

The Laramie Project



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MOISÉS KAUFMAN

Moisés Kaufman was born to Jewish parents in Venezuela in 1963. After receiving his undergraduate degree in business administration from Metropolitan University in Caracas, Venezuela, Kaufman moved to New York City to study theater directing at New York University. After graduating from NYU, Kaufman and partner Jeffrey LaHoste founded Tectonic Theater Project, which staged Kaufman's first play, *Gross Indecency*, in 1997. Kaufman made his Broadway directing debut in 2004 with Tectonic Theater Project's *I Am My Own Wife*, which earned him a Tony Award nomination for Directing, among other honors. In 2016, he was awarded the National Medal of Arts by President Barack Obama. Both Kaufman and Tectonic Theater Project continue to be active in the New York City and global theater scene to this day.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The 1998 brutal torture and murder of gay University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard was a story that stopped the nation. Matthew's murder exemplified the hate and violence threatening queer people, especially in the more conservative areas of the United States. His death and the resulting media circus led to a number of hate crime bills being passed on both state and national levels, many of which were passed thanks to activism by Matthew's mother Judy Shepard and by others who were inspired by Matthew's life and tragic death. The 1990s were a period of transition for gay rights overall. The momentum from the Civil Rights and gay liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s had been refocused in the face of the devastating AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. Though the 1990s in America were largely a slower period in terms of protest or legislative change, a number of cultural shifts—including the popularity of *Will and Grace*, which premiered the same year as Matthew's murder, as well as widespread acclaim for artworks grappling with the previous decade's AIDS crisis, like *Angels in America*—helped to increase queer visibility and bring queer people and queer stories into the homes and minds of Americans of all backgrounds. This laid a portion of the cultural groundwork (along with decades of resistance, rioting, marching, and activism) that would begin the early-2000s' move towards marriage equality, as well as the trans and queer rights battles that wage on today.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Perhaps the most famous work of American theater relating to

LGBT issues is Tony Kushner's two-part play *Angels in America* (1991), which is referenced several times in *The Laramie Project*. Other touchstone LGBT plays include Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (1985) and, more recently, Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori's 2013 musical adapted from Alison Bechdel's graphic novel *Fun Home*. Though *The Laramie Project* is one of the most famous contemporary documentary plays, the genre traces its origins back to the work of Bertolt Brecht and the Federal Theater Project's "Living Newspapers." Other more recent examples of this style include the one-woman plays of Anna Deavere Smith (*Fires in the Mirror*). As a work of literature about a real American murder, the play also has ties to the true crime genre, including Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Vincent Bugliosi and Curt Gentry's *Helter Skelter*. Finally, as an American artwork dealing with the murder of an individual out of hate for their identity, *The Laramie Project* is not unrelated to the many and various works created in response to the nation's history of lynching African-American men and women, from the poems of Langston Hughes to the Billie Holiday standard "Strange Fruit."

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Laramie Project
- **When Written:** 1998-1999
- **Where Written:** Laramie, Wyoming and New York City
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Theater
- **Genre:** Play, Documentary Theater
- **Setting:** Laramie, Wyoming
- **Climax:** Aaron McKinney's sentencing and Dennis Shepard's speech
- **Antagonist:** Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, as well as homophobia and intolerance in general
- **Point of View:** Multiple

EXTRA CREDIT

The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later. Ten years after the premiere of *The Laramie Project*, the creators of the play returned to Wyoming to do additional interviews with the residents of Laramie. Using those interviews, Tectonic Theater Project wrote a second play, entitled *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*, to accompany its original work.

Film. In 2002, Moisés Kaufman directed a film version of *The Laramie Project* for HBO. It won several awards, including the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) Media Award.



PLOT SUMMARY

The Laramie Project begins as various members of the Laramie community praise the town of Laramie, Wyoming, speaking glowingly about town's close-knit community and expounding on its natural beauty. After the residents of Laramie introduce their town, members of Tectonic Theater Project describe how the theater company's leader, Moisés Kaufman, asked them to join him in Laramie, Wyoming to research a play about the murder of Matthew Shepard, an openly gay university student in Laramie. Some theater company members were initially hesitant, worrying both about their own safety and the ethics of representing a real community on stage. After some thought and convincing, though, they did eventually agree to participate.

In Laramie, the company meets first with Rebecca Hilliker, the head of the theater department at the University of Wyoming. Rebecca connects them with people to interview, and the company uses fragments from these interviews (conducted with many people connected to Matthew Shepard) to give the audience a sense of who Matthew was according to the people who knew and loved him. Characters like Romaine Patterson describe Matthew's "mega-watt" smile, while limousine driver Doc O'Connor talks about Matthew's straight-forwardness regarding his sexuality.

The company also uses these interviews to establish the town's general attitudes towards LGBT people at the time of Matthew's murder. Often, these interview fragments contradict one another, forcing the reader to dwell in the residents' subjective memories and opinions, and question what is and isn't true. Some members of the community are extremely accepting of LGBT people (especially those who are LGBT themselves or are closely connected with the LGBT community). Meanwhile, many straight residents believe that Wyoming's philosophy of "live and let live" is sufficiently tolerant of LGBT people, despite the fact that it forces them people to keep their identities to themselves. Many residents, especially residents who practice more conservative religions, express varying degrees of discomfort at the idea of homosexuality, with some admitting to open dislike or disgust.

Through interviews with people working at the Fireside bar, the playwrights begin to reveal what happened on the night of Matthew's murder. They suggest that Matthew, who had been drinking a Heineken alone at the bar, met Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson and left with them around eleven-thirty at night. Aaron Kreifels, the university student who found Matthew the next morning, recalls his shock at seeing Matthew badly beaten and tied to a **fence**, where Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson had left him to die. Officer Reggie Fluty responded to Aaron Kreifels' 911 call, stabilizing Matthew and putting him in an ambulance. During this process, Reggie was exposed to significant amounts of Matthew's blood. In the

emergency room, Matthew began treatment, during which it became clear that he had suffered brain damage and needed life support.

The company then interviews Matthew's friends about their reactions to the shocking news of Matthew's attack, including Matthew's friend Romaine Patterson and Matthew's academic advisor Jon Peacock, who recall their disbelief, horror, and grief. Following their arrest, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson were quickly arraigned. With several hundred people in the audience, Aaron and Russell were charged with murder. As news of their arrest spread, newspapers from all over the country sent reporters to Laramie, who overwhelmed the community with their questions and judgments. Matthew, meanwhile, remained in critical condition.

Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson both decided to plead not guilty, making investigator Rob Debree determined to work hard to ensure they would not walk free after their trials. Meanwhile, first responder Reggie Fluty learned that Matthew was HIV positive, and, due to her contact with his blood during the emergency response, she was at risk for contracting HIV as well. In interviews, Reggie discusses her aggressive treatment plan and remarks on her anxiety about the possibility of having contracted the disease.

Meanwhile, communities throughout the country held vigils for Matthew, including one organized in Laramie by Catholic Priest Father Roger Schmit. Interviews with members of the Laramie community at this time reveal that many people are struggling to reconcile their personal and religious objections to homosexuality with their horror at Matthew's murder. Some residents, who are unable to understand or accept the role that homophobia played in Matthew's attack, feel that the media is using Matthew's murder to extort unfair special privileges for LGBT people. Friends of Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson express their shock, sadness, or frustration at their crimes. Meanwhile, gay, lesbian, and bisexual Laramie residents fear for their safety while walking alone or showing affection for their partners in public.

Members of the theater company also speak with numerous religious leaders in the community during this time and attend their church services. These leaders include: the Unitarian minister, Stephen Mead Johnson, who feels it is his purpose to help the community become more open and accepting after the murder; Father Roger, the Catholic priest who organized Matthew's vigil; Doug Laws, the Mormon minister who condemns homosexuality; and the Baptist Minister, who suggests Matthew's attack may have been punishment for his gay "lifestyle." Together, these different religious beliefs represent the range of viewpoints the residents of Laramie express in reaction to Matthew's murder.

After a long struggle for his life, Matthew dies in the intensive care unit surrounded by his family. Rulon Stacey, a devout Mormon and the hospital's CEO, cries on national television as

he announces Matthew's death. Arrangements for Matthew's funeral are made, and, on a snowy day in late fall, the attendees fill two churches and an entire nearby park. Although Reverend Fred Phelps of the Westboro Baptist Church attempts to protest the funeral, his rant is drowned out by a chorus of counter protesters singing "Amazing Grace."

Six months later, Fred Phelps also protests Russell Henderson's trial, and Romaine Patterson, a close friend of Matthew's who was inspired by the "Amazing Grace" singers, stages a counter protest. Romaine and the other protesters wear angel wing costumes and encircle Phelps to block him from sight. Inside the courthouse, the jury selection for the trial takes place, and jurors are asked if they would be willing to give Russell the death penalty, since his crimes qualify him for capital punishment. However, before the trial takes place, Russell Henderson changes his plea to guilty, and so he receives two life sentences instead of the death penalty. Just after Russell's trial, Reggie Fluty receives the happy news that she tested negative for HIV.

Next, the play presents Aaron's trial. Before the trial, many characters debate their feelings on the death penalty, since Aaron, who did not plead guilty in exchange for a plea deal like Russell, is eligible to be put to death. Some characters are ideologically opposed to the death penalty, believing that violence is never an appropriate response to violence. Other Laramie residents believe that, in order for justice to be obtained, Aaron must be put to death. As the trial begins, the play enacts the dialogue from Aaron's taped confession to Rob DeBree. In the confession, Aaron admits to beating Matthew to death and leaving him tied to a fence to die because Matthew hit on him.

The jurors convict Aaron of murder. Aaron's defense team then approaches the Shepard family to ask for life imprisonment for Aaron rather than capital punishment. The prosecution decides to honor the family's wishes regarding whether to ask for the death penalty, leaving the decision up to Matthew's parents, Dennis and Judy. Matthew's father Dennis Shepard makes an emotional statement about his son in which he describes his love for Matthew and his belief that Matthew was with God when he died. Dennis then tells the public that, although he and his family believe in the death penalty and although he thinks that Aaron deserves to die, Dennis and Judy decide to show mercy on Aaron and grant him his life in Matthew's memory. Dennis instructs Aaron to think of Matthew often and be grateful that he is alive because of him.

With the trials at last over, Laramie residents reflect on how the murder has changed both their community and their personal outlook. Jedediah notes that he has become much more open to gay people since the murder, and will be playing a gay character in a university production of *Angels in America*. Many characters feel similarly changed. Some characters, however, like Jonas Slonaker, feel frustrated by what they see as a lack of

progress. In the end, the theater company leaves with many emotional goodbyes and backwards glances and goes home to New York to produce their play.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Matthew Shepard – Matthew Shepard was an openly-gay university student in Laramie, Wyoming who was murdered in 1998. *The Laramie Project* is constructed from interviews with real Laramie residents reacting to his murder over the course of a year. Matthew is not actually played by any actor in the piece; however, he is still a major presence in the play, as characters describe their relationships with him at length. According to his friends and family, Matthew was known for his vibrant smile and his openness to others. Matthew had a small build, braces, and was HIV positive. Matthew's murder sparked a nation-wide conversation about homophobia and gay rights, prompting many individuals and communities to work toward becoming more accepting and open.

Aaron McKinney – Aaron McKinney, a Laramie resident, is one of Matthew Shepard's murderers. Aaron, who admits he killed Matthew with Russell Henderson because Matthew allegedly tried to hit on him, clearly harbors intense feelings of homophobia. Several characters indicate that Aaron, who was a new father at the time of the murder, had a drug problem. Aaron is sentenced to life imprisonment for his crimes, and the play prominently features discussion of his trial. Aaron and Russell both become a central focus of the town's conversation surrounding justice and punishment as townspeople debate whether they feel the two men deserve the death penalty for their crimes, and whether society is partially to blame for Aaron's actions. Aaron's life becomes a flashpoint for questions about violence, punishment, and who is to blame for homophobia.

Russell Henderson – Russell Henderson is a nineteen-year-old Laramie Resident and one of Matthew Shepard's murderers. Russell pleads guilty to participating in Matthew's murder, driving the truck in which Aaron McKinney beat Matthew and then tying him to the **fence** to die. Russell Henderson purportedly had a troubled family life as a child. Russell was a member of the Church of Latter Day Saints before he is excommunicated from the church for his crimes. Russell and Aaron both become the center of debates between townspeople about who exactly is to blame for Russell and Aaron's homophobia and whether violence could possibly be the proper punishment for their crimes.

Dennis Shepard – Dennis Shepard is Matthew Shepard's father. During Aaron McKinney's sentencing, Dennis makes a statement explaining the family's decision not to ask for the death penalty for Aaron, in which Dennis describes how he and

his family believe that rejecting the death penalty is the best way to honor Matthew's memory and ensure that the Laramie community can heal. Dennis Shepard's cogent argument for why the family is choosing life imprisonment for Aaron helps to set an example for the future of how to appropriately punish such extreme expressions of hatred and violence as Matthew's murder.

Jedediah Schultz – Jedediah Schultz is a theater student at the University of Wyoming and a Laramie resident. He is one of the first people that the interviewers talk to, at the recommendation of Rebecca Hilliker. Initially, Jedediah hesitates to express support for Matthew Shepard, though he finds the murder appalling, because his family is against homosexuality. A year later, however, Jedediah has had a significant change of heart, in part through his work on the play *Angels in America*. Jedediah, whose progress the theater company tracks over the course of the entire play, seems to represent the capacity of people to completely change their views and become more open in a relatively short period of time, particularly through the use of tools like art and theater.

Rebecca Hilliker – Rebecca Hilliker is the head of the theater department at the University of Wyoming and one of the theater company's first contacts in Laramie. Rebecca introduces the interviewers to contacts in the town, including Jedediah Schultz. After Matthew Shepard's murder, Rebecca decides to stage *Angels in America* at the University of Wyoming in order to try to expand the community's awareness and encourage acceptance. Rebecca and her *Angels in America* project show the audience the potential power of theater to change the views of a community— a power that the playwrights of *The Laramie Project* clearly hope to channel in their own work.

The Baptist Minister – The Baptist Minister is one of the most conservative ministers in Laramie and the head of a large congregation at the local Baptist church. The Baptist Minister considers himself a "Biblicist," meaning that he believes in reading the Bible literally and word-for-word. The Baptist Minister, who is firmly against homosexuality, speaks on the phone with Amanda Gronich, telling her that, although he does not condone Matthew Shepard's murder, he sees it as a kind of justice for Matthew's gay "lifestyle." In general, the Baptist Minister seems to see violence as a fitting punishment for what he deems to be moral transgressions, and while he believes that Matthew's death was fitting punishment for his sexuality, he also believes that Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson deserve the death penalty for their deeds. The Baptist Minister expresses an ideological orientation towards violence and offers an image of God and justice as vengeful and unforgiving.

Father Roger Schmit – Father Roger Schmit is the Catholic priest in Laramie at the time of Matthew Shepard's murder. Unitarian minister Stephen Mead Johnson considers Father Roger to be the next left-most minister in town after himself.

Father Roger holds a vigil for Matthew without hesitation after his beating, and generally seems to be accepting of LGBT people despite the fact that the Catholic Church officially disapproves of homosexuality. He condemns all violence against LGBT people—which, according to him, includes homophobic slurs and hate speech—and in doing so he expands the readers' understanding of what violence can mean or look like. Father Roger shows how the same religious doctrine (such as Catholicism) can be read in many different ways and models the possibility of taking part in a traditional religious community while also being an ally to LGBT people.

Stephen Mead Johnson – Stephen Mead Johnson is the Unitarian Minister in Laramie. He considers himself to be the furthest left minister in the town and advocates for the acceptance of all gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Stephen went out to the **fence** where Matthew was found four times after his death, feeling that it was a powerful place to contemplate God and violence. Stephen Mead Johnson represents the most open and accepting form of religion in Laramie.

Reggie Fluty – Reggie Fluty is the policewoman who first responded to the scene where Matthew Shepard was found. She is also Marge Murray's daughter. While she was trying to stabilize Matthew and put him in the ambulance, Reggie was exposed to his HIV positive blood. Reggie was put on an aggressive post-exposure medical regime to reduce her likelihood of contracting the disease, and later tested negative for HIV. Reggie's altruism in helping Matthew despite not having proper equipment, and her obvious care for him and his case, show that Reggie clearly is well fit for her job. Meanwhile, the conclusion of her storyline provides a clear-cut happy ending for at least one person in the play.

Aaron Kreifels – Aaron Kreifels is a university student and Laramie resident. During a somewhat aimless bike ride, Aaron found Matthew Shepard tied to the **fence** where Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson had left him to die. Aaron Kreifels feels that God guided him to Matthew so that Matthew would not die alone. Aaron Kreifels' experience offers an example of how religion can be a positive force that helps people understand and process trauma.

Catherine Connolly – Catherine is a Laramie resident and a faculty member at the University of Wyoming. According to Catherine, she was the first openly lesbian faculty member at the college. Catherine attended Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson's arraignment. After Matthew's murder, Catherine felt unsafe in Laramie. Catherine and other LGBT Laramie residents' experiences show the audience how profoundly hate crimes inspire fear in marginalized community and how they affect the way people live their daily lives.

Doc O'Connor – Doc O'Connor is a limousine driver in Laramie who was a friend of Matthew Shepard's. According to Doc,

Matthew used to hire him for rides to gay bars in a town an hour away. Doc loves Laramie and believes that there are more gay people than there seem to be in the town. Doc hopes that Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson will not receive the death penalty, believing that it would defeat everything Matthew stood for and would leave the community without hope for healing.

Dr. Cantway – Dr. Cantway is an emergency room doctor in Laramie who treats both Matthew Shepard and Aaron McKinney in the same day. Dr. Cantway recalls that Matthew’s injuries were the kind normally seen in severe car crash victims. Dr. Cantway expresses profound compassion for both Matthew and Aaron, modeling the generous compassion that the playwrights themselves seem to try to uphold in the making of their play.

Jonas Slonaker – Jonas Slonaker is a Laramie resident and an openly gay man. Jonas is horrified by Matthew Shepard’s murder and he believes that it reveals deep-seated bigotry in Laramie. Jonas feels that the Wyoming axiom of “live and let live,” although seemingly tolerant, is actually a way for Wyoming residents to mask and avoid confronting their homophobia. A year after Matthew’s murder, Jonas still feels frustrated by what he sees as a complete lack of systemic progress, particularly because of the lack of newly-passed anti-discrimination legislation.

Zubaida Ula – Zubaida is a Muslim university student living in Laramie. Zubaida considers herself an Islamic feminist. She expresses her frustration at the questions people in Laramie asked her after she chose to start wearing a veil. Zubaida, who attended Matthew Shepard’s vigil, also feels frustrated by Laramie’s lack of accountability for its culture of intolerance and discrimination. Zubaida advocates for Laramie residents to face their community’s flaws rather than denying them, believing that in doing so they may actually be able to make Laramie more accepting.

Moisés Kaufman – Moisés Kaufman is the writer of *The Laramie Project*, the founder of the Tectonic Theater Company, and also a character in the play. As a character, Moisés often introduces logistical updates, noting how long the company has been in Laramie, where they are staying, how the interviews are going, etc.

Leigh Fondakowski – Leigh Fondakowski is the head writer of *The Laramie Project* and a member of the Tectonic Theater Project. Leigh actively participates in the trips to Laramie and conducts interviews (including with Father Roger Schmit, the local Catholic priest). Leigh makes a pilgrimage with Greg Pierotti to the **fence** where Matthew was found by Aaron Kreifels and finds the experience very moving. Along with Greg, Leigh seems to have made really lasting relationships within the Laramie community by the time the theater community leaves Laramie for the last time.

Greg Pierotti – Greg Pierotti is a member of the Tectonic Theater Company and one of the interviewers for the Laramie Project. Greg interviews many people featured in the play, including Sergeant Hing, Alison Mears, and Marge Murray. Greg makes a trip with Leigh Fondakowski to the **fence** where Matthew was found and the experience moves him profoundly. By the end of the theater company’s time in Laramie, Greg seems to have made lots of meaningful and lasting connections within the community.

Marge Murray – Marge Murray is the mother of Reggie Fluty, a good friend of Alison Mears, a former bartender, and a lifelong Laramie resident. Marge offers the interviewers context on the culture of Laramie and its attitude towards gay people. Marge also discusses Reggie’s HIV exposure after responding to Aaron Kreifels’ 911 call for Matthew. Marge and Reggie have a jocular, loving mother-daughter relationship. Marge, who becomes close with some of the Laramie interviewers and even tells them she loves them when they leave, helps to show that not only did *The Laramie Project* change Laramie, but people like Marge affected the lives of members of the Tectonic Theater Company.

Matt Galloway – Matt Galloway was the bartender at the Fireside Bar on the night that Matthew Shepard was murdered. Matt Galloway admired Matthew, calling him the perfect bar customer. He testifies in Matthew’s court case as a key eyewitness. Matt regrets that he did not realize Matthew was in danger as he left with Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson that night, wishing he could have foreseen what was happening and stopped it. Because of his proximity to Matthew on the night of his attack, Matt Galloway feels drawn into activism after the murder, and he participates in many pro-LGBT demonstrations.

Matt Mickelson – Matt Mickelson is the owner of the Fireside Bar where Matthew Shepard met Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson the night of his murder. Matthew’s family history in Laramie goes back generations. He helps connect the interviewers with Matt Galloway and Shadow, both bar employees. After he learns of Matthew’s murder, Matt follows the trial closely. He does not support the death penalty and advocates for life imprisonment for both Aaron and Russell.

Murdock Cooper – Murdock Cooper is a local rancher who tries to feel more comfortable about Matthew Shepard’s murder by dwelling on the possibility that, if Matthew hit on Aaron McKinney, it may have been partially his own fault. Murdock Cooper’s reaction represents one of many homophobic ways of perceiving Matthew’s murder that circulated as the community tried to process the tragedy.

Reverend Fred Phelps – Reverend Fred Phelps is the minister of the notorious Westboro Baptist Church, which preaches a doctrine that glorifies judgment and hatred. Reverend Fred Phelps and his followers protest Matthew Shepard’s funeral

and the trials of Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. Reverend Phelps represents a brand of religiosity that is so extremist and hateful that it goes completely against most people's sense of morality and decency, showing how religion can be a dangerous tool for hatred.

Romaine Patterson – Romaine Patterson is a university student, a close friend of Matthew Shepard's, and an openly lesbian woman. Romaine tells her interviewers about her friendship with Matthew and how she was extremely upset about Matthew's murder. Romaine organized a counter protest to block Reverend Fred Phelps's hate speech at the criminal trials by having people wear angel wings and totally encircle the minister. After her experience organizing around Matthew's death, Romaine decided to pursue a career in political activism. Romaine shows how, in the wake of Matthew's murder, many people who were already supportive of LGBT rights became even more outspoken about their views.

Rulon Stacey – Rulon Stacey is a Mormon man, the CEO of the Poudre Valley Hospital (where Matthew Shepard was treated), and the spokesperson for Matthew's family. Throughout Matthew's tenure at the hospital, Rulon communicates with the media to update the public on Matthew's condition. Although Rulon objects to homosexuality for religious reasons, he expresses immense sympathy for Matthew's family, and is moved to tears when he announces Matthew's death. Rulon shows how, even for people who do not change their views on homosexuality, Matthew's death inspires intense empathy and allows them to begin to understand the hatred that LGBT people regularly face.

Shannon – Shannon is a friend and former classmate of Aaron McKinney's. Stephen Belber runs into Shannon at the Fireside Bar with her friend Jen and interviews the two young women. Shannon indicates that both she and Aaron were frequent drug users. When asked if she, Jen, and Aaron went to high school together, Shannon calls them both "a product of their society," suggesting that they are not the only ones to blame for the adults that they became.

Tiffany Edwards – Tiffany Edwards is a local Laramie reporter. Tiffany comments on the presence of the national media in Laramie and express ambivalence towards it. She believes that the national media is invasive and prevents the community from healing and delivering justice, but also that it is holding people accountable for their homophobia.

Rob Debree Rob Debree is a detective at the local county's sheriff's department and the chief investigator on Matthew Shepard's murder case. It is Rob who solicits Aaron McKinney's confession, building an airtight case that ensures that Russell Henderson and Aaron are brought to justice. Rob Debree, who connects with LGBT people for the first time through this case, becomes an advocate of LGBT rights over the course of the play. Rob Debree's transition from apathy to LGBT advocacy through his conversations with Laramie's LGBT residents

shows the importance of contact and discussion with actual LGBT people in fostering acceptance in a community.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Alison Mears – Alison Mears is a longtime Laramie resident and a friend of Marge Murray. Alison works for the local social service agency.

Amanda Gronich – Amanda Gronich is a member of Tectonic Theater Project. She interviews the Baptist Minister about his views on Matthew's murder after attending his church service one Sunday.

Andrew Gomez – Andrew Gomez is a young man who spends time in jail with Aaron McKinney. Andrew tells the interviewers about Aaron's reputation in jail and his conversations with Aaron about why he killed Matthew Shepard.

Andy Paris – Andy Paris is a member of Tectonic Theater Project and one of the interviewers for *The Laramie Project*. He speaks the final lines of the play as the theater company leaves Laramie for the last time.

Anonymous Friend of Aaron McKinney – This friend of Aaron McKinney, who chose to be interviewed anonymously, expresses shock at Aaron's crimes and tells the interviewers a little about Aaron's personal and family life.

April Silva – April Silva is a bisexual university student in Laramie. April, who grew up in Cody, Wyoming, prefers Laramie to her old town.

Bailiff – The Bailiff is one of the staff members of the court who announces the beginning of Russell and Aaron's trials.

Barbara Pitts – Barbara Pitts is a member of the Tectonic Theater Project. She goes with Stephen Belber to interview Matt Mickelson and Matt Galloway at the Fireside Bar.

Bill McKinney – Bill McKinney is Aaron McKinney's father. Bill feels that, because of the media attention the case received, Aaron is not receiving a fair trial.

Cal Rerucha – Cal Rerucha is the prosecuting attorney on Aaron McKinney's case. Cal intended to pursue the death penalty, but deferred to the Shepard family's wishes.

Conrad Miller – Conrad Miller is a car mechanic and a local Laramie resident. Conrad Miller believes that homosexuality is animalistic and wrong.

Doug Laws – Doug Laws is the Mormon minister in Laramie. Doug Laws says that Mormons believe that God is still speaking to everyday people, and he also indicates that, in the Mormon Church, homosexuality is not accepted.

Gil and Eileen Engen – Gil and Eileen Engen are a ranching couple in Laramie. Gil and Eileen both believe that Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson are "bad apples" and do not see Matthew Shepard's murder as connected to a culture of homophobia in Laramie.

Governor Jim Geringer – Governor Jim Geringer is Wyoming’s Republican governor at the time of Matthew Shepard’s murder. Jim expresses his outrage at Matthew’s murder, but warns against using it to give gay people “special rights over others.”

Harry Woods – Harry Woods is a gay Laramie resident. In the play, Harry describes his reaction to the Homecoming Parade and the people walking in support of Matthew Shepard, expressing how he felt incredibly moved and thankful for the demonstrators and for Matthew.

Jeffrey Lockwood – Jeffrey Lockwood is a middle-aged Laramie resident. The interviewers ask him about his reaction to the murder.

Jen – Jen is Aaron McKinney’s friend from childhood. Stephen Belber runs into Jen at the Fireside Bar one night with Shannon. Jen talks with Stephen about her feelings about Aaron and the murder.

Jon Peacock – Jon Peacock is Matthew Shepard’s academic advisor and a political science professor at the University of Wyoming. Jon thought highly of Matthew’s academic potential was shocked and horrified to learn of Matthew’s murder. Jon Peacock helps to contextualize Matthew’s life before his murder.

Judy Shepard – Judy Shepard is Matthew Shepard’s mother. While Judy is not actually played by any actor in *The Laramie Project*, several characters refer to her throughout the play.

Kerry Drake – Kerry Drake is a reporter for the *Caspar Star Tribune*. In the play, Kerry recalls Fred Phelps protesting Matthew’s funeral.

Kristin Price – Kristin is Aaron McKinney’s girlfriend. Kristin is charged as an accessory to Matthew Shepard’s murder.

Lucy Thompson – Lucy Thompson is Russell Henderson’s grandmother. At Russell’s trial, Lucy offers her sympathy to the Shepard family and begs the court to give Russell his two life sentences concurrently rather than consecutively.

Phil Labrie – Phil Labrie was a friend of Matthew Shepard’s who helps to provide the theater company with context about what Matthew was like. He takes Greg Pierotti and a few other interviewers out to see the **fence** where Matthew was found.

Philip Dubois – Philip Dubois is the president of the University of Wyoming. After Matthew Shepard’s murder, he received an email accusing him and the rest of Laramie of being complicit in Matthew’s murder.

Russell Henderson’s Mormon Home Teacher – Russell Henderson’s Mormon Home Teacher is a friend of the Henderson family who has known Russell Henderson since he was a child. The teacher laments Russell’s crime and punishment and describes how, after Russell was convicted, the Mormon Church excommunicated him.

Shadow – Shadow was the DJ working at Fireside Bar the night

Matthew Shepard was killed, and he is the last person besides Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson who talked to Matthew before his death.

Sherry Aanenson – Sherry Aanenson was Russell Henderson’s landlord. Sherry was surprised and upset by the news of Russell’s crime, because in her experience Russell was always very “sweet.”

Sherry Johnson – Sherry Johnson is a Laramie resident and the wife of a police officer. Sherry expresses sympathy for Matthew Shepard, but objects to the classification of the murder as a hate crime, since she feels it gives gay people special privileges.

Stephen Belber – Stephen Belber is a member of the Tectonic Theater Project and one of the interviewers for *The Laramie Project*. Stephen’s interviewees include the workers at the Fireside Bar and the limousine driver Doc O’Connor.

Sergeant Hing – Sergeant Hing is a detective in the Laramie Police Department. Sergeant Hing is proud of his Laramie roots and feels that the national media misjudged Laramie, but is also shocked that a murder like Matthew Shepard’s could occur in a state that he sees as “Live and Let Live.”

Trish Steger – Trish Steger is the owner of a local shop in Laramie and is Romaine Patterson’s sister. Trish knew Matthew Shepard personally, and she broke the news to Romaine about Matthew’s attack.

Zackie Salmon – Zackie Salmon is an administrator at the University of Wyoming and a lesbian woman originally from Texas. Zackie loves that Laramie is such a close-knit community, but feels unsafe in town after Matthew Shepard’s murder. Zackie supports the death penalty for Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson for their crimes.



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.



HOMOPHOBIA, TOLERANCE, AND ACCEPTANCE

By showing different characters’ reactions to Matthew Shepard’s homosexuality, *The Laramie Project* explores how communities and individuals deal with people who deviate from behaviors and identities that are considered “normal.” As the play opens, it quickly becomes clear that, at the time when Matthew Shepard was murdered, being gay was considered by most people in Laramie to be outside of the norm, and gay people were ostracized and discriminated against as a result. Several gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters

comment on the difficulty of living in Laramie, and one character, Jonas Slonaker, mentions how many people who grew up in Wyoming left because of the state's profound homophobia.

Despite these lived and expressed experiences of homophobia, many members of the Laramie community insist they are tolerant. Tolerance, however, means ignoring differences (including different sexual identities) rather than truly accepting them. Doc O'Connor, a friend of Matthew's, says, "Wyoming people don't give a damn one way or another whether you're gay or straight." Marge Murray, meanwhile, insists that Laramie is "live and let live," saying that most people don't mind gay people "as long as they don't bother [them]." While both of these stances appear to be fairly tolerant, they also depend on being blind to difference, rather than acknowledging and accepting it.

Because they view Laramie as a place that, through its culture of "live and let live," is passively tolerant, many people assert that Matthew's murder was a singular tragedy that the rest of the community should not be blamed for. Eileen and Gil Engen, for example, write Aaron and Russell off as just a few "bad apples" in a town that is full of good people. Some characters refuse to acknowledge that Matthew's murder had to do with his sexuality at all, like Sherry Johnson, who tries to ignore the bigotry linked to Matthew's murder by saying that every murder is a "hate crime." However, while Laramie's residents insist they are tolerant (or at least that they do not condone murder on account of intolerance), the play also suggests that the community played a role in shaping the men who murdered Matthew. Aaron's friend Shannon tells the playwrights that Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson are "a product of their society," suggesting that she blames the community around them for teaching them to hate. Even people who are not sympathetic to the murderers blame the town culture for the murder—in an email to Philip Dubois, one critic writes that the murder is "not just the work of a couple of random crazies," and that the townspeople "all have blood on their hands."

By showing how the community at large may be responsible for the homophobia that drove Aaron and Russell to murder Matthew, the play forces the reader to question the value of a community that fosters tolerance without acceptance. As Zubaida Ula states, Laramie "is that kind of a town. If it wasn't this kind of town, why did this happen here? [emphasis added]" Clearly Zubaida sees the "tolerance" that Laramie believes it possesses as insufficient. *The Laramie Project* suggests that merely putting up with people who are gay or otherwise "different" is not enough to maintain a safe and comfortable community for everyone. Instead, Laramie and towns like it need to encourage real acceptance by understanding and respectfully encountering other people's differences, not just ignoring them.

Following Matthew Shepard's death, many people in Laramie

do work to figure out how to reeducate themselves and their peers. Some characters that were already accepting of homosexuality (some of whom were gay, lesbian, or bisexual themselves) are no longer content with allowing intolerance to exist in their communities. Romaine Patterson, for example, is moved to activism after Matthew's murder, organizing a counter-protest to Fred Phelps's demonstration at the funeral and deciding to attend an undergraduate program in politics. Other characters, meanwhile, adjust their own viewpoints, moving from a homophobic stance to one that is more accepting. Jedidiah Schultz is one such character, and he expresses regret for the homophobia he used to harbor. Jedidiah also works to challenge the people around him to rethink their own prejudices (particularly his parents). Even characters who don't end up fully accepting homosexuality are at least moved to reevaluate their priorities following the murder. Rulon Stacey, the hospital spokesperson, maintains his religious objections to homosexuality even after his interaction with the Shepards, but he does empathize profoundly with Matthew and his family, and in doing so seems to make a small step towards a more open-minded stance. Although these changes are slow (one character does note the lack of legislative action against hate crimes in the year following Matthew's death), the playwrights seem to empathize with the difficulty of changing deeply-held views about homosexuality, and they appear to celebrate even the smallest progresses that citizens of Laramie make towards becoming a more genuinely accepting community.



VIOLENCE, PUNISHMENT, AND JUSTICE

In depicting the aftermath of the murder of Matthew Shepard, *The Laramie Project* meditates on what counts as violence and what kinds of punishments are appropriate for violent acts. The violence against Matthew Shepard is the primary moral lens through which different characters explore their views on violence, punishment, and mercy. While the playwrights allow many different viewpoints to be expressed without judgment, they give the last word to Matthew Shepard's family, who advocate for mercy.

Most characters in the play, even the ones who overtly condemn homosexuality, see the violence against Matthew Shepard as worthy of punishment (as it is under law). These same characters, however, often condone and excuse milder forms of violence without repercussion. Though Marge Murray thinks what happened to Matthew is terrible, she says nonchalantly that someone "might actually smack [a gay person] in the mouth" if they saw one at a bar, "but then they'd just walk away." This suggests that, to many people in Laramie, smaller instances of violence against gay people are acceptable. Meanwhile, according to Father Roger Schmit, the Catholic priest in Laramie, the whole culture of discrimination in Laramie

is a kind of socially acceptable violence. Father Roger says that “every time that you are called a fag...that is the seed of violence.” This statement implies that murder and verbal abuse are both violence, and these acts are separated only by degrees of intensity.

Some other people in Laramie, however, view Matthew’s murder as just, since they believe Matthew’s sexual orientation was “sinful.” This view is heavily implied by the Baptist Minister, who says that, although he knows that Matthew’s “lifestyle is legal,” he hopes that “before he slipped into a coma he had a chance to reflect on his lifestyle.” During his protest of Matthew’s funeral, Fred Phelps asks outright, “If God doesn’t hate fags, why does he put ‘em in hell?” While Fred Phelps expresses his thirst for violence more openly, both men seem to believe that Matthew’s murder is a kind of divine justice for what they view as his “sinful” homosexuality. Through these two characters, the play draws attention to the fact that some people’s conceptions of justice perpetuate violence, and their views might encourage people like Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson to execute their own kind of vigilante “justice” according to moral systems that deviate from the law.

At the end of the play, during Aaron and Russell’s trials, the playwrights explore most fully the complicated intersection of legal and moral justice. Capital punishment is legal in Wyoming, and Aaron and Russell’s crime makes them eligible for the death penalty. Several characters, including the Baptist Minister (who thinks that Matthew’s murder is justice for his sexuality), believe that Aaron and Russell should be put to death for their crimes. The prosecutors, however, in deference to the wishes of the Shepard family, allow Russell to take a plea deal for a life sentence and they do not ask for the death penalty for Aaron. Matthew Shepard’s father Dennis Shepard explains the family’s reasoning, stating that, although he “would like nothing better than to see [Aaron] die,” and although Matthew “believed that there were crimes...that justified the death penalty,” the family would not pursue the death penalty and would instead “show mercy to someone who refused to show any mercy.”

The Shepard family’s decision not to ask for the death penalty marks their difference from people like the Baptist Minister who believe that a violent act should be punished through violence. Despite all that they have suffered, the Shepard family decides that, for them, justice means being merciful, and the best way to honor their son is to choose not to take two more lives. Dennis Shepard’s opinion is just one opinion on violence expressed in the play, but since his moving speech is the climax of the play, the playwrights give his opinion extra weight. Thus, *The Laramie Project* subtly suggests that punishing violence with violence only makes violence the norm, and that mercy can interrupt violent norms and help communities become more tolerant.



MEDIA AND COMMUNITY

The Laramie Project portrays the town of Laramie, Wyoming struggling with how the media’s portrayal of Matthew Shepard’s murder reflects or contradicts their own vision of their community. As the play opens, characters describe Laramie as a friendly, normal place. In the introduction, Sergeant Hing describes Laramie as “a good place to live,” Rebecca Hilliker says that “you have the opportunity to be happy in your life here,” and Jedidiah Schultz says that “Laramie is a beautiful town...[where] you can have your own identity.” Since Matthew’s murder, however, media coverage has made Laramie nationally synonymous with a hate crime—as Jedidiah Schultz notes, Laramie is now “a town defined by an accident... a crime.”

Many characters attribute what they see as Laramie’s excessively negative reputation to the onslaught of media coverage in the wake of Matthew’s murder. Jon Peacock describes “hundreds of reporters...everywhere” and says that “the town is not used to that kind of exposure,” emphasizing how unusual it is for Laramie to be put under a microscope. The presence of such intense media coverage is met with mixed and often resentful feelings on the part of the townspeople. Many believe that the coverage is invasive and interferes with the community’s ability to deliver justice and heal. Tiffany Edwards, a local journalist, calls the out-of-town journalists “predators” and describes how reporters tried to talk to the judge of Matthew’s case while he was in the bathroom. Tiffany seems to imply that the journalists are harming the community, as they fail to respect the town’s privacy during a difficult time. Others in Laramie are primarily frustrated not by concerns about privacy, but by what they see as a biased portrayal of the town. Sergeant Hing calls the news stories “sensationalist” while Eileen Engen says the community was “more or less maligned” by the journalists. Sergeant Hing and Eileen Engen’s comments suggest that they are upset by the way that the journalism is focusing on Laramie’s troubles, rather than painting a more balanced picture.

Some characters, however, feel these news stories expose the discomfort they have felt in Laramie for a long time. Tiffany Edwards thinks that the media finally “made people accountable” to what happened to Matthew, forcing them to confront their own latent homophobia. Zubaida Ula remembers with frustration how, at the candlelight vigil, someone called for the citizens to show that “Laramie is not this kind of town.” Zubaida sees people’s obsession with Laramie regaining a good reputation as misguided, since the community should instead focus inwardly on trying to change its culture of homophobia.

Though the characters’ opinions about the media are varied, the frequency with which they mention the media shows how much the press has affected the town, and particularly the extent to which negative news stories have forced residents of

Laramie to look more closely at the cruelties and contradictions of their community. In this way, though the press can be biased, predatory, and frustrating, it also serves the purpose of not allowing Laramie residents to ignore or forget what happened. In part because of the negative news stories, *The Laramie Project* shows Laramie residents actively examining who they are and who they would like to be as a community.



RELIGION, MORALITY, AND PREJUDICE

Religion is a strong presence in Laramie, and many people of different faiths are represented in *The Laramie Project*. For those people, the religious teachings with which they grew up tend to influence the prejudice or acceptance with which they view Matthew Shepard. Because of this, the town's religious leaders have tremendous power to shape public opinion, and their reactions to Matthew's death reflect the reactions of the town at large. Through its focus on several of the town's religious leaders, *The Laramie Project* grapples, in particular, with the ambiguous ethics of situations in which religious doctrine seems to inspire or justify immoral acts.

Christianity is the predominant religion in Laramie, and the characters in the play include parishioners and religious leaders from the Baptist, Catholic, and Mormon faiths. In addition to the considerable Christian population in Laramie, there is also a population of Unitarians and at least one character who is Muslim. As these characters confront the disturbing and obviously amoral murder of Matthew Shepard, they often invoke their religion to help them make sense of what happened, or to structure their moral judgment of it. For example, Aaron Kriefels, who finds Matthew's body, sees his role in the aftermath of the murders as God's will—he believes that God wanted him to help bring Matthew home. Other characters, many of whom have a very different vision of God than Aaron, grapple with religiously-driven aversions to homosexuality and use their faith to excuse Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson's actions.

In addition to the everyday people who use religion to frame their understanding of what happened to Matthew, various town ministers navigate their role as representatives of their religion as they confront Matthew's death. Stephen Mead Johnson, the Unitarian minister, roundly condemns the crime against Matthew, feeling that the murder is profoundly against official Unitarian teachings (which do not discriminate based on sexuality). The Catholic minister, Father Roger Schmit, meanwhile, must weigh some church teachings against others as he reacts to Matthew's death. While the Catholic Church officially disapproves of gay and lesbian relationships, it also condemns violence. Despite the official church policy against homosexuality, Father Roger Schmit chooses to organize a vigil for Matthew immediately after he is found, believing that it is the right thing to do when weighing his beliefs overall.

Although Catholicism condemns being gay, Father Schmit clearly prioritizes compassion and anti-violence over condemning homosexuality, and he even seems to feel that it's not his place to pass judgment on Matthew's sexual orientation. Essentially, Father Schmit's interpretation of his religion is that it is more important for Catholics to refuse violence and hatred than it is for them to believe that homosexuality is a sin that should be punished. Father Schmit shows how, while religious doctrine may establish the grounding laws or principles of a religion, it is interpreting and evaluating that doctrine that determines whether a religion encourages love and acceptance or not. Likewise, although being gay is a sin in Mormonism, the Mormon Church excommunicates Russell Henderson (who was a Mormon) for his crimes, seeming to make a similar evaluation about the paramount importance of resisting violence.

Meanwhile, the most extreme minister in Laramie, the Baptist minister, equivocates when asked about the violence against Matthew. Effectively, the Baptist minister weighs Matthew's sexuality against his murder, suggesting that Matthew may have deserved to be murdered because of his sexuality. The Baptist Minister, in believing that Matthew's brutal death might be God's punishment, seems to view God as a figure to be feared rather than a figure of love and mercy. Fred Phelps, a minister from the notorious Westboro Baptist Church, provides an extreme example of hate-focused religious interpretation when he protests Matthew Shepard's funeral, shouting horrible things about God's wrath. Fred Phelps's church is a Christian church, and so it is based in the same texts and traditional doctrine as the Baptist, Catholic, or Mormon churches. Through Fred Phelps's presence, the play shows how the same general religion (Christianity) that Father Schmit interprets as obligating him to hold a vigil for Matthew can also inspire someone to promote the same kind of violence that killed Matthew.

Through these different ministers and churches, *The Laramie Project* gives the reader a spectrum of examples of how different individuals and institutions grapple with morality, doctrine, and religious interpretation. These religious leaders' reactions embody the complexity and plurality of responses that the townspeople have to the murder, and suggest that while some religious doctrine can be inclined towards violence and hatred, it is really how one engages with religious doctrine that determines whether a religious community is accepting or not.



THEATER AND REPRESENTATION

In one sense, *The Laramie Project* is not the story of the aftermath of Matthew Shepard's murder—it's the story of an East Coast theater company coming to a small town in Wyoming to make a piece of art about the town's experiences in the wake of a hate crime. In making such

a play, the playwrights grapple with questions about the ethics of representing real events (particularly violent ones that are far removed from the playwrights' own experiences) and they struggle with how to be fair and balanced in their representation of the town while still holding Laramie residents morally accountable for homophobia and violence. In order to address their ethical concerns, the playwrights include themselves in the play. They openly address their uncertainties and anxieties, and they own up to the specificity of their perspective, acknowledging that *The Laramie Project* is just one of many accounts of Laramie, and it should be taken as the playwrights' unique perspective rather than the literal truth.

The Laramie Project is constructed out of monologues from interviews that the playwrights did with the residents of Laramie, as well as dialogue between the playwrights and the people in the town. As a result, the playwrights become characters themselves, drawing the audience's attention to the fact that this is a play that was created by people, rather than a reconstruction of objective facts. It's notable, too, that the playwrights include dialogue that establishes their status as outsiders to Laramie, which reminds the audience of the specificity of the playwrights' perspectives. In being transparent about their experience of the community, the playwrights deliberately undercut their own authority in telling the town's story so that they can engage with complicated moral issues without falsely claiming that their opinions are definitive. This is a pointed contrast to the media reports on Matthew Shepard's murder, which were written by outsiders and presented as unbiased truth.

The playwrights also include dialogue that expresses the anxieties that the people of Laramie have about being represented onstage. Several characters worry the writers will misrepresent Laramie by depicting complex reactions to a communal trauma without empathy, and thus make Laramie out to be a more negative place than what it actually is. Some, like the Baptist Minister, even try to avoid talking with members of the theater troupe, only agreeing to do so anonymously out of fear of being cast in a negative light. Other characters worry that the theater company's goals might backfire and encourage hatred, rather than promoting tolerance. Specifically, Father Roger Schmit is concerned that by representing anti-gay violence in the play, including homophobic slurs, the playwrights could actually encourage the same kind of violence that they are trying to understand and eradicate. By seriously engaging the townspeople's anxieties, the playwrights shine a critical light on their own project, inviting the audience to consider what harm and distortion theatrical projects can create.

The townspeople's concerns about the effects of *The Laramie Project* also speak to the profound power of art to influence people's opinions and to change their beliefs. The playwrights acknowledge the potency of theater to shape people's

viewpoints, in part through their inclusion of descriptions of the play *Angels in America*, which is being performed by university students in town after Matthew's murder. Jedidiah Schultz describes how the play, which prominently features gay characters struggling through the AIDS crisis, forced him to confront his own biases and gave him a framework for helping his parents, who at first refused to see the play, to work through theirs. By including descriptions of the effect of *Angels in America* on the Laramie community, *The Laramie Project* seems to be drawing attention to the powerful role of theater in tackling social issues like homophobia, and thus its potential for influencing how people see the world, be it positively or negatively.

Through exposing the play's process and allowing themselves to become subjects of the play alongside the townspeople, the playwrights dismantle the hierarchical relationship between themselves and the citizens of Laramie. Instead, they portray the process of making the play as a mutually beneficial learning process. In turn, the audience does not see the playwrights' account and judgment of what happened in Laramie as definitive; instead, the audience is encouraged to come to their own conclusions about the nature of violence, acceptance, and social change.



SYMBOLS

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



THE FENCE

After Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson beat Matthew Shepard, Russell tied Matthew to a fence and the two men left him there to die. The next day, Aaron Kreifels, a local student, found Matthew unconscious, still tied to the fence. The fence where Matthew was found is on the outskirts of town, and the spot offers a view of the city lights, the **stars**, and the beautiful, stark landscape. After Matthew dies, the fence becomes a pilgrimage site where people go to meditate on their grief, the hatred that led to the crime, and the possibilities for the town's recovery. Members of Tectonic Theater Company and local people make trips to the fence to pay their tributes to Matthew, and some of them find themselves moved to tears. The fence is referred to throughout the play as both a site of violence and of redemption, where people can go to acknowledge hatred and think about Laramie's fight against bigotry. The fence thus represents both the incredible violence of Matthew's murder, and Laramie's increased awareness in its aftermath.



THE STARS

Throughout *The Laramie Project*, characters refer to the natural beauty surrounding the town of Laramie, and express their great love for it. This includes the stars in the Laramie night sky, which, thanks to the lack of light pollution in rural Wyoming, are extremely vibrant. Dennis Shepard brings up the stars in his statement expressing the Shepard family's lack of support for the death penalty for Aaron McKinney, saying that he was happy that the stars were the last thing that Matthew Shepard saw as he was dying and he hopes they made him feel less alone. Because characters often reference the stars and nature while talking about what makes Laramie a great place to live, and because of the way Dennis references them as a symbol of solace and togetherness, the stars seem to symbolize the aspects of the Laramie community that can be redeemed or looked to for hope in the face of the tragedy of Matthew's murder.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dramatists Play Service edition of *The Laramie Project* published in 2001.

Act 1: A Definition Quotes

☞ And I'm thinking, Lady, you're just missing the point. You know, all you got to do is turn around, see the mountains, smell the air, listen to the birds, just take in what's around you. And they were just—nothing but the story. I didn't feel judged, I felt that they were stupid. They're, they're missing the point—they're just missing the whole point.

Related Characters: Sergeant Hing (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Sergeant Hing, who has just been expounding on the beautiful nature in Laramie, discusses a conversation he had with an out-of-town reporter about the area around the fence where Matthew was found. The reporter does not understand why anyone would want to go out to that remote point for pleasure.

Sergeant Hing feels frustrated by the woman's remarks, believing that they indicate her total lack of appreciation for the beauty of rural Laramie, a quality of the town that so many residents love. The reporter's inability to grasp why

the town's nature may be important to people seems to represent how many outsiders, and members of the media in particular, failed to see Laramie as a complex, beloved, and fraught place rather than simply the site of a murder.

Hing repeats the assertion that "they're missing the whole point" over and over again, suggesting that, by failing to understand Laramie holistically, the reporters fail to really reach the crux of Laramie's story: the question of how a well-loved community reacts to tragedy and how it uses it to change. By presenting this quotation in the first scene of the play, the playwrights seem to be trying to suggest that they are aware of these previous failures and that they are trying to do better at telling Laramie's story.

☞ Now, after Matthew, I would say that Laramie is a town defined by an accident, a crime. We've become Waco, we've become Jasper. We're a noun, a definition, a sign. We may be able to get rid of that...but it will sure take awhile.

Related Characters: Jedadiah Schultz (speaker), Matthew Shepard

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Jedadiah Schultz discusses his understanding of how the image of Laramie has changed in the wake of Matthew's murder. Whereas people previously thought of Laramie as a beautiful Western town, Jedadiah now believes people see the town as defined by Matthew's murder.

The first moment of the play takes its name from Jedadiah's description of post-crime Laramie as a "noun, a definition, a sign," suggesting that this quotation resonated strongly with the playwrights. Jedadiah clearly senses that the crime has flattened people's vision of Laramie, a one-dimensionality that he links with language itself (Laramie is a "noun, a definition, a sign"— words that all represent some aspect of language, and which also suggest that Laramie's dynamism has been reduced by being confined to it). Jedadiah's metaphorical negative description of Laramie as a "noun, a definition, a sign" seems to suggest that language and the narrative it builds might, in themselves, be too limited to convey a nuanced portrait of the experience of living in Laramie after the tragedy, and might even be harmful in their failure to do so.



Since the playwrights are about to engage in just that kind

of exercise—an attempt to tell the story of Laramie in language—the inclusion of this quote seems to be an attempt to outline their understanding of what a difficult project they are undertaking.

Act 1: Alison and Marge Quotes

☝☝ As far as the gay issue, I don't give a damn one way or the other as long as they don't bother me. And even if they did, I'd just say no thank you. And that's the attitude of most of the Laramie population. They might poke one, if they were in a bar situation you know, they had been drinking, they might actually smack one in the mouth, but then they'd just walk away...Laramie is live and let live.

Related Characters: Marge Murray (speaker), Greg Pierotti, Matthew Shepard

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 29-30

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Marge describes how she sees the attitude towards LGBT people in Laramie. This quote seems to be drawn from an early interview with Marge, who reappears throughout the play.

Marge talks about how the Western philosophy of “live and let live” plays out in regards to LGBT people in Laramie, saying that, personally, she does not “give a damn” if someone is gay “as long as they don't bother me.” Marge seems to imply that “bothering” someone as an LGBT person is openly expressing sexual or romantic interest in another person—effectively denying LGBT people a large aspect of the human experience. While Marge believes that she would just say “no thank you” if a woman hit on her, Marge's understanding of that kind of expression of interest as “bothering” speaks to the general anxiety that many Laramie residents have surrounding actual displays of non-heterosexual romance and the fear that straight people in Laramie have of being perceived as LGBT. Although Marge sees her stance (which many other people in the town possess as well) as fairly tolerant, her views are the symptom of a general culture of homophobia that pervades Laramie.

Marge also seems to condone minor attacks of violence like punching an LGBT person who hits on a straight person, and implies that that kind of violence is generally accepted in the community. This statement helps to contextualize the attack on Matthew, because it suggests that, while murder

certainly exceeded the socially acceptable, there is already a culture of acceptable violent acts towards LGBT people in Laramie.

Act 1: A Scarf Quotes

☝☝ You know, it's so unreal to me that, yeah, that a group from New York would be writing a play about Laramie. And then I was picturing like you're gonna be in a play about my town. You're gonna be onstage in New York and you're gonna be acting like you're us. That's so weird.

Related Characters: Zubaida Ula (speaker), Stephen Belber

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Zubaida Ula speaks this quote after talking with Stephen Belber about her frustrating experience being a Muslim and wearing a headscarf in Laramie. After describing her experience, Zubaida digresses and expresses astonishment that the Tectonic Theater Project is actually making a play about Laramie.

Zubaida's disbelief about the fact that Laramie will actually be represented on stage suggests that Zubaida feels somewhat disconcerted by the idea of being a real person who is part of a real community being portrayed in an artistic work. Zubaida draws attention to the fact that the company will be “onstage in New York,” specifically referring to New York as the location where the play will debut and where the company is from several times. This draws attention to the fact that the play is both being made by people from outside of Laramie and that the play is being written with an East Coast audience in mind. Zubaida says that this is “so weird,” making it clear that Zubaida is uncomfortable, or at least bewildered by the idea. By including Zubaida's sense of disquiet about the project and the playwrights' status as outsiders, the playwrights highlight the difficult ethics of coming into a community and then representing it for an outside audience.

Act 1: Finding Matthew Shepard Quotes

☝☝ They were both my patients and they were two kids. I took care of both of them...of both their bodies. And... for a brief moment I wondered if this is how God feels when he looks down at us. How we are all his kids...Our bodies...Our souls...And I felt a great deal of compassion...for both of them...

Related Characters: Dr. Cantway (speaker), Matthew Shepard, Aaron McKinney

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Dr. Cantway describes his feelings when he realized that he had treated both Matthew Shepard and his murderer, Aaron McKinney, on the same day at the hospital. Matthew was brought to the hospital in unstable condition after his attack, while Aaron came to the emergency room earlier in the morning for minor unrelated injuries.

Dr. Cantway explains that he felt intense compassion for both Aaron and Matthew when he realized that he had treated both young men—or as he calls them, “kids.” Dr. Cantway compares his feelings of empathy for both Matthew and Aaron as nearly god-like, saying he believes that God feels immense love for “all his kids.” Dr. Cantway’s experience treating both men is a highly spiritual one, and in his understanding of religion, which clearly shapes Cantway’s own morality, God is a universally loving figure rather than one of punishment and exclusion.

When Dr. Cantway uses the word “kids” for both Aaron and Matthew, he deemphasizes Aaron’s individual responsibility in the assault by drawing attention to his youth and implying that Aaron may be modeling his behavior after other, older people who raised him. Dr. Cantway’s view of Aaron could be perceived as too generous, as it does not really hold Aaron accountable for his actions, but it also exemplifies the universal empathy that the playwrights seem to be trying to encourage throughout the play.

In this quote, Murdock Cooper tells the playwrights what he has heard about the lead-up to Matthew’s murder, saying that rumors are flying that Matthew hit on Aaron and Russell and that’s why they killed him.

While there is no confirmation of this rumor, Murdock Cooper chooses to believe in it. He says that it does not excuse Aaron and Russell’s actions, but he also says that it makes him “feel better” to believe the idea that Aaron and Russell killed Matthew because he tried to “[make] a pass at them.” In Murdock’s mind, Matthew having hit on Aaron and Russell would make him half to blame for what happened, implying that openly expressed homosexuality is a moral transgression on par with murder. Murdock also clearly views LGBT people as abnormal, a view he reveals when he states that LGBT people should not pick up “regular” people, and so suggests that LGBT people are outside of what is “regular” and normative.



Rather than actually being interested in the truth of what happened that night, Murdock seems attracted to a narrative that allows him to make sense of senseless violence without having to confront the culture of homophobia that he seems comfortable in. The playwrights include this quote to show how the culture of homophobia in Laramie both inspires violence and can also be used to condone or excuse it.

☞ And it’s even in some of the Western literature, you know, live and let live. That is such crap. I tell my friends that—even my gay friends bring it up sometimes. I’m like, “That is crap, you know?” I mean basically what it boils down to: If I don’t tell you I’m a fag, you won’t beat the crap out of me. I mean, what’s so great about that?

Act 2: Live and Let Live Quotes

☞ Some people are saying he made a pass at them. You don’t pick up regular people. I’m not excusing their actions, but it made me feel better because it was partially Matthew Shepard’s fault and partially the guys who did it... you know maybe it’s fifty-fifty.


Related Characters: Murdock Cooper (speaker), Russell Henderson, Aaron McKinney, Matthew Shepard

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

Related Characters: Jonas Slonaker (speaker), Matthew Shepard

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, which follows some very open and extreme expressions of homophobia by various Laramie residents, Jonas Slonaker, a gay Laramie resident, lambastes the pervasive philosophy of “live and let live” in Wyoming and how it is used to obscure discrimination against LGBT people.



Throughout the play, straight Laramie residents refer to the policy of “live and let live” as a fairly tolerant stance on homosexuality. However, as Jonas Slonaker describes how

the axiom actually plays out in real life, he makes it clear that the policy forces gay people to stay in the closet or risk assault. Jonas says the idea that “live and let live” actually manifests itself in individual freedom of expression is “crap,” since the straight people of Laramie seem to think that any gay person living openly is intruding on their heterosexual lifestyle. Jonas’s criticism of the “live and let live” policy suggests that simply tolerating LGBT people in theory and refusing to encounter them in practice is not a genuinely tolerant stance, implying that “tolerance” without acceptance is not actually tolerance at all.

Act 2: The Gem City of the Plains Quotes

☞ And for us to be more or less maligned...That we’re not a good community and we are—the majority of people here are good people.

Related Characters: Gil and Eileen Engen (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, which is presented during a scene in which characters discuss their reactions to the media presence in Laramie after Matthew’s murder, Eileen Engen expresses her frustration about the fact that (as she sees it) the media has slandered the entire town of Laramie.

Eileen Engen says that the town has been “more or less maligned,” and that the media has implied that Laramie is “not a good community,” which she thinks is far from reality. Eileen’s views represent a large swath of the Laramie community that feel disserved and misrepresented by the media’s negative portrait of the town. Notably, Eileen seems preoccupied by the “maligning” of Laramie, but elsewhere she suggests her lack of support for Matthew Shepard and LGBT people in general. It is unclear whether Eileen is using her frustration with the portrayal of Laramie as a way to mask or excuse her anti-LGBT views, or whether the misrepresentation of Laramie in the media has created a false sense of polarization that discouraged Eileen from being open to changing her views. Regardless, the sense that Laramie has been unfairly represented by the media galvanizes some people to change their town, but it turns other people like Eileen Engen away from working towards change, or at least gives them a distraction from the town’s real problems.

☞ Look, I do think that, um, the media actually made people accountable. Because they made people think. Because people were sitting in their homes, like watching TV and listening to CNN and watching Dan Rather and going, “Jesus Christ, well that’s not how it is here.” Well how is it here?

Related Characters: Tiffany Edwards (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Tiffany Edwards, a local reporter who expresses dislike for the national media earlier in this scene, talks about the silver lining of Laramie’s representation in the media. While Tiffany previously called the reporters from outside of Laramie “predators,” she concedes here that the media did a good job holding people “accountable.”

Tiffany imagines people watching the television in their homes and feeling misrepresented, just as Eileen Engen and other characters describe. Tiffany suggests that this upset about Laramie’s portrayal forced people to think about exactly how the real Laramie deviates or does not deviate from the media’s image of it. In doing so, the media made people examine exactly what is problematic about the culture towards LGBT people in Laramie and so recognize what might need to change for Laramie to regain its good graces. Tiffany believes that, while the media may have been invasive and damaging in many ways, it also encouraged difficult but necessary conversations.

Act 2: Seeing Matthew Quotes

☞ And quite frankly I wanted to lash out at somebody. Not at Matthew, please understand that, not one of us was mad at Matthew. But we maybe wanted to squeeze McKinney’s head off. And I think about Henderson. And, you know, two absolutely human beings cause so much grief for so many people.

Related Characters: Marge Murray (speaker), Matthew Shepard, Russell Henderson, Aaron McKinney, Reggie Fluty

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Marge Murray describes her feelings of anger and grief after learning that, while helping Matthew into the

ambulance, her daughter Reggie had been exposed to HIV. Marge's fury and worry for her daughter are focused on Aaron and Russell rather than on Matthew, indicating that she has a reasonable view of where the blame lies for Reggie's exposure. Notably, HIV/AIDS is an affliction that plagues the gay community in particular and that historically has been used to fuel homophobic views. Marge's insistence that she blames Aaron and Russell for hurting Matthew and her daughter rather than Matthew for having HIV, therefore, represents an anti-homophobic stance on a subject that can often be a flashpoint for homophobic discourse.

On the other hand, Marge's anger manifests itself in the desire to inflict physical violence on Aaron and Russell. Marge seems to have a fairly high tolerance for violence in general, as she refers to violence fairly casually during several of her interviews. While Marge's anger is certainly understandable, the play takes up a generally anti-violent stance, suggesting that Marge's desire to hurt Aaron and Russell is not the appropriate outlet for her anger.

their frustration with the Laramie community using highly aggressive and extreme language, even going so far as to compare the average Laramie resident to Nazis and telling Philip that he has "Matthew's blood on [his] hands." Though the emailer may be correct that the community must own its responsibility for Laramie's toxic culture of homophobia, the emailer presents a stance that is entirely devoid of compassion for and perspective on the heartache that the people of Laramie are facing and hard work that many people are already doing to change Laramie.

Notably, the emailer also seems to be an outsider to the community who has only learned about the crime from the national media, and so lacks the insight that seems necessary to actually help Laramie change. Given the play's commitment to the nuances of difficult narratives and to maintaining a compassionate stance towards everyone involved in Laramie's story, it seems fair to say that the playwrights do not support the emailer's delivery even if they support their belief in collective responsibility.

Act 2: E-Mail Quotes

☝ You and the straight people of Laramie and Wyoming are guilty of the beating of Matthew Shepard just as the Germans who looked the other way are guilty of the deaths of the Jews, the Gypsies, and the homosexuals. You have taught your straight children to hate their gay and lesbian brothers and sisters—unless and until you acknowledge that Matt Shepard's beating is not just a random occurrence, not just the work of a couple of random crazies, you have Matthew's blood on your hands.

Related Characters: Matthew Shepard, Philip Dubois

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 57-58

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is the text of an email that University of Wyoming president Philip Dubois receives from a non-Laramie resident after Philip Dubois makes a statement about Matthew's murder to the media. The anonymous emailer blames Philip Dubois and "the straight people of Laramie" for Matthew's death.

While the play, like the email, repeatedly suggests that the people of Laramie share a collective responsibility for the culture of homophobia that resulted in Matthew's murder, the emailer differs from the playwrights in that they express

Act 2: It Happened Here Quotes

☝ And someone got up there and said... c'mon guys, let's show the world that Laramie is not this kind of a town, why did this happen here?... That's a lie. Because it happened here. So how could it not be a town where this kind of thing happens?...And we have to mourn this and we have to be sad that we live in a town, a state, a country where shit like this happens. I mean, these are people trying to distance themselves from this crime. And we need to own this crime...We are like this.

Related Characters: Zubaida Ula (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 60-61

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Zubaida, who has been describing her experience at Matthew's vigil, talks about her frustration when one person stood up and implored the other people in attendance to "show the world that Laramie is not this kind of a town." Zubaida calls that a "lie" and argues that the person's logic does not make sense, since clearly Laramie must be "this kind of town" if a hate crime happened there.

Zubaida seems to be frustrated with what she saw as the speaker's desire to distance Laramie from the hate crime. She sees the speaker's words as an attempt to discount Aaron and Russell as a part of the Laramie community and

to ignore the fact that their values and sense of right and wrong were forged by it. Whereas the speaker seems to see Aaron and Russell's actions as outlying, Zubaida, who has herself experienced how the town's ignorance and closed-mindedness can be damaging for people on the margins, views their crime as the natural result of a culture that is tainted by homophobia. Zubaida also may be turned off by the speaker's focus on Laramie's image in the world rather than the actual quality of Laramie's community values. Rather than showing the world that Laramie is not like it is being portrayed, Zubaida wants Laramie to mourn its failures and own its flaws in order to change them.

Act 2: Shannon and Jen Quotes

☞ “You guys both went to Laramie High?”
“Yeah. Can't you tell? We're a product of our society.”

Related Characters: Stephen Belber, Shannon (speaker), Aaron McKinney, Jen

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Stephen Belber, who is interviewing two friends of Aaron McKinney's after running into them at a bar, asks if “you guys” went to Laramie High School. It is unclear from the context whether Stephen means only Shannon and Jen or whether he is including Aaron in “you guys,” but, regardless, Shannon seems to speak for all three of them when she responds “Yeah. Can't you tell?”

Shannon's affirmation and her comment that they are “a product of [their] society” suggests that Shannon views herself and her friends as having been heavily shaped by the culture they were raised in. Shannon's dry tone also seems to imply that she feels somewhat disserved by how her life turned out as a result, perhaps because Shannon struggles with perpetual poverty and a drug problem. If the reader believes Shannon's comment that she, Jen, and Aaron are “a product of their society,” then Aaron's own culpability must be viewed in light of the culture he grew up in. Shannon's comment shifts responsibility for whatever happened to Matthew from Aaron as an individual to the greater Laramie community that made him who he is.

Act 2: Two Queers and a Catholic Priest Quotes

☞ I thought, “You know, should we...call the bishop and ask him permission to do the vigil?” And I was like, “Hell, no, I'm not going to do that.” His permission doesn't make it correct, you realize that? And I'm not knocking bishops, but what is correct is correct.

Related Characters: Father Roger Schmit (speaker), Matthew Shepard, Greg Pierotti, Leigh Fondakowski

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Father Roger discusses his thought process as he was deciding to host a vigil for Matthew after his attack. Father Roger initially wondered if he should ask a higher ranking member of the clergy whether he could hold a vigil, but then decided that, whether he had the permission of the institution of the Church or not, holding a vigil was the right thing to do.

Father Roger, who is Catholic, follows his own philosophy of acceptance of LGBT people, despite the fact that the Catholic Church is officially anti-homosexuality. While the Catholic Church as an institution condemns non-heterosexual sexualities, Father Roger's own experience of Catholicism seems to deviate from these official policies, suggesting that the same religion can be interpreted in different ways. Father Roger is more concerned with promoting the ideals of compassion and nonviolence than with judging other people's identities, and he views that moral hierarchy as “correct” regardless of the politics of the church. To Father Roger, the word “correct” seems to mean “morally right” rather than “accurate.”

☞ You think violence is what they did to Matthew—they did do violence to Matthew—but, you know, every time that you are called a fag, or you are called a...dyke...Do you realize that is violence? That is the seed of violence. And I would resent it immensely if you use anything I said...to somehow cultivate that kind of violence...Just deal with what is true. You know what is true. You need to do your best to say it correct.

Related Characters: Father Roger Schmit (speaker), Matthew Shepard, Greg Pierotti, Leigh Fondakowski

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 65-66

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Father Roger explains his philosophy of violence and his own reservations about appearing in *The Laramie Project*.

Father Roger explains that he views hate speech as violence in itself, thereby expanding the normal view of what is considered violence beyond the solely physical. (This idea is also Biblical in nature, as Jesus taught that cursing at one's neighbor was the same sin as striking or killing him.) Father Roger's radically inclusive understanding of violence allows the reader to see how more subtle examples of LGBT discrimination in Laramie can be linked to outbreaks of extreme violence like Matthew's murder.

Because Father Roger sees any hate speech as violent, he worries that, by representing physical violence and violent speech in theater, *The Laramie Project* could serve as a model for (or even enact, through repeating slurs) the very kind of violence that it is trying to condemn. Father Roger's concern suggests that, while theater is capable of tackling social issues, is also could be capable of exacerbating them. Father Roger implores the playwrights to portray Laramie in a way that is "correct," a word he uses elsewhere to mean not only true, but also morally righteous. Father Roger's words draw attention not only to more useful ways of thinking about violence, but also to the precariousness of theatrical representation itself, and the care that needs to be taken to make sure it affects communities in positive ways.

In this quote, The Baptist Minister explains his views on Matthew's murder during a phone call with Amanda Gronich. The Minister, who was initially hesitant to speak with members of the theater company, opens up to Amanda after she tells him she attended his church service that Sunday.

The Baptist Minister expresses complicated views of both Aaron and Russell and of Matthew. He makes it clear that he condemns Aaron and Russell's violence in itself, even going so far as to say that they deserve to be put to death. At the same time, however, the Minister, who is openly and extremely anti-LGBT, says that he hopes that Matthew "had a chance to reflect on his lifestyle" "before he slipped into a coma." While the Baptist Minister disapproves of Aaron and Russell's murder, he also seems to imply that Matthew's death is a kind of just and divine retribution for his sexuality (which the Minister minimizes as a "lifestyle"). This reflects the Baptist Minister's vision of God as more inclined to vengeful punishment than a loving forgiveness.


The Baptist Minister's seemingly contradictory moral juggling certainly reveals his extreme homophobia, but it also shows how he views violence as the appropriate form of justice for perceived wrongdoing (both for Aaron and Russell in the form of the death penalty, and for Matthew in the form of his murder). As the question of violence as punishment recurs in later discussions of the death penalty, the Baptist Minister serves as a warning of how orientation towards violence as punishment often reflects ideologies that center hatred and judgment rather than compassion and love.

Act 2: Lifestyle 2 Quotes

☝☝ Now, those two people, the accused... I think they deserve the death penalty... Now as for the victim, I know that that lifestyle is legal, but I will tell you one thing. I hope that Matthew Shepard as he was tied to that fence that he had time to reflect on a moment when someone had spoken the word of the Lord to him—and that before he slipped into a coma he had a chance to reflect on his lifestyle.

Related Characters: The Baptist Minister (speaker), Amanda Gronich, Matthew Shepard, Russell Henderson, Aaron McKinney

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 67-68

Explanation and Analysis

Act 2: Magnitude Quotes

☝☝ And as I told you before, homosexuality is not a lifestyle with which I agree. Um, but having been thrown into this... I guess I didn't understand the magnitude with which some people hate.

Related Characters: Rulon Stacey (speaker), Matthew Shepard

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 69-70

Explanation and Analysis

Rulon Stacey speaks this quote after describing his experience as a spokesperson for the Shepard family and the emails he received after tearing up while announcing Matthew's death. Rulon Stacey describes one email that



was especially hateful and used gay slurs to describe both Matthew and Rulon.

Rulon, who is a devout Mormon, disclaims that he does not agree with “homosexuality” as a “lifestyle” before expressing his surprise at the “magnitude with which some people hate.” Rulon clearly is not pro-LGBT, a stance that has to do with his religious views as a Mormon. However, he also seems shocked and horrified by the depth of anti-LGBT sentiment that he encounters while helping the Shepard family. Although Rulon does not change his stance on homosexuality, Rulon empathizes with Matthew and the Shepard family, even crying as he reads their statement. This suggests that, while many Laramie residents like Rulon may not completely change their views, Matthew’s story may push them to feel compassion for victims of anti-LGBT violence and to actually confront the extremity of some people’s hate. Although not a huge one, this seems to be a step in the right direction for people like Rulon.

Act 3: Snow Quotes

☝☝ I decided that someone needed to stand toe to toe with this guy and show the differences. And I think at time like this when we’re talking about hatred as much as the nation is right now, that someone needs to show, that there is a better way of dealing with that kind of hatred. So our idea is to dress up like angels.

Related Characters: Romaine Patterson (speaker), Russell Henderson, Reverend Fred Phelps

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Romaine Patterson, who is a friend of Matthew’s, an out lesbian, and a budding activist, talks about how she organized a protest to block out Fred Phelps’ hate speech at Russell Henderson’s trial. Before this quote, Romaine discusses how she was inspired by a peaceful counter-protest at Matthew’s funeral.


As Romaine describes her decision-making process, she focuses on the need not only to drown out Phelps’ ranting, but also to show that pro-LGBT political activism is the ideological opposite of Phelps’ hateful rhetoric. Romaine feels determined to use her protest not only to stop Phelps, but also to set an example for the entire country of how to confront hatred and violence with symbols of peace and love.

In pursuit of these goals, Romaine chooses to dress up herself and her fellow counter-protestors as angels. In doing so, the protestors present themselves not only as symbols of peace and love, but also of God and religious morality. Through the use of these symbols, the protestors reclaim religion, which is often cited as a justification for homophobia, in the name of acceptance for LGBT people.

Act 3: Angels in America Quotes

☝☝ Well, once we started working into the case, and actually speaking to the people that were gay and finding out what their underlying fears were, well, then it sort of hit home. This is America. You don’t have the right to feel that fear. And we’re still going to have people who hold with the old ideals...I’m not gonna put up with it, and I’m not going to listen to it...I already lost a couple of buddies. I don’t care. I feel more comfortable and I can sleep at night.

Related Characters: Rob Debee (speaker), Matthew Shepard

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Rob Debee talks about his experience talking to LGBT people in Laramie in depth for the first time as a result of Matthew’s case. Rob discusses how he came to understand the real fear that LGBT people in Laramie feel every day and talks about how, through that experience, Rob became an advocate for LGBT rights.

Rob Debee’s statement suggests that, in order to truly understand the LGBT experience in a place like Laramie, it was necessary to actually talk and connect with LGBT people themselves. Through these conversations, Rob Debee spoke with LGBT people about their struggles for the first time, and so began to see that the fear that LGBT residents felt did not correspond to his image of his community and his country. Rob’s experience shows how Matthew’s case opened a conversation to show people like Rob how homophobia affected real people in their communities, and so encouraged people like Rob to become allies. It also implies the important work that narrative and first-hand experience can do to change people’s perspectives.

Act 3: A Death Penalty Case Quotes

☝ I think right now our most important teachers must be Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney. They have to be our teachers. How did you learn? What did we as a society do to teach you that? See, I don't know if many people will let them be their teacher. I think it would be wonderful if the judge said, "In addition to your sentence, you must tell your story."

Related Characters: Father Roger Schmit (speaker), Aaron McKinney, Russell Henderson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, which follows a series of quotes revealing different characters' opinions on the death penalty, Father Roger talks about what he sees as appropriate punishment for Aaron and Russell's actions. Rather than supporting the death penalty like the Baptist Minister, Father Roger hopes that Aaron and Russell will be kept alive and required to tell their stories.

Father Roger describes the need to allow Russell and Aaron to be society's teachers, suggesting that they help Laramie answer the question "what did we as a society do to teach you that?" Father clearly implies that he believes that society at large shares the blame for Matthew's murder, and he suggests that Laramie must try to discover exactly how they are complicit in order to change. Father Roger, worries, however, that people will not "let [Aaron and Russell] be their teacher," suggesting that people may be afraid to confront their collective culpability and may prefer instead to act like the case is an open-and-shut issue. Father Roger's insistence on the importance of listening to Aaron and Russell's story emphasizes the importance of stories in general to change social values and norms, and it also suggests that the use of the death penalty as punishment may prevent essential changes from being made in the Laramie community.

Father Roger's view of storytelling also suggests that storytelling can serve not only as a source of knowledge for the Laramie community, but also that it could be a kind of atonement for Aaron and Russell. Considering *The Laramie Project's* role telling the story of the entire community, the play might itself be considered to be a kind of collective atonement for the Laramie community's collective responsibility for the homophobic culture that indirectly caused Matthew's murder.

Act 3: Dennis Shepard's Statement Quotes

☝ I would like nothing better than to see you die, Mr. McKinney. However this is the time to begin the healing process. To show mercy to someone who refused to show any mercy. Mr. McKinney, I am going to grant you life, as hard as it is for me to do so, because of Matthew... I give you life in the memory of one who no longer lives. May you have a long life and may you thank Matthew every day for it.

Related Characters: Dennis Shepard (speaker), Matthew Shepard, Aaron McKinney

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, which is an excerpt from the statement Dennis Shepard made during Aaron's sentencing, Dennis Shepard explains the family's reason for asking for a life sentence for Aaron rather than the death penalty.



Dennis says that, although he would really like to see Aaron die, he is going to grant Aaron life in Matthew's memory. Dennis emphasizes how difficult it is for him to refuse the death penalty, suggesting that mercy and non-violence, rather than being a show of weakness, are actually a very difficult path to follow, especially in the face of an injustice like what Aaron did to Matthew. Dennis, however, says that it is "time to begin the healing process," suggesting that the death penalty would prevent the community from healing and moving on from the tragedy (this is possibly in part because it would mean a long, drawn-out appeals case that would keep the community under national scrutiny). By choosing to give Aaron life imprisonment, the Shepard family chooses not to punish violence with violence, and in doing so they reject ideologies like the Baptist Minister's that valorize violence and hatred (and which, notably, tend to be the same philosophies that discriminate against LGBT people).


Act 3: Aftermath Quotes

☝ It just hit me today, the minute that I got out of the courthouse. That the reason that God wanted me to find him is, for he didn't have to die out there alone, you know. And if I wouldn't've came along, they wouldn't've found him for a couple of weeks at least. So it makes me feel really good that he didn't have to die out there alone.

Related Characters: Aaron Kreifels (speaker), Matthew

Shepard

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis


Throughout the play, when Aaron Kreifels discusses how he found Matthew, he talks about how he had been on an aimless bike ride, picking directions at random. Aaron states elsewhere that he believes that God was guiding him, but that he could not figure out why. After Matthew's trial and Dennis Shepard's statement, Aaron finally realizes why God guided him to Matthew in this quote, where he states that he realized God did not want Matthew to die alone.

Aaron's understanding of his purpose in Matthew's life clearly is shaped by his profound religiosity. Notably, his understanding of God seems to be as a kind figure whose love includes LGBT people like Matthew, as he believes that God cared enough about Matthew to not want him to be alone when he died. Religion helps Aaron process finding Matthew (clearly an extremely traumatic event for Aaron) and to recognize the good that he did in bringing Matthew home. Aaron Kreifels' experience of religion shows how religion, when it is based in goodness and acceptance, can be a helpful tool to aid people in making sense of difficult experiences.

Act 3: Epilogue Quotes

☝☝ Change is not an easy thing, and I don't think people were up to it here... it's been a year since Matthew Shepard died, and they haven't passed shit in Wyoming...at a state level, any town, nobody anywhere, has passed any kind of laws, anti-discrimination laws or hate crime legislation... What's come out of it...that's concrete or lasting?

Related Characters: Jonas Slonaker (speaker), Matthew Shepard

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Jonas Slonaker expresses his frustration with what he sees as a lack of systemic change in Laramie after Matthew's murder. While there were many demonstrations


after Matthew's death, Jonas Slonaker points out that there were no concrete legislative changes in the year following Matthew's murder.

Jonas, who admits that change is "not an easy thing," seems to be the voice of skepticism in a play that ends on an otherwise hopeful note. Jonas seems to worry that, even if Matthew's murder caused some social progress towards LGBT acceptance, that change will not prove to be "concrete or lasting." Notably, it is unclear exactly what kinds of hate crime or anti-discrimination legislation Jonas would like to see passed—and since Matthew's murderers received the maximum sentences possible, it is not obvious from the play exactly what still needs to be done legislatively. Still, Jonas's frustration with the lack of tangible change shows his legitimate frustration as a gay man who has long been living with discrimination and has seen little progress in his lifetime thus far. Jonas reminds the reader that, while the play may end on an uplifting note, there is still much more work to be done in the field of LGBT rights in Laramie and throughout the country.

☝☝ And I remembered to myself the night he and I drove around together, he said to me, "Laramie sparkles, doesn't it?" And where he was up there, if you sit exactly where he was, up there, Laramie sparkles from there...Matt was right there in that spot, and I can just picture in his eyes, I can just picture what he was seeing. The last thing he saw on this earth was the sparkling lights.

Related Characters: Doc O'Connor (speaker), Matthew Shepard

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Doc, who is at the fence with members of the Tectonic Theater Company paying tribute to Matthew, remembers how Matthew once told him that Laramie sparkles while they were out driving. Doc notes that, in the spot where Matthew was tied to the fence, a good view of the Laramie lights would have been the last thing he saw.


Doc's description of how Matthew loved the sparkling Laramie lights seems, in part, to be pure sentimentality. However, the Laramie lights also represents Laramie's beauty, both physically and in terms of the beauty of its

community and the individuals in it. By noting Matthew's admiration for the lights, Doc seems to be drawing attention to Matthew's love for his town. Then, as Doc states that the lights were the last thing that Matthew saw as he was dying, Doc seems to be implying that Matthew died still seeing the beauty in Laramie. Doc, who elsewhere talks about the supreme importance of hope, appears to be alluding to his belief that Matthew would have continued to love Laramie and have hope for Laramie's future even after his brutal attack.

Act 3: Departure Quotes

☛ To show it's not the hellhole of the earth would be nice, but that is up to how you portray us. And that in turn is up to how Laramie behaves.

Related Characters: Marge Murray (speaker), Leigh Fondakowski

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

Marge Murray speaks this quote as she talks on the phone with Leigh Fondakowski for the last time and says her goodbyes. When Leigh asks how she feels about the fact that Laramie will be portrayed in their play, Marge speaks

the quote above.

Marge, ever blunt, tells Leigh that "to show it's not the hellhole of the earth would be nice," seeming to allude to the media's extremely negative portrayals of Laramie in the past and hoping that the play will offer a portrait of the town that is at least slightly more positive. However, Marge tells Leigh that it is "up to how you portray us," effectively relinquishing artistic control to the playwrights. Marge suggests that Laramie has already done all it can to affect how it will be represented, since it was also "up to how Laramie behaves." By suggesting that Laramie will be represented at least in part according to how it "behaves," Marge seems to imply that, unlike some Laramie residents quoted elsewhere in the play, she would not wish or expect the playwrights to paint a rosier picture of Laramie than it deserves.

Marge's comment acknowledges the symbiotic and mutually constructive nature of *The Laramie Project*, which, as a play that is representing real people and a real community, has a responsibility to portray the Laramie community responsibly. This means dealing with it both compassionately and accurately (the reader may, like Andy Paris does in the last few lines of the play, think back to Father Roger's command to get everything "correct"). Ultimately, the playwrights seem to include this quote from Marge to suggest that the play was the result of a collaborative process between the theater company and the town, for which both parties are at least in part responsible.



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: A DEFINITION

The Laramie Project opens with its narrator describing how, from 1998 to 1999, Tectonic Theater Project made repeated trips to Laramie, Wyoming to conduct interviews with people from the town. The narrator states that the play the audience is about to see is comprised of shortened and edited versions of those interviews and other primary source texts.

Next, Greg Pierotti, a member of the Tectonic Theater Project, says that his first interview in Laramie was with Detective Sergeant Hing. Greg then “transforms” into the Sergeant and talks about his three-generation family history in Laramie. He praises Laramie as a good place to live and talks about the town’s history as a major stop along the railroad. Rebecca Hilliker, the head of the theater department of the University of Wyoming, jumps in, talking about how Wyoming’s sparse population and sunshine allows for reflective space and the opportunity to be happy.

Eileen Engen, a rancher, then speaks up, talking about how important it is to care for the land in and around Laramie. Doc O’Connor, a limousine driver, talks about how he prefers Laramie to the East Coast because of the climate. Next, the narrator introduces Philip Dubois, the president of the University of Wyoming, who talks about how Laramie is much safer for his children than the bigger cities he had lived in previously. The narrator then introduces Laramie resident Zackie Salmon, who talks about how practically everyone in Laramie knows each other. Zackie loves how close knit the community is. Doc O’Connor talks about how the trains going through the town don’t bother him. April Silva, a university student, says that Laramie is at least better than her hometown.

Sergeant Hing then resumes his discussion of Laramie, calling Laramie a “good place to live” before saying that a lot of reporters came to Laramie after Matthew Shepard’s murder. One reporter (whose dialogue is spoken by another actor) had asked who found Matthew far out on the country road where he was killed, and when Sergeant Hing explained that lots of people like to run and bike out there, the reporter did not understand why. Sergeant Hing, who loves nature, felt the reporter was totally missing the point.

In the play’s opening, the narrator tells the audience that the play was created through interviews with real people. In doing so, the playwrights draw attention to the play’s construction and the fact that it is an artistic portrayal of actual people and a real story.



The playwrights highlight how, although they are portraying real people, their characters are artistic representations of those people, rather than objective or journalistic presentations of the people themselves. The playwrights accomplish this by showing how Greg Pierotti, one of the playwrights, “transforms” into Sergeant Hing, underlining the artifice of the theatrical form and discouraging total suspension of disbelief.



The playwrights use this moment to show that Laramie is beloved by its residents. Characters compare Laramie favorably to coastal and urban places—places like New York City, where the play first was produced, and where people are generally thought of as more progressive than in the rural West. This opening shows the value of a community like Laramie, which does not exist in cosmopolitan spaces. The opening also challenges the preexisting negative portrait of Laramie that the audience may have seen in the media in the wake of Matthew Shepard’s murder.



As Sergeant Hing recounts his conversation with the reporter, it becomes clear that Hing and other residents feel that the national media and community outsiders have fundamentally misunderstood Laramie. By putting this anecdote in the play’s first scene, the play seems to be acknowledging the media’s failures and positing itself as an attempt to do better than previous portrayals of Laramie.



The narrator then introduces Jedediah Schultz, who discusses how his perception of Laramie changed after Matthew Shepard's murder. Jedediah says that, before the murder, he would have said Laramie was a beautiful town with a strong sense of community. But since the murder, Jedediah thinks of Laramie as a town "defined by an accident, a crime," and a "noun, a definition, a sign."

As Jedediah expresses his frustration that the town has become "a noun... a sign," he seems to imply that language can obscure rather than illuminate. Through this quote, the playwrights acknowledge how, in representing the town in a verbal artistic work, they have to be especially careful not to misrepresent it.



ACT 1: JOURNAL ENTRIES

The narrator contextualizes the following dialogue as excerpts from the journal entries of members of the theater company. Andy Paris begins reciting part of his journal in which he describes Moisés Kaufman introducing the idea of the Laramie Project. Stephen Belber talks about how he hesitated to take part in the project because he felt it was invasive. Amanda Gronich expresses her overwhelming sense of inexperience in conducting interviews. Finally, Kaufman states that the company agreed to go to Laramie to do interviews. He notes his own safety concerns with such a trip, but says that Rebecca Hilliker, the head of the university theater department, is going to introduce the company to people to interview.

Through excerpts from the playwrights' journals, this scene shows the playwrights' individual concerns going into The Laramie Project. By including these excerpts, the playwrights show that they entered into the project with an awareness of the potential problems they might encounter or create through their investigation. The playwrights are worried about how they could harm Laramie and could themselves be hurt while working on the project. Kaufman notes his safety concerns, while others worry their presence may be invasive.



This moment opens with a journal entry from Greg Pierotti describing how, on the day they arrived in Laramie, the theater company saw a herd of buffalo and a sign that said "Wyoming—like no place on earth." Another member of the company, Leigh Fondakowski, describes stopping to eat at a local inn and interacting with a peculiar waitress. Moisés Kaufman admits that, upon arriving out West, the rest of the company had to explain to him what chicken fried steak was.

These journal entries focus on the company's sense of foreignness in Wyoming. They marvel at a herd of buffalo and require explanations of chicken fried steak, suggesting that the New York-based company is deeply out of their element. This shows how the playwrights are newcomers and outsiders to Laramie, and so undercuts their authorial authority.



Company member Barbara Pitts talks about seeing the "Welcome to Laramie" sign the night they finally arrived in the town. After a strip of Walmarts and fast food chains, they arrived at a town that looked like "a turn-of-the-century Western" town. Barbara remembers one of the inns they passed was displaying a sign that said, "HATE IS NOT A LARAMIE VALUE."

Barbara's memory of a sign proclaiming that "HATE IS NOT A LARAMIE VALUE" shows how, even prior to the theater company's arrival, the Laramie community was still grappling with its culture of homophobia and reevaluating its values following Matthew Shepard's death.



In an excerpt from a journal entry, Moisés says the company is switching from a motel to a Best Western. Amanda Gronich talks about how the company is dividing up to attend different churches in the community, and she and Moisés attend a Baptist service.

As the playwrights begin to settle into Laramie (even switching to a nicer hotel), they engage with the town's religious community by experiencing various church services firsthand.



ACT 1: REBECCA HILLIKER

In this moment, Rebecca Hilliker talks about her fear when Moisés Kaufman contacted her about his theater project. After her initial negative reaction, however, Rebecca decided that, after all the “negative closure” the town and the university had already had, it would be good for them to open the topic back up in a productive way. Rebecca remarks that she admires how her students are so open, honest, and independent in their views, saying how, compared to students in other parts of the country, her Wyoming students are more expressive of their controversial opinions. Rebecca then recommends that the company talk with Jedadiah Schultz.

Like many of the playwrights themselves, Rebecca Hilliker initially hesitated to take part in the project. Rebecca’s ultimate agreement and her belief that the play could provide more positive closure for the community suggests that she believes wholeheartedly in the cathartic power of theater. As head of the university’s theater department, Rebecca would be especially aware of the potential for using art to create productive conversations.



ACT 1: ANGELS IN AMERICA

Jedadiah Schultz begins his interview by saying he has lived in Wyoming his entire life and his family history in Wyoming goes back generations. Jedadiah then moves on to talking about how his parents could not pay for his college, so Jedadiah entered a high-school theater competition to try to win a scholarship. One of his professors suggested that Jedadiah use a scene from the play [Angels in America](#) for the competition. Jedadiah agreed. When Jedadiah told his parents about the competition and the scene, his parents told him that they would not come watch the competition. Jedadiah explains that his parents did not approve of the scene because Jedadiah would be playing a gay character, and they believed homosexuality was wrong.

The play [Angels in America](#) centers on the lives of gay characters during the AIDS crisis, and reimagines traditional religious figures in the context of these characters’ lives. By referring to this play in The Laramie Project, the playwrights seem to be cataloguing their place in a genre of theater that recounts and acknowledges LGBT stories. Jedadiah’s comments about his family’s homophobic reactions to the play show how powerfully theater can affect an audience, even if it evokes discomfort and fear rather than connection and catharsis.



However, Jedadiah Schultz decided to do the scene in the competition against his parents’ wishes, and he received first prize, earning him a scholarship to the University of Wyoming. Jedadiah describes the day as one of the best of his life, but he wonders why, since he’s not gay, he did the scene despite his parents’ disapproval. He thinks it’s because he wanted to win. Jedadiah calls the scene “the best scene,” and asks them to tell the playwright that he thinks so, if they happen to know him from the New York theater scene.

Although elsewhere in his first interview Jedadiah notes that he does not support homosexuality, Jedadiah’s insistence on doing the scene and his admiration for the scene’s writing shows how theater allows him to empathize with and appreciate work that centers gay stories. While the scene does not change Jedadiah’s views in itself, it pushes him towards a more compassionate stance.



ACT 1: ALISON AND MARGE

This moment consists of an interview that Greg Pierotti conducts with local social workers Alison Mears and Marge Murray. Alison describes how Laramie used to be more rural when Marge was growing up. Marge talks about how she could run around “in [her] all together” while her kids were at school. Greg asks if she is talking about walking around naked, and Marge asks, “why wear clothes?” Greg asks if Laramie was a ranching town, and Alison says yes, and it was also a railroad town with a maintenance shop for the trains. Marge tells Greg that her mother worked as an engine builder. Alison then tells Greg that Wyoming is a hard place to find a good job, and Marge adds that she’s been working in the service industry, so she knows everyone in town.

Marge Murray describes what she sees as a class divide in Laramie, noting that well-educated people look down on people who are less educated. Marge talks about people making fun of her children because she, their mother, was a bartender. Alison Mears adds, however, that without the university in town, they would be “S.O.L.” Greg Pierotti asks what she means, and Alison explains, laughing, that it stands for “shit out of luck.”

Greg Pierotti then asks what Marge Murray and Alison Mears’ responses were to Matthew Shepard’s murder. Marge explains that she was fairly close to the investigation because her daughter works for the sheriff. She then says that she does not care if people are gay as long as they don’t “bother” her. Marge says that most people in Laramie feel the same, describing how they may punch a gay person at a bar, but that would be all. She says that Laramie is “live and let live.” Alison tells Greg that Marge knows more than she’s letting on about the case, and Marge asks what Greg is going to do with the interview. Greg says he isn’t sure, but that they’ll present it to the people of Laramie at the end. Marge tells Greg that, in that case, she’ll keep some things to herself.

ACT 1: MATTHEW

In this moment, Andy Paris meets shopkeeper Trish Steger, someone who knew Matthew Shepard, for the first time. Trish says that she knew “Matt” because he used to come into her shop, and Andy comments that Trish was the first person he heard call Matthew “Matt.” Doc O’Connor then jumps in, describing how, one October night, he received a phone call from Matthew asking Doc to pick him up in his limo. Matthew told Doc to take him to a gay bar, asking “Do you have a problem with that?” Doc drove Matthew to a bar in a town an hour away. Doc says that he liked Matt because he was straightforward.

Greg Pierotti encounters Marge Murray for the first time during a conversation with her and Alison Mears, and their exchange shows that Greg Pierotti and Marge clearly come from very different backgrounds. As Marge contextualizes Laramie, Greg is surprised when Marge talks about walking around naked, while Marge seems puzzled by his lack of understanding. Marge Murray is one of the playwrights’ recurring subjects, and this first conversation provides a benchmark for how their relationship changes.



Characters bring up the class and educational rift in Laramie several times throughout the play. As the town confronts its problem with homophobia, this gap exacerbates the problem, since many of the more progressive people in the town are also highly educated and often affiliated with the university.



Marge exemplifies the “live and let live” philosophy that many Laramie residents cite as a cornerstone of their society. However, “live and let live” seems insufficient when it comes to truly accepting differences—for example, to Marge, it is okay to punch an LGBT person for hitting on someone who is straight. Marge seems to find these kind of minor incidents of violence acceptable, while still condemning Matthew Shepard’s murder as unacceptable. The question, then, is where does she draw the line when it comes to homophobic violence? Marge also expresses anxiety about whether other Laramie residents will see her interview, suggesting that representing real people in art can be a very complicated task.



As the playwrights talk with people who actually knew Matthew Shepard, they humanize Matthew in a way that more journalistic mediums may not be capable of. From Doc O’Connor, the audience learns that Matthew was very open about his sexuality. It is also evident that Matthew was very aware of the bigotry he faced in Laramie, as Matthew defensively and immediately asked Doc whether he had a problem with his sexuality.



Trish Steger refers the theater company to her sister Romaine Patterson, a close friend of Matthew Shepard's. Romaine then appears, talking about how, in their friend group, they all referred to Matt as "Choo-choo." Romaine describes Matthew's vibrant smile and how he would stare people down in the local coffee shop to get his favorite spot. She also mentions that Matthew was very interested in politics and enjoyed watching CNN and MSNBC.

Jon Peacock, Matthew Shepard's academic advisor at the University of Wyoming, describes how, when Matthew first entered the university, he was very shy and maladjusted. Eventually, however, Matthew became more open about his interests and told Jon that he wanted to work in human rights. Jon describes Matthew "blooming" and beginning to feel that he could make a difference. The floor switches back to Romaine Patterson, who says that Matthew told her he had joined a campus gay and lesbian group and was preparing for Pride Week a few days before his attack. Jon then says that Matthew's interest in human rights makes his murder even more ironic and tragic.

Romaine's portrait of Matthew is extremely intimate as she describes Matthew's smile and his nickname in their friend group. Matthew's interest in politics also suggests that he was unhappy with aspects of society—presumably in part with the treatment of LGBT people—and hoped to incite change.



Combined with Doc's description of Matthew's open sexuality, Jon Peacock's descriptions of Matthew's interest in human rights suggests that Matthew saw something lacking in the way people treated him because of his sexuality. While Jon sees Matthew's interest in human rights as ironic and tragic, it could also be seen as a kind of solace that Matthew's death sparked a national conversation about LGBT acceptance.



ACT 1: WHO'S GETTING WHAT?

In a monologue, Doc O'Connor says that there are more gay people in Wyoming than it might initially appear, though they are not all recognizably, stereotypically gay. Instead, Doc says, they are tough, farmer types, who will fight anyone who messes with them. Doc says he knows a lot of gay people in Wyoming, and he adds that he does not think Wyoming people care if someone is gay or straight, implying there is a lot of gay activity that is somewhat hidden.

Doc's belief that there are more gay people in Wyoming than meets the eye suggests that many gay people in the state feel that they have to remain closeted in order to be accepted. While Doc says people do not care if someone is gay or straight, he also suggests that gay men must be hyper masculine and hushed in order to be "tolerated."



ACT 1: EASIER SAID THAN DONE

The narrator introduces Catherine Connolly, who calls herself the first "out" lesbian faculty member at the University of Wyoming. Catherine says she came out during her job interview when asked what her nonexistent husband did. Catherine goes on to talk about how, when she first started at the University, she received a call from an anonymous woman who told Catherine that she was also a lesbian, and wanted to meet her, and that she knew other lesbians who were in the closet who would be afraid to be seen with Catherine.

Catherine Connolly's story about arriving in Laramie as the first "out" lesbian on the university faculty seems to contradict what people like Marge and Doc have been saying about the "live and let live" attitude towards gay people. Catherine's phone call suggests that many lesbians in Wyoming live with so much fear of being persecuted that they keep their sexuality completely secret.



The narrator then introduces Jonas Slonaker, a gay man who moved to Laramie because he loves Wyoming. He talks about how when he would go to gay bars, men from Wyoming would ask how he can live there, since they found it so difficult. Occasionally, though, Jonas says someone would talk about how much they missed Laramie and wanted to move back. Jonas begins to imagine how things might be different if more gay people stayed in rural towns, but then states that this would be “easier said than done.”

Jonas further articulates the fear and lack of acceptance that many LGBT people feel in Wyoming when he talks about the gay men he knows who refuse to live there because facing the constant bigotry makes life too hard. Again, this statement contradicts how many straight people view Laramie’s attitude towards LGBT people as fairly tolerant (but fits the usual trend of the oppressive majority minimizing the experiences of the oppressed minority).



ACT 1: THE WORD

The Baptist Minister recites what seem to be Amanda Gronich’s memories of his sermon. The Baptist Minister says he is preaching the word of God, and that the Bible, which sometimes contradicts science or modern thought, must be believed entirely and verbatim. Next, Unitarian minister Stephen Mead Johnson, in what appears to be excerpts from an interview, talks about the dominant religions in the area, saying that Baptists and Mormons are everywhere. Doug Laws, the Mormon Church leader in the area, talks about how many outsiders are threatened by the Mormon belief that God still speaks to everyday people and Mormon leaders.

The Baptist Minister’s sermon about believing the Bible word for word shows that the Minister’s reading style is highly conservative. While the Minister encourages this literal, direct, evangelical way of reading the Bible, the play itself seems to require the opposite kind of reading. Since the play represents a living community and since its characters change over time, it resists readings that nitpick, decontextualize, and fail to see the work as a whole.



Stephen Mead Johnson resumes talking about the different religions in Laramie, describing them on a political spectrum from left to right. Furthest left is the Unitarian Church, and then next leftmost is Father Roger Schmit and the Catholic parish. Stephen says that, immediately after Matthew Shepard’s attack, Father Roger hosted a vigil for him. The floor then goes to Father Roger, who talks about how, when he tried to get different ministers together for the vigil, some hesitated to join because they wanted to wait and see how the public would react. Father Roger was angered by this lack of leadership.

While Catholicism is often viewed as a conservative religion, Father Roger seems to have a more open interpretation of its doctrine. Father Roger’s description of other religious leaders’ hesitation after Matthew’s death suggests that some religious groups simply reflect preexisting values rather than shaping communities and leading them to morality. Father Roger finds that model of religion frustrating.



Doug Laws talks about how “God has set boundaries” and people must study scripture to learn these boundaries and follow them. One of these limits, according to Doug, is the definition of a family as “one woman and one man and children,” which cannot be deviated from. The Baptist Minister adds that his followers may be criticized for their faith, but they must follow the Bible.

Doug Laws and the Baptist Minister’s views of God and morality are very authoritarian and strict. Meanwhile, both leaders express a sense of victimhood about the fact that some people criticize their religious views, hypocritically ignoring that their views totally ostracize and dehumanize LGBT people.



Stephen Mead Johnson mentions how many of the conservative Christian pastors in the community did not condemn what happened to Matthew Shepard. He says that they use the Bible as a way to defend their views. The Baptist Minister describes himself as a “Biblicist” and says that, regardless of people’s beliefs, the Bible is true. Stephen tells the company that he arrived in Wyoming just a few weeks before Matthew’s murder, and felt that his purpose in Laramie was to help the community through the trauma surrounding it.

As Stephen Mead Johnson describes how the conservative religious leaders in Laramie defend their views, his phrasing seems to suggest that they read the Bible in a literal way to support their preexisting bigotry, rather than actually deriving their views from the text. Stephen Mead Johnson’s contrasting views of religion shows how varied different manifestations of religions can be.



ACT 1: A SCARF

Stephen Belber, one of the playwrights, has breakfast with university student and Islamic feminist Zubaida Ula. Zubaida tells Stephen that she and her parents moved to Laramie from Bangladesh when she was four. Zubaida decided a few years ago to start wearing a headscarf, and it changed how people in the community interacted with her. Frustratingly, many people expected her to explain her choice as she was going about her daily life (for example, in the aisle of the grocery store). Zubaida talks about how strange it is for her that the company is writing a play about Laramie and that she and the rest of the town will be represented on stage.

Zubaida Ula feels like her privacy is invaded when people she does not know ask her questions about her headscarf. Zubaida experiences a real religious marginalization that contrasts with the victimization people like the Baptist Minister imagine. Zubaida, who elsewhere expresses support for LGBT people, seems to have been made more aware of the struggles people outside of the norm face through her own experience with being a Muslim in Wyoming.



ACT 1: LIFESTYLE 1

This moment consists of a phone call between Amanda Gronich and the wife of the Baptist Minister. Amanda introduces herself over the phone and explains her reason for calling. She talks about how she attended the Reverend’s service on Sunday and hopes to talk to the Reverend about his thoughts on Matthew Shepard. The minister’s wife tells Amanda that the minister will probably not want to talk to her, and explains that he has “very Biblical views” on homosexuality. The minister does not encourage violence, according to the minister’s wife, but also “doesn’t condone that kind of lifestyle.” The minister’s wife also mentions how “terrible” the media presence in Laramie has been. Amanda sympathizes with the minister’s wife’s comments about the media. The minister’s wife tells Amanda to call back at nine and Amanda thanks her.

In Amanda’s conversation with the Baptist Minister’s wife, it becomes clear that the Baptist Minister is equivocating about his views on Matthew’s murder. The minister’s wife’s comments that he has “very Biblical views” on homosexuality suggests that the Bible is inherently anti-homosexuality, despite the fact that the Bible is read in many different ways, including as pro-LGBT. The minister’s wife also talks about the difficulty they have had with the media, suggesting that they have been treated unfairly (and notably, both the Minister and his wife ask for their names not to be used in the play).



ACT 1: THE FIRESIDE

Stephen Belber and Barbara Pitts go to the Fireside Bar, where Matthew Shepard was last seen on the night of his murder. The bar has pool tables and a stage for karaoke. First, Stephen and Barbara talk to Matt Mickelson, the bar’s owner. Matt Mickelson talks about his family’s history in Laramie, saying his grandfather opened an opera house and Wyoming was the first place in the world where a woman cast a ballot in an election. Matt wants to reopen an opera house and restaurant, and Fireside is his initial foray into that.

Matt Mickelson’s claims about Wyoming’s history as the first state that allowed women’s suffrage suggests that, in the past, Wyoming was a site of progress and individual freedom. By reminding the audience of this history, the playwrights seem to be suggesting that Wyoming’s conservative views on LGBT rights are not inevitable, or even really traditional, for Wyoming.



Barbara Pitts turns the conversation back to Matthew Shepard, and Matt Mickelson tells her that the night Matthew died, he came into the bar for a beer. Matt Mickelson suggests that the interviewers talk to Matt Galloway, the bartender. Matt Galloway tells them that Matthew showed up alone around ten-thirty and ordered a Heineken. Matt Galloway says that Matthew was a very polite customer who tipped well and made good conversation.

Matt Galloway says that on that night at around eleven forty-five, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, Matthew's murderers, came into the bar looking unkempt and acting rude. They bought a pitcher of beer with only coins and then went to play pool. Soon afterwards they returned to the main area of the bar, having apparently finished the beer. Matt Galloway assumed, however, that they did not have any money left to buy another.

Matt Galloway says he saw Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson talking to Matthew Shepard after they came back into the main part of the bar. The narrator then introduces Kristin Price, Aaron McKinney's girlfriend, who gives Aaron's account of the meeting. She says that Matthew approached and propositioned Aaron. According to Kristin, Aaron and Russell then decided to pretend they were gay in order to rob Matthew. Matt Galloway totally refutes Kristin's secondhand account, saying Matthew Shepard had no reason to approach them and that Matthew did not just come onto people indiscriminately (Matthew had, Matt Galloway notes, never come onto him).

Romaine Patterson, however, notes that Matthew Shepard was a naturally chatty person, who would easily strike up a conversation with almost anyone. Phil Labrie adds that Matthew was gullible and often felt lonely, and he thinks that being alone must have made Matthew more vulnerable. Matt Galloway resumes his account of the events of the night, noting that he is an eyewitness in the criminal case. He says that he saw Matthew leave with two people he presumed to be Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. Matt Mickelson then tells the interviewers to talk with the DJ, Shadow, who was the last person Matthew spoke with that night. Shadow remembers that Aaron and Russell seemed anxious and the three men left in a small black truck. Shadow did not think anything was suspicious at the time.

Matt Mickelson and Matt Galloway describe Matthew Shepard as a model customer, offering an alternative version of Matthew's bar-going to the rumors calling Matthew a "barfly" and implying he was constantly trying to pick up men. This suggests that Matthew's habits may have been skewed to discredit or even blame him as a victim.



In contrast to Matthew, Aaron and Russell arrive at the bar acting drunk and rowdy. While some townspeople comment negatively on Matthew's bar-going, they do not do the same to Aaron and Russell, revealing that their negative portraits of Matthew have more to do with homophobic stereotypes than actual bad behavior.



Kristin Price's secondhand account of Matthew and Aaron's meeting, in which she states that Matthew tried to hit on Aaron, plays on stereotypes of gay men as promiscuous and sexually aggressive. Matt Galloway, who actually knew Matthew and who was present at the bar that night, does not think Matthew hit on Aaron whatsoever. This suggests that negative stereotypes can both warp people's perceptions of events and serve as retrospective excuses for bad behavior and even violence.



While Matt Galloway's account of what happened the night of Matthew's attack seems reliable, friends of Matthew suggest that it is, in fact, possible Matthew initiated conversation with Aaron and Russell. The playwrights deliberately resist making a judgment about what they think really happened. In refusing to make concrete judgments about the facts of the case, the playwrights seem to imply that determining the objective truth about the details of Matthew's murder is not their goal. To the playwrights, establishing with certainty whether Matthew hit on Aaron is not essential to telling Matthew or Laramie's story.



ACT 1: MCKINNEY AND HENDERSON

In this moment, an Anonymous Friend of Aaron McKinney since childhood describes how shocked he was to hear of the murder. The friend says that Aaron McKinney, who was twenty-one, was living in a trailer with his girlfriend and their child at the time of the murder. The friend says that, while Aaron tried to act cool, he was actually just a scared kid. Next, the narrator introduces Russell Henderson's landlord Sherry Aanenson. Sherry describes Russell as "sweet" and says she was shocked to hear that he snapped. Sherry remembers that, at a Christmas party, Russell was very nice and even asked her to dance. Sherry says she wanted to shake him and ask him "what in the hell were you thinking?" after hearing about the murder.

Aaron's friend implies that Aaron was a young man with too many responsibilities who felt deeply lost, while Sherry describes Russell as kind and wholesome. By intentionally evoking compassion for Aaron and Russell, the playwrights seem to imply that they are not innately evil or inherently bad. The playwrights thereby shift some of the blame for the murder away from Aaron and Russell as individuals, leaving the reader to wonder, like Sherry does, what outside factors compelled Aaron and Russell to commit such a heinous act of violence and homophobia.



ACT 1: THE FENCE

Stephen Mead Johnson describes how the **fence** where Matthew Shepard was found in a coma became a sort of pilgrimage site. Stephen imagines Matthew wondering if God had left him behind as he suffered in the cold the night of his attack. Greg Pierotti then describes how Phil Labrie took them one morning to see the spot on the fence where Matthew was left. Greg says he cried when he touched it, feeling such a strong connection to Matthew. Greg thinks no one saw him crying, but company member Leigh Fondakowski says he noticed and felt the same deep sadness. Leigh asks the other members of the company to interview Aaron Kreifels, the boy who found Matthew, since Leigh does not feel up to it.

As Stephen and Greg talk about the fence, they refer to both the incredible violence and suffering that Matthew endured there and the way that the fence makes them feel connected to Matthew. The fence is clearly a complicated place, as it represents both an act of incredible inhumanity and the profound power of human empathy. As Leigh describes his lack of emotional strength after his visit, it is clear that the playwrights, rather than being cool observers, are themselves profoundly affected by Matthew's story.



ACT 1: FINDING MATTHEW SHEPARD

Aaron Kreifels describes finding Matthew Shepard tied to the **fence** where Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson left him to die. Aaron Kreifels had gone for a bike ride the evening after Matthew's attack. Not really knowing the way, Aaron picked directions at random. In retrospect, he thinks that God was guiding him to Matthew. Aaron kept riding and eventually fell off his bike. As he was brushing himself off, he noticed what he thought was a scarecrow tied to a fence. Aaron approached it and realized it was a person—Matthew. Aaron ran to the nearest house and called the police.

Aaron's sense that God was leading him to Matthew shows that Aaron understands God to be a compassionate figure who would not punish Matthew for his sexuality. Aaron's version of religion seems to help him process his proximity to such horrific violence. Notably, the playwrights do not state Aaron's religious denomination, suggesting that it's not the congregation itself that matters, but Aaron's own vision of God.



Officer Reggie Fluty takes the floor, explaining how she was the one who responded to the call. Reggie ran over and saw that Matthew Shepard was tied to the **fence**, covered in blood, and was barely breathing. The only place Matthew did not have blood on his head was below his eyes, where he appeared to have been crying. Reggie noticed that Matthew had a severe head wound.

Reggie Fluty, whose story the playwrights follow throughout the play, first appears as she describes responding to Aaron Kreifels' call. Reggie's attention to blood in this description both emphasizes the profound violence Matthew endured and foreshadows Reggie's HIV exposure.



Dr. Cantway, the emergency room doctor the night Matthew Shepard was brought in, describes how he had not seen a patient in such bad shape in a long time—not in the rural Laramie hospital, anyway. Dr. Cantway said that usually those kinds of severe injuries are the result of car crashes, not beatings. Aaron Kreifels begins to talk again, describing how he waited with Matthew for the ambulance to arrive and tried to wake him up.

Reggie Fluty resumes talking about how Matthew Shepard was bound to the **fence** tightly with white rope, and notes that his shoes were missing. Reggie struggled to release Matthew from the fence without hurting him further. Doctor Cantway speaks again, talking about how he hoped it was not a Laramie resident that hurt Matthew like that. Reggie then describes how Matthew stopped breathing briefly when they cut him off the fence and only breathed again when he was rolled onto his back. The emergency medical services drove him in an ambulance to the emergency room.

Dr. Cantway notes that, strangely, Aaron McKinney came into the emergency room for an unrelated problem just before they brought in Matthew Shepard, and Dr. Cantway was helping Aaron just before he treated Matthew. Dr. Cantway says that, soon after seeing Matthew, they called in specialists from farther away, knowing Matthew needed special care. Reggie Fluty remembers seeing a picture of Matthew a few days after responding to the call and thinking she would not have recognized him. Dr. Cantway closes Act One by meditating on the coincidence that he treated both Aaron and Matthew, who were both “kids.” Dr. Cantway wonders if God feels like he did that night: a profound compassion for both of his “kids” and their bodies and souls.

ACT 2: A LARAMIE MAN

Jon Peacock, Matthew Shepard’s academic advisor, describes how on that Thursday the media began reporting on the crime and first mentioned Matthew’s name. Jon Peacock was initially in denial that it was the Matthew Shepard he knew. Romaine Patterson gives her reaction to the news, talking about how a friend took her aside and told her what had happened. Romaine called her sister Trish Steger to ask what was going on. Trish talks about how, as she was on the phone with Romaine, a story about Matthew came up on the news. Jon describes watching the news and realizing that the victim was, in fact, his Matthew Shepard. Trish confirms to Romaine that it was her friend Matthew who was attacked.

Like Reggie’s descriptions of Matthew’s blood, Dr. Cantway’s discussion of the severity of Matthew’s injuries highlights the intensity of the violence that Matthew suffered. Matthew’s attack provides a reference point of extreme violence that contextualizes smaller incidents or fantasies of violence in the play.



Dr. Cantway’s hope that Matthew was attacked and murdered by someone not from Laramie reflects a desire that Laramie residents frequently articulate to distance themselves and their town from the crime. These residents, who often are not people on the margins of Laramie society, have an image of their community as more tolerant and open than it actually is, an image that is challenged in the aftermath of the murder.



As Dr. Cantway talks about treating both Matthew and Aaron at the same time without realizing it, he compares his compassion for both young men to what he believes God must feel for all people. Dr. Cantway’s comments speak to his own faith and the profound religious presence in Laramie. Dr. Cantway’s view also suggests that having compassion for everyone, even people who have done horrible things, is the moral way of engaging with painful human conflict. The playwrights explore this and other versions of morality throughout the play.



As the media begins to break the news of Matthew’s murder, many people who knew and loved Matthew first learn what happened to their friend from the television or secondhand gossip. While it is not the media’s obligation to ensure that Matthew’s extended network of loved ones learn what happened to him in a comfortable way, this moment does show how the very nature of news reporting can lack empathy for people who are profoundly affected by tragedies like Matthew’s death.



Next, Matt Galloway and Matt Mickelson, bartenders at the Fireside bar where Matthew Shepard was last seen at before his attack, describe how they realized Matthew was the victim and had been at their establishment the night before. The narrator then introduces Rulon Stacey, the CEO of the hospital where Matthew was treated, who received a call from reporters and quickly became the hospital's spokesperson to the media. Romaine Patterson, Jon Peacock, Matt Galloway, and Matt Mickelson all describe their overlapping reactions of shock, fear, sadness, and anger. Matt Mickelson and Matt Galloway decide to go to the arraignment to identify Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson.

Matt Galloway and Matt Mickelson spring into action after learning about Matthew's attack and prepare for the arraignment (the declaration of charges). The two men seem to feel compelled to do their part to ensure that Matthew gets justice. Meanwhile, Rulon begins serving as a spokesperson to provide a buffer between Matthew's family and the media. Many Laramie residents quickly become involved in Matthew's case and seem to feel a communal responsibility for him.



ACT 2: THE ESSENTIAL FACTS

A reporter states that Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson have been charged with assaulting Matthew Shepard. Catherine Connolly then describes how she walked from work to the arraignment. At the arraignment, there were about a hundred or two hundred townspeople in attendance. They were all silent as Aaron and Russell walked into the room in handcuffs. Catherine says the judge read the facts of the case, and an actor playing the judge begins to actually read them on stage.

The large audience presence at Aaron and Russell's arraignment clearly shows how profoundly the young men's crime has shaken Laramie's townspeople, and how interested the people of Laramie are in seeing how Aaron and Russell are put to justice. Catherine's personal interest in the case seems to stem in part from her own lesbian identity.



The judge states that Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson met Matthew Shepard at the bar and then drove him to the **fence**, where they tied Matthew up and beat him. Later, the police department found Matthew's wallet and shoes in Aaron and Russell's car, and suspected that the men had intended to rob Matthew's home. As the judge's voice fades out, Catherine Connolly says that she thinks everyone in the court was crying by the end of the judge's statement. The judge ended the statement of facts by saying that Matthew begged for his life.

As the judge reads out Aaron and Russell's crime, the facts of the case, even presented dryly and in a court setting, are so horrific that they move the audience to tears. The fact that the townspeople react so strongly to this cut and dry account of the crime suggests that the media's frequently-referred-to sensationalization of the crime is not actually necessary to get people to care about what happened.



ACT 2: LIVE AND LET LIVE

Sergeant Hing asks himself how what happened to Matthew could happen in Laramie, noting that there is a very active gay community in Laramie compared to the rest of Wyoming, and it is "live and let live." Laramie resident Jeffrey Lockwood then talks about how he had hoped the killers were not from Laramie, saying they don't raise children like that here. He then backtracks to say that clearly they *do* raise children like that in Laramie. Catherine Connolly talks about how the arraignment profoundly disturbed her and her feeling of safety. Jon Peacock states that, as more and more details about the murder came out, loads of reporters came to Laramie.

When Sergeant Hing struggles to reconcile what he sees as Laramie's tolerant policy of "live or let live" with the reality of Matthew's homophobic murder, and when Jeffrey admits that he hoped the criminals were out-of-towners, the readers sees Laramie residents confronting the reality of what happened to Matthew and begin to change how they see the morality of their community's attitude towards gay people as a result.



Jedediah Schultz discusses his confusion about reconciling his personal beliefs with the doctrine of his church. At church, the Reverend tells him that homosexuality is wrong, but Jedediah feels conflicted. Although he does not think he agrees with homosexuality, he states that he does not hate gay people, and would not let someone else's sexuality come between him and that person.

Conrad Miller, another Laramie resident, maintains his strong objection to homosexuality, saying he would tell his children it is "what animals do." Murdock Cooper, another resident, says that there are more gay people in Laramie than meets the eye, and he thinks that Matthew Shepard is partially to blame for his own death because he came onto Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. Murdock says that believing this makes him "feel better."

Next, the narrator introduces Zackie Salmon, who identifies as a lesbian and says that, in the wake of Matthew Shepard's murder, she fears for her safety and would be afraid to show affection for her partner in public. Jonas Slonaker, another gay Laramie resident, talks about the Western idea of "live and let live," saying it is "such crap" because it forces gay people to be silent or else risk being beat up.

ACT 2: THE GEM CITY OF THE PLAINS

The playwrights represent the influx of reporters to Laramie by flooding the stage with newspeople talking loudly and flashing lights. One newsperson says that Wyoming has just as many bigots as New York or California. Another newsperson describes Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson's poverty growing up. Another reporter insists that hatred like what happened to Matthew Shepard occurs on a smaller scale in schools nationwide on a daily basis.

As the newspeople's voices fade out, Jon Peacock reiterates that the town was not prepared for that kind of attention. Tiffany Edwards, a local reporter, calls the media who came into Laramie from elsewhere "predators" and describes how one journalist even followed the case's judge into the bathroom to question him. Doc O'Connor talks about how, when he was interviewed by one publication, he recorded the interview himself in case anyone tried to misrepresent what he said.

The playwrights check in again with Jedediah Schultz as he struggles with the difference between his own empathy for LGBT people and the doctrine of the church that he loves and believes in. Clearly, this discrepancy causes him discomfort and places him in something of a moral crisis.



In contrast to Jedediah's struggle to understand how to accept gay people and still be a part of his church, Conrad Miller and Murdock Cooper display varying degrees of unrepentant homophobia. Murdock seems to use homophobic stereotypes as a way to process the murder, which would otherwise be hard for him to reconcile with his worldview.



Following expressions of homophobia, the playwrights give the floor to people who are the targets of this bigotry. Zackie and Jonas, both LGBT, give their perspective on the fear they experience after Matthew's murder and their frustration with how homophobia stifles them in less visible ways.



The audience is put into the Laramie residents' shoes as they experience overwhelming noise and flashing lights from reporters on stage. The playwrights show that reporters are pushing the conversation about Matthew to become a national one as they compare Wyoming to the other states.



Tiffany Edwards, who is a reporter herself, thinks that the journalists who came from elsewhere and flooded Laramie are "predators." Since Tiffany also works in media, this suggests that it is not their occupation, but rather their status as outsiders, that made the national media presence so damaging for the Laramie community.



Next, the actors play out a short dialogue between the Governor of Wyoming, Jim Geringer, and a reporter. The Governor laments Matthew Shepard's attack, but when the reporter points out that the Governor has not supported hate crime legislation in the past, Governor Geringer says he hopes people will not use the event to try to give one group "special rights over others."

The floor then goes to Sergeant Hing, who describes seeing a sensationalist news story on television with the word Wyoming dripping with blood. Eileen and Gil Engen talk about their frustration with what they see as the media maligning the whole community for a crime two individuals committed. Next, Aaron McKinney's father Bill McKinney says that he thinks the murder would not be as big of a deal if Matthew Shepard were not gay, and he thinks his son is being seen as guilty before the trial. Finally, Tiffany Edwards states that, even if the media coverage was overblown, at least it made people confront their community's problems.

ACT 2: MEDICAL UPDATE

In this moment, Rulon Stacey, the hospital's spokesperson, gives an update on Matthew Shepard's condition. Rulon describes how Matthew was admitted to the hospital in critical condition and was immediately treated for hypothermia, a head fracture causing bleeding in his brain, and a fever. Rulon reads a statement by Matthew's parents thanking the public for their support and requesting that the media respect their privacy.

Hospital CEO Rulon Stacey gives another medical update, saying that Matthew Shepard is still in critical condition. Rulon asks again that the media respect the family's privacy.

Rulon Stacey gives the statement that he prepared with Matthew Shepard's family. He informs the public that Matthew passed away, and expresses the family's gratitude for the public's support. The family is thankful that they did not have to make a decision about whether to continue Matthew's life support. Matthew's mother asks the public to go home and give their kids a hug and tell them they love them every day.

The playwrights show how Matthew's murder not only created a conversation about homophobia in social spheres, but also drew attention to the legislation of hate crimes. As reporters confront Wyoming Governor Jim Geringer, they open discussion about LGBT rights in politics.



While the national media presence in Laramie is holding people accountable for homophobia, as Tiffany Edwards states and the play shows, it is clearly also frustrating and disenfranchising others. Eileen and Gil Engen, for example, feel that the media has grossly misunderstood and misrepresented their community, and because of this they seem less receptive to calls for the need to expand LGBT rights.



Rulon Stacey's update reminds the reader of the victim at the center of the crime, tracking Matthew's declining medical state and the bodily consequences of violence. The use of Rulon as a spokesperson also suggests the difficulty of navigating personal, familial grief while under such intense media attention.



Again, Rulon's updates remind the reader of the real person and family behind the vigils and conversations about homophobia.



As he delivers this statement, Rulon becomes teary and choked up, triggering a variety of responses from thankful and kind to hateful that are described in the next scene. Rulon's emotional response shows how stories like Matthew's can profoundly move people and, in doing so, perhaps make them more accepting.



ACT 2: SEEING MATTHEW

The narrator gives the audience an update on the case against Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, stating that they both pled not guilty. Their girlfriends were charged with accessory to murder and also pled not guilty. The narrator then introduces Rob DeBree, the chief investigator of the case. Rob talks about how disturbing it was to see Matthew Shepard fighting for his life, when Rob usually deals with dead bodies.

Next, Aaron Kreifels speaks again about finding Matthew Shepard, saying he can't get that image out of his head. He wonders why God wanted Aaron specifically to find Matthew. Catherine Connolly describes her new feelings of fear walking down the street with her son. Meanwhile, bartender Matt Galloway processes his guilt, wishing he had noticed something was wrong the night of Matthew's murder so he could have stopped it.

Rob DeBree speaks again about the case, talking about how he worked extremely hard to make sure there was no way Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson could be acquitted. Then Reggie Fluty, one of the first responders on the scene, talks about how they all tried to wear protective gloves as they helped Matthew Shepard, but the gloves kept breaking and they eventually ran out. Marge Murray then reveals that Reggie is actually her daughter. Reggie goes on to explain how, a day after she helped transfer Matthew to the hospital, the hospital called and told her that Matthew had HIV—she needed to get on medication immediately and get tested.

As Reggie Fluty started the intense treatment, Marge Murray felt extremely angry. She clarifies that she was not angry at Matthew Shepard, but at his attackers. She meditates on how much grief they caused so many people. Marge told Reggie she should quit her job as a police officer after the incident, but Reggie refused. Marge and Reggie banter back and forth about Reggie's choice to stay on the force, and Marge worries that Reggie will die before she (Marge) will.

ACT 2: E-MAIL

Philip Dubois, president of the University of Wyoming, describes an email he received after he put a statement in the newspaper about Matthew Shepard's death. The email writer accused Philip and the rest of the Laramie residents of being equally complicit in Matthew's death because they encourage and condone a culture of hate. Philip felt extremely upset by the email and also felt that the email writer couldn't understand the effect Matthew's death had on the community.

The narrator's practical updates about the legal situation of Aaron and Russell gets the reader up to speed on their case. Rob DeBree's comments about working with a living victim emphasize how the violence Matthew endured has caused long, drawn out suffering.



The playwrights draw attention to the trauma endured by individuals other than Matthew. Catherine's comments show how hate crimes make people of targeted groups feel constant fear in their communities. Aaron Kreifels, meanwhile, uses religion to process the scarring experience of finding Matthew.



As Reggie Fluty describes how she was exposed to HIV while trying to get Matthew into the ambulance, the playwrights make clear how the violence against Matthew was not only limited to him. Though Matthew certainly bore the brunt of the violence during his attack, the crime's consequences ripple to not only hurt other people emotionally and inspire grief, but also to even physically harm them, as in the case of Reggie's HIV exposure.



Marge and Reggie's surprise mother-daughter connection emphasizes how small the Laramie community really is, as the playwrights met them separately. Marge articulates her anger when she learned of Reggie's exposure and her frustration that their violence hurt so many people, including but also exceeding Matthew.



While the email Philip Dubois receives holds the entire Laramie accountable for what happened to Matthew, just as the play itself seems to, it does so with a complete lack of empathy for the people of Laramie and so hurts more than it actually helps. It also appears misdirected, as Philip and the university work hard after the murder to encourage LGBT acceptance.



ACT 2: VIGILS

The narrator describes how cities throughout the country held vigils for Matthew Shepard, and millions of people expressed support for Matthew on the hospital's website.

This section shows how profoundly Matthew's story made an impact nationwide, in part thanks to the national media coverage.



ACT 2: IT HAPPENED HERE

Zubaida Ula describes her experience at the vigil for Matthew Shepard. She says that it felt good to be with other people who were in pain. Someone at the vigil stood up and said they needed to “show the world that Laramie is not this kind of a town.” Zubaida found that statement frustrating because, to her, Laramie clearly is “that kind of town,” which is why Matthew’s attack happened. Zubaida feels that the town needs to confront the crime rather than try to distance itself from it.

Zubaida's frustration with the comment that Laramie needs to show that it is “not this kind of town” seems to stem both from the fact that it denies the real homophobia that is present in the town and places more importance on Laramie's outward image than on actually changing Laramie for the better and making it an accepting community.



ACT 2: SHANNON AND JEN

Stephen Belber, a member of the theater company, was at the bar where Matthew Shepard was last seen when he encountered two friends of Aaron McKinney. One of the women, Shannon, tells Stephen that she thought what happened was “really really awful,” but she goes on to say that Matthew had a lot of money, calling him a “little rich bitch.” Jen, the other woman, objects, and Shannon clarifies that she is not saying he deserved it—he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The playwrights include these interviews with friends of Aaron's, and in doing so reaffirm that their project is not only telling Matthew's story, but the story of the entire Laramie community, including people who may have more sympathy for the killers than for Matthew. Shannon in particular talks about Matthew fairly callously, only softening when Jen objects.



Shannon implies, though, that she can understand how, if Aaron McKinney were high on meth, he could have thought about robbing someone. Jen agrees, saying that Aaron had done that kind of thing before with Russell Henderson, though they usually targeted people who looked rich, not gay people specifically. Stephen Belber asks if they think there was any homophobia involved in the attack, and Jen says that there probably was, especially if Matthew Shepard had hit on Aaron. According to Jen and Shannon, Aaron could tolerate homosexuality as long as “it didn’t come up.” Stephen asks if the women think that Aaron knew any gay people, and Shannon says that she thinks he did, and that half the people she knows in the town are gay.

Shannon and Jen's descriptions of why they think Aaron robbed Matthew and their emphasis on his drug problem casts some doubt on the prevailing narrative that Aaron killed Matthew purely because he was gay, suggesting that the reasoning may have been more convoluted. However, they do confirm that they believe homophobia played a role in the murder. Shannon and Jen suggest that, just like many other Laramie residents, Aaron tolerated LGBT people as long as he didn't have to actually confront their differences.



Stephen Belber then asks what the women would say to Aaron McKinney if they saw him, and Jen says she would ask why Aaron had done what he did, but also would make sure that Aaron was doing okay in prison. They both say they would want to hang out with Aaron and smoke weed. Stephen asks if both Shannon and Jen went to Laramie High, and Shannon says yes, calling them “a product of [their] society.”

Shannon's comment that she and Jen (and presumably Aaron as well) are “a product of their society” implies that they are not whole or uniquely responsible for who they became. This implies that the Laramie community shares some collective responsibility for what happened to Matthew.



ACT 2: HOMECOMING

The narrator describes how homecoming weekend, which is normally a simple, fun event, was much more somber and contemplative in the wake of Matthew's murder. University President Philip Dubois describes how students added a tribute to Matthew to the homecoming parade. Harry Woods, a Laramie resident who lived along the parade route, says he was disappointed he couldn't walk with the people marching for Matthew because he had a cast on his leg. Harry, a gay man, watched the parade from his window and describes how he was very moved by the sight.

Matt Galloway, the bartender at Fireside the night of Matthew Shepard's attack, participated in the parade. He talks about how incredible and powerful it was, describing it as "one of the most beautiful things I've ever done in my life." Harry Woods resumes talking about his experience watching the parade, saying how more and more people joined in the march until there were around five hundred participants. Harry began to cry and mentally thanked God and Matthew that he got to see that moment.

The inclusion of a tribute to Matthew in the homecoming parade suggests that LGBT acceptance is beginning to be incorporated into the most mainstream or visible parts of Laramie society after Matthew's murder. As Harry Woods explain how moved he was by the display, the playwrights show how meaningful the demonstration was for other LGBT people as a show of solidarity and acceptance.



Matt Galloway's proximity to Matthew in the time close to his death seems to have made Matt feel compelled to publically demonstrate his support for Matthew. As Harry Woods describes how he cried while watching the parade, his invocation of God suggests that religion, rather than being anti-LGBT, could actually be on the side of acceptance.



ACT 2: ONE OF OURS

Sherry Johnson, a Laramie resident and the wife of a policeman, describes her reaction to Matthew Shepard's murder. She says that she thought what happened to Matthew was horrible, but feels that it is unfair that Matthew's death received more attention than the recent death of a policeman in a traffic accident. Sherry feels that the media is portraying Matthew as a "saint." Sherry finds Matthew scary, saying that he was "spreading AIDS" and calling him a "barfly." Sherry does not understand why people are giving Matthew special attention since he's gay, saying that every crime is a hate crime.

In this moment, Sherry Johnson expresses an opinion that various characters allude to throughout the play: that Matthew's sexuality is being emphasized too much when discussing his murder, and that his murder is being used to earn gay people special privileges. Sherry tries to completely ignore the element that bigotry played in Matthew's murder (as well as the fact that the "special privileges" are simply those that non-LGBT people already enjoy), and in doing so she reveals her own homophobia.



ACT 2: TWO QUEERS AND A CATHOLIC PRIEST

Leigh Fondakowski and Greg Pierotti, who both identify as gay, go to speak with Father Roger Schmit, Laramie's Catholic priest. Father Roger tells Leigh and Greg that Matthew Shepard has done an enormous amount for the community. Father Roger then goes on to say that, when Matthew was attacked, Father Roger was afraid. He considered asking the Bishop permission to hold a vigil for Matthew, but then he decided that, regardless of what the Bishop said, holding the vigil was the right thing to do.

Father Roger Schmit expresses an understanding of Catholicism that emphasizes the importance of compassion and consideration above condemning homosexuality. In this, Father Roger's views seem to deviate from the official views of the Church, showing how the same baseline religion can be interpreted and acted upon in radically different ways.



Father Roger Schmit tells Leigh Fondakowski and Greg Pierotti that, if they do intend to write a play about the murder, they have a “responsibility” to do it correctly. Father Roger informs them that using homophobic slurs is a kind of violence in itself, and he would be highly resentful if, in trying to show Laramie’s bigotry and the violent acts committed against Matthew, the play ended up accidentally providing a model for and inciting hate. Father Roger encourages them to be truthful in their account.

Father Roger’s understanding of violence not only as physical, but also as emotional and cultural, comes through as he emphasizes how important it is that the playwrights do not accidentally provoke hate speech. This expansive view of what constitutes violence (which actually reflects Jesus’s teachings) provides a framework for understanding the genealogy of physical displays of violence.



ACT 2: CHRISTMAS

An inmate named Andrew Gomez, who was in prison with Aaron McKinney, talks about how he and Aaron ate their Christmas dinners together. Andrew asked Aaron why he killed Matthew Shepard knowing he would likely be caught and sexually assaulted in prison. Aaron told Andrew that Matthew made a pass at him. According to Andrew, other inmates are auctioning off the chance to assault Aaron when he arrives at the maximum security ward.

In this section, inmate Andrew Gomez implies that Aaron McKinney would likely be sexually assaulted in prison, and so would non-consensually endure the same kinds of sex acts that he hated Matthew for. This section seems to be implying that violence like Matthew’s murder can engender further violence.



ACT 2: LIFESTYLE 2

Amanda Gronich calls back the Baptist Minister. The Baptist Minister tells Amanda he does not really want to talk about Matthew Shepard. Amanda tells the minister she went to his service on Sunday. The minister clarifies that his views are not necessarily his congregation’s, but he notes that he is somewhat involved with the case because the girlfriend of one of the perpetrators is a part of the congregation. The minister says that the congregation had been trying to help Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney for years, and he is providing spiritual guidance to one of them, who is on suicide watch.

As Amanda Gronich finally speaks with the Baptist Minister, he tries to divide his personal views from the views of the congregation. However, as a religious leader, this attempt seems somewhat unconvincing. As the Baptist Minister goes on to describe how Aaron’s girlfriend is a part of the congregation, it is clear that the minister is more concerned with maintaining his community and the status quo than actually encouraging morality in his religious followers.



The Baptist Minister notes that he thinks Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson deserve the death penalty. The minister also says, however, that he hopes that as Matthew Shepard was slipping into a coma he had a chance to reflect on his “lifestyle” and think about the “word of the Lord.” Amanda thanks the minister for his time.

The Baptist Minister, when he says he hopes Matthew reflected on his “lifestyle” after the attack, seems to imply that Matthew’s brutal death was a kind divine justice for his homosexuality. The minister’s vision of God is clearly a vengeful, angry one.



ACT 2: THAT NIGHT

Rulon Stacey states that, around eleven-thirty, Matthew Shepard’s temperature began to drop. Matthew died, and Rulon rushed to the ICU to see his family. Matthew’s mother, Judy Shepard, hugged Rulon, and then he helped the family prepare a statement until four in the morning.

Rulon discusses how he worked with Matthew’s family after Matthew’s death to determine how to inform the media. This moment leads up to Rulon’s poignant tears while delivering the statement.



ACT 2: MAGNITUDE

Rulon Stacey reflects on his role as the hospital's spokesperson for Matthew Shepard, talking about how he began to get choked up during the televised statement because he began to think of his own children and Matthew's mother's loss. After the statement, people sent him emails, most of which were kind. One, however, mocked him for his emotions and used homophobic slurs. Rulon clarifies that he does not support homosexuality, but he is still shocked by the hate some people expressed. Rulon emphasizes, though, that most letters were full of compassion.

While Rulon states that he does not support homosexuality, his empathy for Matthew and his family comes across both in the work he does to help them and how he cries while delivering the final statement. Though empathy is not a substitute for pro-LGBT politics, it marks a shift in Rulon toward a more accepting stance and his difference from bigots like the one who emailed him using slurs.



ACT 2: H-O-P-E

In this moment, Stephen Belber tells Doc O'Connor that the interview team will be back for Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney's criminal trials. Doc O'Connor states that he hopes they don't put Aaron and Russell to death because Matthew Shepard would not want them to die—he would want to give the community hope, instead. According to Doc, hope is the crux of the entire incident.

As Doc O'Connor discusses why he doesn't want Aaron and Russell to get the death penalty, he ushers in a conversation that dominates the third Act: about the proper punishment for heinous crimes and how punishment, like crime itself, affects the community at large.



ACT 3: SNOW

Act Three opens with different characters talking about their experiences at Matthew's funeral. Matt Galloway speaks first, saying that the day of the funeral was snowy, and the funeral took place in two different churches— one for the immediate family and friends, and one for everyone else who wanted to go. According to Matt, both churches were full and people overflowed into a nearby park, which also filled up. A priest and a crowd of people play out the funeral service on stage, with the priest leading the prayers. Tiffany Edwards says the snowstorm that day was a very big one. Tiffany thought it was "the forces of the universe at work."

As characters describe Matthew's funeral, it is clear that, like at the Homecoming Parade, Matthew has generated widespread support that represents a more general support for the LGBT community. As Tiffany Edwards says that she saw the snowstorm as "the force of the universe at work," she invokes an intense spiritualism that she associates with Matthew's story, although it is not specifically referred to as God.



Kerry Drake, a reporter, talks about how Reverend Fred Phelps, the leader of the extremist Westboro Baptist Church, protested the funeral. An actor playing Fred Phelps preaches about God's hatred. Kerry Drake talks about how a group of high schoolers started to yell at the protestors. One of the counter-protestors was wearing leather and spikes and Kerry thought there would be a fight, but instead the counter-protestor led the group in singing "Amazing Grace." Meanwhile, the actor playing Fred Phelps rants with homophobic slurs about how gay people are using Matthew's murder to promote the "gay lifestyle."

Fred Phelps's appearance at the funeral represents the most hateful and violent versions of religion. Phelps, who is a well-know extremist Baptist minister, protests Matthew's funeral. Notably, one counter-protestor is a man who Kerry implies did not look like he would be an LGBT advocate. Kerry's surprise at the counter-protestor's good deeds exemplifies the importance of accepting and being open-minded to differences in general, not just LGBT people.



The narrator states that, six months after the funeral, the company went back to Laramie for Russell Henderson's trial, where Fred Phelps was also protesting. Romaine Patterson, who was a friend of Matthew Shepard's, decided to organize a counter-protest for the trial. She talks about how she got a group of people to dress as angels and encircle Phelps and his followers, completely blocking him from view. Romaine, not wanting the counter-protestors to hear Phelps's hate speech, also bought the angels earplugs.

Romaine, inspired by the counter-protestors at Matthew's funeral, organizes a counter-protest to Phelps at Russell's trial. Interestingly, and like the group that sang "Amazing Grace," the counter-protestors take up religious imagery in combatting Phelps. The protestors and counter-protests represent two clashing visions of Christianity as either defined by love or by fear and hatred.



ACT 3: JURY SELECTION

During jury selection for Russell Henderson's trial, Trish Steger describes how people came into her shop and expressed their fear that they would be selected for the jury. Trish says that, during the selection process, prosecutors asked if the jurors would be willing to give Russell the death penalty. Actors portray the potential jurors agreeing to the possibility of capital punishment.

Trish's description of many Laramie residents' reluctance to serve on the jury for Matthew's case speaks to the intense communal pressures to deliver appropriate justice. The question of the death penalty returns, as jurors are selected for their willingness to give capital punishment.



ACT 3: RUSSELL HENDERSON

During Russell Henderson's trial, the judge asks Russell if he would like to change his plea, and Russell says he would. The judge confirms Russell's awareness of the two life sentences he could receive, and the fact that they could be served either concurrently or consecutively. Russell indicates that he still wishes to plead guilty. The judge then welcomes statements before he rules on the sentencing.

As Russell changes his plea, it becomes clear that Russell has taken a plea deal in order to avoid the death penalty, instead taking two life sentences. Russell's plea deal also avoids the spectacle of a long trial—so, although it may not be as cathartic as a trial, it avoids drawing out the Shepard family's suffering.



Lucy Thompson, Russell's grandmother and former guardian, makes a statement. She offers her sympathies to the Shepard family and says that she has often thought of Matthew Shepard since the attack. Lucy acknowledges that the Shepard family has shown a lot of "mercy" in allowing Russell to plead guilty (presumably to avoid the death penalty). Lucy then expresses her hope that Russell can serve his terms concurrently so he might eventually receive parole.

In Lucy's statement, she uses the word "mercy" to describe the Shepard family's decision to allow Russell to take a plea deal. Over the course of Russell and Aaron's trials, the idea of "mercy" recurs as a complex idea that is often set in opposition to justice. It is also a concept with highly religious undertones, like much of the other rhetoric and imagery in the play.



The judge then invites Russell Henderson to make a statement. Russell expresses his regret and his sympathy for the Shepard family. He hopes that someday they can forgive him. Russell tells the judge he is sorry for what he did and feels ready to repay his debt. The judge then lists Russell's crimes and states how exactly Russell is complicit in Matthew's death. The judge indicates that the Court does not believe that Russell feels any real remorse for his crimes and does not fully recognize their impact. As a result, the judge sentences him two consecutive life sentences, rather than two concurrent ones.

Russell expresses his regret and asks for his sentences to be given concurrently (at the same time) instead of consecutively (one after the other), presumably so that he might eventually receive parole. The judge, however, seems to think that giving Russell the terms concurrently would be excessively merciful, suggesting that there is a limit to how merciful someone can be while still delivering justice. In particular, the judge seems to see remorse as a requisite for mercy.



After the hearing, the company spoke with Russell's Mormon Home Teacher. She notes that she has known Russell Henderson for his entire life, and says that when she heard he murdered Matthew Shepard she felt total disbelief. The teacher tells the company that the church decided to excommunicate Russell, which really upset him and made him realize how serious his crime was. The teacher states that she will not "desert" Russell, because of her faith and her connection to his family.

Russell's Mormon Home Teacher discusses how Russell has been excommunicated from the church, saying it wasn't until then that he realized the severity of his crimes. This speaks to how significantly the church can affect people's understandings of morality, showing the importance of strong religious leadership for the people of Laramie.



ACT 3: ANGELS IN AMERICA

The company goes to speak again with Rebecca Hilliker, who is producing the play [Angels in America](#) at the university. Rebecca said that it became clear to the university that they need to do their part to reduce homophobia statewide, and that the play is a way to do that. Rebecca asks the company to guess who is auditioning for the lead role.

Rebecca's belief that plays can change community values is clear from how she discusses [Angels in America](#). In turn, Rebecca seems to feel similarly optimistic about the capacity of the Laramie Project to change people's perspectives.



Jedediah Schultz answers the question by exclaiming that his parents were shocked to hear that the university was doing the same play that Jedediah performed for the high school competition—a play that greatly upset them. His mother asked if he was going to audition for a part, and when Jedediah said he was, it prompted a huge argument between them. Jedediah argued that his parents had just seen him play a murderer on stage in *Macbeth*, and if they did not object to that, they shouldn't object to him playing a gay person. Jedediah goes on to say that he never prepared for an audition as much as he did for the role in *Angels in America*.

In this interview with Jedediah Schultz, the reader begins to see how Jedediah has changed over the course of the play. Whereas Jedediah describes his high school self as simply ignoring his parents wishes, Jedediah now actively engages with his parents about why they do not want him to do the play and forces them to confront their own hypocritical logic. Jedediah also shows that he cares deeply about the play's success, as he describes preparing for the audition for hours.



Next, the Detective on Matthew's case, Rob Debree, talks about how, thanks to the investigation, he spoke for the first time with LGBT people living in the community about their safety concerns. Rob says that, since Matthew's case, he has changed his own values, and he is no longer going to put up with or listen to homophobic rhetoric. As a result, Rob says, he has lost some friends, but he feels "more comfortable."

Rob Debree discusses how his investigation of Matthew's case allowed him to actually meet and engage with LGBT people and become an outspoken supporter of the LGBT community. This is another example of how Matthew's death helped to change people's views.



The narrator then reintroduces Reggie Fluty, who finishes the story of her HIV exposure. Reggie said she got tested regularly until she was finally declared officially negative for HIV. Marge Murray, Reggie's mother, talks about how happy they both were. Reggie says the first thing she did was kiss her husband, and then she thought about how she hoped she'd done her "service" well. Reggie's daughters cried when they heard the news and the whole family went out for drinks to celebrate. At the bar, everyone hugged and kissed, and Reggie kissed everyone on the lips regardless of their gender. Marge tells her that the interviewers don't need to know that, and Reggie good-naturedly tells her to get over it.

Reggie's story of HIV exposure ends happily. As Marge and Reggie discuss their reactions to the good news, Marge becomes slightly embarrassed when Reggie talks about kissing everyone in the bar, regardless of their gender. As Reggie playfully tells Marge to get over it, the playwrights seem to be drawing attention to the difference in generational attitudes towards homosexuality, suggesting that, over time, Laramie is slowly changing to be more accepting.



ACT 3: A DEATH PENALTY CASE

Act Three opens with the prosecuting lawyer of Aaron McKinney's case, Cal Rerucha, talking about Aaron's impending trial. Cal tells the interviewers that it will "definitely" be a death penalty case. Various Laramie residents then give their opinions on the death penalty. Marge Murray says that she partially hopes that Aaron gets the death penalty, but she feels conflicted. Zackie Salmon, meanwhile, expresses full support for the death penalty. Matt Mickelson says he does not want Aaron to be put to death, but he hopes Aaron is locked up for life. Matt Galloway agrees.

Zubaida Ula says she defers to the Shepard family's wishes, but she knew Aaron McKinney in elementary school, and so she has a hard time with the idea of putting him to death. Father Roger talks about the importance of learning lessons from Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney and letting them be society's "teachers." Father Roger hopes that part of their sentence will be that they have to tell others about their crimes and their repentance. The court Bailiff ends the moment by saying the court is in session.

Cal Rerucha describes the case against Aaron as "definitely" a death penalty case, suggesting that the prosecution has deemed that, according to the law, Aaron's actions qualify him for the death penalty. However, the death penalty is clearly a controversial topic in Laramie, with some people thinking that a violent punishment to a violence crime is the only proper punishment, and others believing the opposite.



Father Roger's belief that Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson should be required to tell their stories as part of their sentence suggests that narrative provides the possibility of both repentance and education. In this way, The Laramie Project, as a narrative in itself, could be viewed as the Laramie community's atonement for its complicity in perpetuating a culture of homophobia.



ACT 3: AARON MCKINNEY

This moment consists of the dialogue from a taped recording of Aaron McKinney's confession, which was played during the trial. In the conversation, Rob Debree tells Aaron that he has the right to remain silent. He asks Aaron about his trip to Fireside Bar, where he and Russell Henderson met Matthew Shepard. Aaron tells him that they gave "a kid" a ride home, and when Rob Debree asks what the kid looked like, Aaron uses homophobic slurs to describe him.

Rob Debree asks how Aaron McKinney met Matthew Shepard, and Aaron says that Matthew asked them for a ride home. Rob asks when Aaron and Russell talked about beating Matthew up and robbing him, and Aaron said they discussed it at the bar. Rob asks what happened next, and Aaron admits to beating Matthew up after Matthew put a hand on his leg. Aaron says he hurt Matthew "pretty bad" with his fists and his pistol, and maybe killed him. Aaron says he felt disassociated as he attacked Matthew.

As the audience observes this scene from Aaron's confession, they might think back on Father Roger's comment about how homophobic slurs are themselves the seed of violence—since Aaron uses words like "fag" to describe Matthew, whom he has just murdered. Clearly, Aaron's words show that language and physical violence are closely linked.



As Aaron describes attacking Matthew, it becomes obvious from his casual language that Aaron does not fully understand the significance of taking Matthew's life. Aaron also admits to deciding to kill Matthew because he thought Matthew was hitting on him when Matthew put his hand on Aaron's leg, confirming that homophobia was behind the attack.



ACT 3: GAY PANIC

Zackie Salmon talks about how, when the defense team tried to argue that Aaron McKinney killed Matthew Shepard because Matthew hit on him, she felt sick. Zackie thought it was an endorsement of that kind of reaction. Rebecca Hilliker, meanwhile, feels conflicted, because she thinks it is important to acknowledge that Matthew's identity was a major factor in his attacker's motivations, rather than the murder simply being the consequence of a normal robbery.

As Zackie and Rebecca express opposite reactions to the defense team's strategy (which was pointing out that Aaron's reaction was based in homophobia), they raise questions similar to Father Roger's about whether describing anti-LGBT violence might actually be understood as an endorsement of it. The playwrights leave the answer ambiguous.



ACT 3: AARON MCKINNEY (CONTINUED)

As Aaron McKinney's interrogation continues, Rob DeBree asks if Matthew tried to defend himself, and Aaron indicates that he did, but he didn't really stand a chance. Aaron tells the detective that he hit Matthew about three times with his fists and six times with his pistol, while Matthew begged him to stop. Rob asks if Russell Henderson dragged him to the fence and tied him up after that, but Aaron says he does not remember clearly. He confirms, though, that Matthew was conscious when Russell tied him to the fence. Aaron says that he told Matthew not to look at his license plate number, and he hit Matthew again when Matthew looked.

The actors return to playing out Aaron McKinney's confession, in which Aaron describes killing Matthew in brutal detail. Aaron's descriptions finally give a clear portrait of what happened that night, and Aaron does not seem to try to hide anything from the detective. As with the descriptions of Matthew's injuries, the playwrights openly confront the reality of violence by including Aaron's graphic description of the murder.



Rob DeBree suggests that Aaron McKinney does not like gay people, and Aaron confirms that no, he doesn't. When Rob suggests he hates them, Aaron hesitates, and says he just gets angry if they hit on him. Rob asks if Matthew Shepard threatened him, and Aaron says he did not. Aaron then begins to realize that he will never see his son again. Rob tells Aaron he will go to court that day to be arraigned. Aaron asks if Matthew is definitely going to die, and Rob says yes. Aaron asks what his sentence will be, and Rob tells him it is up to the judge and jury to decide.

As Rob DeBree interviews Aaron about his homophobia, Aaron tells Rob he does not like gay people, especially if they hit on him, but does not agree that he hates them. Damningly, this is a view that is also expressed by many non-criminal Laramie residents, suggesting that it may be possible for any normal person who harbors similar views to snap and hurt someone just like Aaron did.



ACT 3: THE VERDICT

The bailiff asks if the jury has reached a verdict, and the foreperson of the jury announces that the jury finds Aaron McKinney guilty of kidnapping, robbery, and first-degree murder.

The jury roundly convicts Aaron McKinney for his crimes, taking the first step towards justice for Matthew.



ACT 3: DENNIS SHEPARD'S STATEMENT

The narrator states that, since Aaron McKinney was found guilty of felony murder, he qualified for the death penalty. Aaron's defense team asked the Shepard family for life imprisonment for Aaron rather than capital punishment, and the prosecution indicated that they would respect the family's wishes for sentencing.

Although the prosecuting attorney originally intended to ask for the death penalty, the public and the prosecution team both seem to think that it is best that the Shepard family, rather than the court, decide how to punish Aaron.



Next, the playwrights present Dennis Shepard's statement. Dennis, who is Matthew Shepard's father, says that Matthew was a winner, although he did not look like it, but he lost on October twelfth, the day he died. Dennis wonders what Matthew could have done with his life if he hadn't been killed, stating that although Matthew officially died in the hospital, he truly died tied the **fence** after Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson's attack. However, Dennis says, Matthew was not alone, thanks to God and thanks to the Laramie **stars** and landscape that he loved. Dennis feels that some good came out of Matthew's death, in that people are now focusing on trying to end hatred. Dennis says he is proud of his son.

Dennis Shepard then talks about the death penalty, saying that he has heard people saying that Matthew Shepard and Matthew's mother, Judy Shepard, are against the death penalty. Dennis calls these statements false, and says that Matt did believe in the death penalty, and so does he. Dennis even says that he wants to see Aaron McKinney die. However, Dennis says that he and Judy decided to show mercy and ask for life imprisonment for Aaron in Matthew's memory. Dennis hopes that Aaron thinks of Matthew often and thanks Matthew every day for the mercy Aaron is being shown.

ACT 3: AFTERMATH

Reggie Fluty talks about how she and investigator Rob Debree hugged and cried after Dennis Shepard's statement, as did most other people in the courtroom. Rob Debree expresses his thankfulness that the case is over. Aaron Kreifels, the boy who found Matthew on the **fence**, says that, leaving the courthouse, he finally understood that God wanted him to find Matthew Shepard so he didn't die alone. Matt Galloway says he is happy the case is over and that he found testifying very difficult.

ACT 3: EPILOGUE

Andy Paris, one of the members of the theater company, says that, on the company's last trip to Laramie, they were able to see Jedediah Schultz in *Angels in America*. Afterward, Jedediah told the theater company that, although he tried not to get involved with Matthew Shepard's case, he felt it changed him. Jedediah asks to hear a recording of his interview from the first time the theater company came to town, and he is shocked and upset that he previously expressed anything other than unconditional acceptance towards gay people.

In this climactic statement, Matthew's father speaks about Matthew's death, poignantly discussing his son's final hours and affirming that Matthew was with nature and with God when he died. Dennis evokes religion, displaying a sense of God as a comforting, loving presence in Matthew's final hours. Dennis also speaks about the solace he feels that Matthew's death is galvanizing people to confront and combat homophobia and allowing the Laramie community to slowly change.



Dennis then goes on to address the question of the death penalty. Dennis makes it clear that he and his family are not ideologically opposed to the death penalty, and that, in fact, Dennis believes Aaron deserves death. Despite this, Dennis chooses to give Aaron life imprisonment to honor Matthew's memory and, presumably, to prevent the perpetuation of violence. In Dennis's view, mercy is the best justice for Aaron.



As Reggie describes how the entire court cried after Dennis's statement, it is clear that the moment served as a catharsis for the community. Meanwhile, Aaron Kreifels finds peace thanks to Dennis's words about not wanting Matthew to die alone, believing that God led him to Matthew for that reason. Aaron seems to see God as a figure of love and empathy.



In this final interview with Jedediah, Jedediah clearly feels that his views on homosexuality have changed drastically since his first interview. While Jedediah is horrified by the things he said in the earlier interviews that expressed doubt about the morality of homosexuality, his journey shows the capacity that people have to change and become more open in even a short amount of time.



Next, Romaine Patterson talks about how she has changed since the beginning of the project. Romaine says she has decided to go to college for communications and political science in order to become a political activist. Romaine goes on to say that she is to be honored in Washington D.C. by the Anti-Defamation League for the counter-protest she organized. Romaine feels that Matthew Shepard is guiding her through her life.

Jonas Slonaker talks about how difficult change can be, and says that he feels that meaningful change did not occur in Laramie. Jonas believes that, once Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson were convicted, the townspeople stopped talking about Matthew's death. Jonas notes that, in the year since the murder, no anti-discrimination laws have been passed.

The narrator states that the company decided to meet one last time at the **fence** where Matthew Shepard was found to say their goodbyes. Doc O'Connor then talks about how beautiful that spot is, with a view of the sparkling lights of the whole city. He is glad it was the last thing Matthew saw.

Romaine began The Laramie Project with a very open acceptance of LGBT people (she was, in fact, a friend of Matthew's). Her experience after Matthew's murder pushes her to advocate and organize for social justice more passionately, so much so that Romaine decides to devote her life to it.



While many individual characters have become more accepting, Jonas Slonaker is frustrated by what he sees as a lack of systemic and legislative change. This suggests that Wyoming still has much more work to do to protect LGBT rights.



Doc's comments about the beauty of the lights of Laramie leave the reader with a hopeful image of the town's future and evoke Doc's earlier comments about how, without the death penalty, the town will hopefully move forward.



ACT 3: DEPARTURE

Moisés Kaufman talks about how the theater company packed up their materials and said goodbye after six visits and two hundred interviews within the span of a year. Leigh Fondakowski asked Marge Murray how she would feel seeing the play, and Marge said she would enjoy it, but it's up to the company whether they portray Laramie well. Marge tells Greg Pierotti that she loves him as she hangs up the phone. Stephen Belber talks about how Doc O'Connor asked them to write a book about Laramie, and Matt Galloway offered them a place to stay and asked if the play would have open auditions.

Finally, Andy Paris describes the company leaving for good to go to Denver for their flight. Andy looks in the rear-view mirror. Father Roger Schmit appears and repeats his earlier request that the playwrights tell the story of Laramie correctly and in a way that's "right." Andy then says that, in the rear-view mirror, he could see the lights of Laramie as they drove away.

As the theater company packs and says their goodbyes, Marge tells the playwrights that both they and Laramie are responsible for Laramie's portrayal on stage— that while the playwrights can choose how to splice the different monologues, the original source material was Laramie's responsibility. Many Laramie residents seem interested in continuing their relationships with the interviewers, telling them to keep in touch.



As Andy describes looking backward at Laramie and thinks of Father Roger Schmit's words, the playwrights draw attention to what they learned from Laramie and how Laramie residents like Father Roger shaped their own playwriting philosophy.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Churchill, Katherine. "The Laramie Project." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 16 Aug 2017. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Churchill, Katherine. "The Laramie Project." LitCharts LLC, August 16, 2017. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-laramie-project>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Laramie Project* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Kaufman, Moisés. *The Laramie Project*. Dramatists Play Service. 2001.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Kaufman, Moisés. *The Laramie Project*. New York: Dramatists Play Service. 2001.