respective lockouts will end, they're essentially trapped in a limbo in which they're unwilling to give into their companies' demands but also unwilling (or unable) to move on and seek work elsewhere.

Chris tells Brucie not to let the lockout get to him, and Brucie reassures Chris that he's okay. Stan pours Chris a beer, and Brucie asks Chris about Olstead's and about college. The lockout is getting hostile, Chris says, and he's decided not to enroll at school this semester because he can't afford the tuition. Brucie asks what Cynthia thinks about this, but Chris says that his relationship with her is strained right now.

The conflict in Chris and Cynthia's relationship once again shows the interpersonal consequences of trying to get ahead in life. While Cynthia sees her job at Olstead's as an indispensable opportunity (and the lockout as a way of giving Chris the necessary push to pursue his dreams), Chris seems to be at least partially aligned with Tracey and the others, viewing Cynthia's management role as a betrayal rather than a triumph.

Brucie worries that protesting with the union isn't such a good idea for Chris, but Chris remembers the first time Brucie walked out of his job: Brucie held a meeting with about a dozen other men at their house after one of their coworkers lost his hand in the mill. Brucie had shouted about how they'd rise up and vote if the company didn't meet their demands. After school, Chris and his friends rode their bikes to watch the men picket at the mill—he remembers that they looked "like warriors" standing in solidarity.

Having come from a legacy of blue-collar union workers, Chris holds romantic ideals of union protestors as "warriors" pursuing social justice. However, Brucie's current state—financially destitute and constantly inebriated—shows the long-term consequences of trying to take a stand against companies like Olstead's. Brucie's fall sends the discouraging message that Reading's working class is unappreciated and cast out no matter how hard they work or how persistently they fight.

Chris says that this memory inspires him to be remain strong on the line; he and Jason are adamant that Olstead's won't break them. But Brucie remains skeptical: he tells Chris that they don't "give a damn about your black ass" and reminds Chris that he has the opportunity to get an education—something Brucie never had. He encourages Chris not to back down from his aspirations. What will happen, he asks, when the line thins out?

Although Brucie was initially skeptical of Chris's aspiration to become a teacher, he's now supportive. Having suffered the consequences of being undervalued by a company, Brucie wants something entirely different for his son—even if that means feeling left behind when Chris moves on. Additionally, his comment about Olstead's not caring about Chris because he's black supports Cynthia's conviction that her identity as a black woman makes her even more devalued and disposable at Olstead's. The discrimination that minorities face in Reading seems to worsen the already difficult struggles of working-class life.

ACT 2, SCENE 5

October 26, 2000. In the news, the U.S. experiences yet another school shooting despite government reassurance that schools are safe; 200 people camp out overnight at a Reading electronics store to buy the new $350 Play Station 2. At the **bar**, Jessie is slumped over at a table while Stan checks inventory. When Oscar enters, Stan tells him he crossed a line and asks when he was going to tell him. Oscar explains that Olstead's was hiring part-time temps; he hopes that picking up some hours will eventually lead to a full-time job. Stan warns him to be careful—the locked-out floor workers are sure to be angry that Oscar is earning money while they're out of a job. Oscar says that this isn't his problem, but Stan is adamant that he shouldn't work at Olstead's.

The local headline in this act could imply that income inequality is an issue in Reading, as some people are clearly able to afford expensive video game systems while many others are struggling to make ends meet. This would presumably make people like Oscar, who are just trying to keep their heads above water, even more disillusioned with their station in life. The fact that others are in the same boat doesn't make them any more sympathetic, however—as Stan recognizes, the financial strain that the working-class community is facing is likely to make them hostile toward Oscar rather than supportive of him, especially given that he's working at the very company many of them were locked out of.

Stan offers to ask Howard about giving Oscar a raise, but Oscar tells him that Olstead's is paying $11 per hour—$3 more than what he makes at the **bar**. Stan warns Oscar that he's going to make enemies and that he's helping to do away with the wages and benefits that Stan's father's generation fought so hard to earn. But Oscar maintains that he's just trying to make a living; his father worked in a steel factory too, because it was "the American way." For years, he swept floors with the pipe dream of being hired onto the floor. Oscar knows how his father feels—people at the bar never acknowledge him, so he doesn't feel obligated to care about them either. Still, Stan advises him to look elsewhere for a job.

Oscar's situation is another example of how racism compounds the hardships that working-class people face: despite Oscar's father working tirelessly as per "the American way" of pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps, being a Latinx person meant that he was never accepted into the in-group of the factory workers. Oscar is similarly underappreciated and ignored at the bar, so it's understandable that he doesn't feel any particular sense of loyalty or solidarity with the Olstead's workers.

Just as Oscar goes to take some beer crates to the back, Tracey walks into the **bar**. She orders a double vodka and updates Stan on the lockout: the union is offering people money to go back to school, but Tracey has resigned to taking the meager handouts until she can find another job. She tells Stan to put the drink on her tab, but Stan says he can't—Howard is only allowing cash or credit since so many people have been unable to pay their tabs. Tracey doesn't have a credit card, so she makes a show of gathering her spare change until Stan offers to pay for the drink.

Again, Tracey's struggles show the potentially self-destructive consequences of working-class disillusionment: having been cast out from the company to which she dedicated her life, Tracey is now struggling to make ends meet and to rediscover a sense of purpose. As a result, she seems to be self-medicating with alcohol as a means of escape, despite not even being able to pay for a drink.

Oscar walks back in, looking uncomfortably at Tracey. Tracey is immediately hostile, hurling racial slurs at Oscar. She charges at Oscar, but Stan holds her back. Oscar laughs, asking Tracey what she's going to do. Stan orders him to take a break, and Tracey warns Oscar to see what happens if he talks to her that way when Jason is around. Oscar replies that he doesn't have a problem with her and that the situation at Olstead's isn't personal—but Tracey counters that it *is* personal for her.

Stan's advice to Oscar has proven correct: though Tracey and Oscar are both desperate to make money, this common struggle doesn't make Tracey any more understanding of Oscar. Rather, her own hardships cause her to view Oscar's attempts to achieve a higher socioeconomic level as a personal affront, which this passage shows could result in a physical confrontation—whether between Tracey and Oscar or Jason and Oscar.

ACT 2, SCENE 6

November 3, 2000. In the news, Bush and Al Gore are closely matched in the polls leading up to Election Day; Reading proposes an increase on income tax. Chris and Jason burst into the **bar**, where a drunk Jessie is sitting at a table. Chris and Jason are riled up, and when Stan asks what's going on, they tell him that there was a fight between "the scabs" and some of the guys on the line. Stan says that this won't help their cause, but Jason thinks they need to teach the temps (who don't seem all that temporary) a lesson. He reasons that it would be a waste of time to give in and take the deal now.

Reading's proposed tax increase adds yet another layer to the working-class community's struggles: already experiencing economic hardship, they may face even more financial strain at the hands of the government in addition to the widespread lockouts in town. The disillusionment that these intersecting situations are causing has seemingly brought out racial animosity within Reading's white working class, as evidenced by Jason's casual use of a racist slur in reference to the Latinx temp workers.

Jason asks Stan what he thinks, and Stan replies that maybe it's time for Jason to move on and find opportunity somewhere else. Reading isn't what it used to be, he says, and people tend to get weighed down by emotional and physical baggage when they stay in one place for too long. Stan knew Jason's dad, Hank, and he recalls that Olstead's took his life too early. Jason says that if things don't go as planned, he'll go to the Gulf to work on an oil rig, which Stan thinks is a good idea since it pays exceptionally well—he'd go himself if he were 30 years younger. Stan says that there's nothing left in Reading and that "nostalgia's a disease" he won't succumb to.

This passage implies that Jason's father, Hank, was killed in a work-related accident at Olstead's. This could partially explain why Tracey and Jason are even more outraged than others about how Olstead's is treating the locked-out workers, as they've lost a beloved husband and father, in addition to their own livelihoods, to the company. Meanwhile, Stan's attitude is an important contrast to that of people like Tracey. Rather than being hung up on the past, he's adamant that "nostalgia is a disease"—essentially, that moving on and taking advantage of present opportunities is necessary to avoid self-destruction.

Chris is tired of talking about all this; he suggests they get drunk, smoke a blunt, and relax, which Jason is all for. Stan asks about Chris's girlfriend, but Chris says that he broke up with her because she couldn't handle him being out of work. He agrees with Stan that they should get out of Reading. Chris doesn't want to end up like Brucie, and he longer cares what people will think of him if he goes against the norm and does something other than factory work.

Chris seems to have conflicting feelings about Olstead's: while the lockout has cost him his paycheck and his relationship (and he's afraid of ending up like his father), he's also been adamantly aligned with the union up until this now. This is another way in which the hardships of working-class life can leave people disillusioned and paralyzed: people like Chris are often stuck in a dilemma between staying with what's familiar and forging a new, uncertain path.

Just then, Tracey emerges from the bathroom and asks Jason to buy her a drink. Chris offers to pay instead, and Jessie rouses and asks for a drink as well. Stan pours both drinks, and Tracey begins to tell a story about a mutual acquaintance just as Oscar walks in. When he and Tracey see each other, Oscar offers to come back another time to get his stuff from the back. Jessie shouts a racial slur at him, and Jason stands up; Stan warns him not to do anything. Jason calls Oscar a "spic," and Tracey makes a racist comment as well.

Oscar has presumably come to pick up his things because he's quit his job at the bar—likely because he's gotten enough hours at Olstead's to support himself. Again, the floor workers' resentment has seemingly caused them to turn against Oscar (who's struggling financially just like they are) rather than having compassion for his situation. Tracey, Jessie, and Jason all resort to using racist slurs against Oscar, exemplifying how these widespread feelings of disillusionment and resentment can worsen racial tension in communities like Reading.

Chris and Stan try to calm Jason down, reasoning that the situation at Olstead's isn't Oscar's fault—he's only trying to make a living just like they are. But Tracey and Jessie egg Jason on, and he maintains that he wants to set Oscar straight. Stan slams a baseball bat down on the **bar**, yelling at Jason to sit down, and Jason does. But then, Tracey makes a comment about what Hank would do if he were here, and Jason balls up his fists. Oscar walks back in with his things, shakes Stan's hand and thanks him for everything, and goes to leave—but Jason stands in his way.

Stan's defense of Oscar echoes one of the play central messages: when people allow their anger to take over, such hostility tends to be misplaced, and innocent people wind up as scapegoats. The floor workers should be (and are) angry at Olstead's, but they also direct their anger at Latinx temp workers like Oscar because it's easier to go after marginalized outsiders than it is to win the conditions they want from the company's higher-ups. Rather than understanding that Oscar is only taking advantage of a rare opportunity, they view him as complicit with Olstead's much like they view Cynthia as a betrayer for being part of management. Additionally, Tracey's invocation of Hank's memory is a catalyst that brings Jason's anger and resentment to the surface, as knowing that his father died working for the very company that's now shutting them out is too much for Jason to bear.

Despite Chris's pleas to let Oscar pass, Jason won't back down—he doesn't know why, but he can't let Oscar walk out of the **bar**. Jason shoves Oscar and pushes Stan to the ground when he tries to intervene. Oscar goes to help Stan, but Jason grabs him, and a chaotic fight ensues. Chris tries to break it up, but Oscar headbutts him, and Tracey and Jessie continue egging the situation on. Now angry, Chris puts Oscar in a headlock and beats him to the ground. Jason grabs the bat from the bar and hits Oscar in the stomach. Again, Stan tries to intervene, but Jason swings back and accidentally hits Stan in the head. He falls back, hits his head on the bar, and slumps to the ground, bleeding. Tracey exclaims, "Stan?!"

This passage is the climax of the play, as the mystery of the crime that landed Chris and Jason in prison is finally revealed. Having allowed himself to be consumed by self-destructive anger, resentment, and misplaced animosity, Jason unfairly takes out his woes on Oscar. In the process, he influences his best friend to commit assault and winds up seriously injuring Stan, an innocent bystander who has nothing to do with the conflict surrounding the lockout. As such, this tragic outcome demonstrates the far-reaching consequences that economic strain can have on individuals and on the communities to which they belong.

ACT 2, TRANSITION

September 24, 2008. In the news, President Bush is preparing to warn the American people that the economy will be in dire trouble if Congress doesn't immediately approve a $700 billion bailout for Wall Street.

This headline serves as a short interlude which brings the audience back into the context of 2008. It's significant that just prior to this, Jason and Chris are so distraught and resentful about their financial woes that they commit assault against an innocent person—the play has shown that the hardships working-class Americans face can destroy individuals' lives and the very fabric of struggling communities. As such, the news of an enormous Wall Street bailout emphasizes the inequality present in American society and the unjust nature of ordinary Americans' job insecurity and inability to make ends meet.

ACT 2, SCENE 7

October 15, 2008. In the news, U.S. stocks fall 733 points, the second-worst decline in history. In his parole meeting, Chris finishes telling Evan about his encounter with Jason. Evan reassures him that it's okay not to feel angry at Jason anymore—forgiveness is the easier path. Chris shares how the night of the assault, he'd planned on driving down to Philadelphia to go clubbing with friends and then visit Albright College the next day. He regrets not walking away from the **bar**. Now, he feels like people only look at him like a criminal. He prays for forgiveness, but all he sees are closed doors in front of him.

This headline indicates that in the eight years that have passed since Act Two, Scene 6, the U.S. economy is still struggling—it seems that working-class communities like Reading's have been unable to escape financial hardship. Meanwhile, Chris's struggle to forgive himself is an example what can happen if a person is unable to overcome shame and self-blame: rather than being able to move forward and achieve his goals, Chris is paralyzed by his perception that he's undeserving of or excluded from life's opportunities.

Evan shifts, and the scene switches. He's now talking with Jason. Evan suggests that Jason and Chris meet up to talk. Jason hasn't thought about the assault in a long time, but now everything in Reading reminds him of that day. Jason felt too depressed staying with Tracey, so now he's camping in the woods. He hasn't been able to focus since running into Chris—he remembers the "blind fury" when he attacked Oscar and admits that he hasn't been able to shake it since. Evan tells Jason that he's experiencing shame, and that this is a crippling, unproductive emotion that can destroy people. In Jason and Chris's separate meetings, Evan asks what each man is going to do about the present moment, and Jason and Chris both answer that they hear him.

Like Chris, Jason is held back by the shame he feels over assaulting Oscar—but whereas Chris's shame manifests in self-doubt, Jason's is expressed through "blind fury" at himself and others, which could easily lead to further violence down the line. In either case, their reactions are counterproductive. Evan's advice to both men echoes Stan's sentiments from Act Two, Scene 6 and serves as one of the most important messages of the book: everyone makes mistakes, and in order to move on and prevent further damage to oneself and others, it's imperative that people learn to let go of shame and forgive themselves.

ACT 2, SCENE 8

October 18, 2008. In the news, thousands of Latin American immigrants are leaving the U.S. as manual labor and service industry jobs dry up. Chris enters the **bar**, which has been refurbished, and sits at a table. Oscar is standing behind the counter. Oscar says he heard that Chris and Jason got out, and he pours Jason a beer. Chris compliments the bar's new look, and Oscar says they're catering to a new crowd—the customers have been mostly college kids since Olstead's closed. He tells Chris that Howard retired to Phoenix—Oscar is the manager and weekend bartender now, which impresses Chris.

The news of Latinx immigrants leaving the U.S. suggests that white working-class people and minority immigrants are facing similar struggles—and thus, the racial tension between these two groups is largely misplaced and unwarranted. Chris seems to have come to this conclusion on his own, as he clearly no longer resents Oscar for taking hours at Olstead's and now wants to make peace. The bar, as an ongoing symbol of both working-class escapism and of nostalgia and tradition, has been remodeled since 2000, which sends the message that it's possible for a community—and the individuals that comprise it—to adapt and move on rather than staying hung up on the past. Oscar's upward trajectory from busboy to manager mirrors this idea.

Just as Chris is about to say something, Jason walks in. Oscar grows nervous and asks what's going on. Jason panics and turns to leave, but Chris tells him to stay. Just then, Stan—now severely disabled due to his traumatic brain injury—enters. Chris acknowledges him, but Oscar tells him that Stan can't hear very well. They watch as Stan wipes tables and struggles to reach for his cloth when he drops it; Jason rushes over and picks it up for him. Stan thanks him in garbled speech. Jason says that it's nice how Oscar takes care of him now, and Oscar replies that this is simply how things should be. Chris and Jason look apologetic, but they're unable to find words to express themselves. The four men collectively hesitate in a state of *"fractured togetherness."*

Stan's debilitating injuries exemplify how working-class disillusionment can effectively destroy individuals and radiate outward to affect innocent people in the community. His fate also shows the dangers of reacting to other people's attempts to better themselves with resentment rather than support, and of letting one's anger manifest in racial animosity. All of these factors are what collectively drove Jason and Chris to commit the assault that hurt Oscar and changed Stan's life. The play ends on an optimistic note, however: having followed Evan's advice to begin forgiving themselves and each other, Jason and Chris are taking an important and courageous step to make amends with Oscar and Stan. Although the scene ends in an ambivalent state of "fractured togetherness," *it leaves audiences with hope that disenchantment, bitterness, racism, and self-blame aren't insurmountable problems—ordinary people like* Sweat*'s characters can prevail over their circumstances and their mistakes.*

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