

Emotional damage to  
the three weston  
daughters in august:  
osage county



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In Tracy Letts' play *August: Osage County*, each of the Weston daughters—Barb, Ivy, and Karen—shows evidence of deeply rooted emotional damage. A large amount of the emotional damage the girls have can be attributed to their upbringing, and being treated so harshly by their mother, Violet.

Although all three daughters experience emotional damage at the hands of their mother, each reacts differently to it, and the repercussions of the emotional damage manifests themselves in varying ways in each daughter.

The youngest of the Weston daughters, Karen, displays emotional damage because of the lack of attention she received from Violet as a child. Violet's neglect of Karen appears multiple times during the dinner scene. The first time occurs when Violet mentions the sideboard in her dining room. She initially addresses Barb, asking, "you have any interest in that?" (Letts 86). When Barb does not express interest, Violet turns to Ivy, who says the same thing. Throughout the conversation, Karen intermittently says that she thinks the sideboard is "really pretty" (Letts 86). However, she receives no acknowledgment and is passed over by her mother. This interaction shows Karen's underlying need to be noticed by her mother, because of the lack of attention she has received her entire life. Another instance of Karen's emotional distress occurs in Act III, when Violet tells the girls the story about the boots. Karen dotes on her mother when, "Violet sits, exhales. Karen picks up a hand cream from the bedside table, rubs it on her hands" (Letts 106). This action shows that Karen is still trying get on her mother's good side, even as a grown woman. Later on in the same scene, Violet tells the girls that, "my momma was a nasty, mean old lady. I suppose that's where I get it from" (Letts 107). Karen sweetly replies, "You're not nasty-mean.

You're our mother and we love you" (Letts 107). Karen's deep-seated emotional damage is present here because although Violet had spent the afternoon verbally eviscerating each member of the family, Karen still tells her mother she is not nasty—however untrue that may be—to get on good terms with her. The emotional damage Violet inflicted upon Karen in her childhood is also evident in Karen's past love life. Karen speaks of a man named Andrew, with whom she used to be involved. He would verbally berate her and cheat on her, but Karen would tell herself, "No, you love him, you love him forever, and here's an opportunity to make an adjustment in the way you view the world" (Letts 59). Andrew almost directly mirrors Violet and how she acts towards Karen, and because Karen tries so desperately to be loved by her mother regardless of her abusive tendencies, she does not understand that that is not how one should be treated by another human. Steve then enters Karen's life afterwards, and is yet another mistake. Karen seems to be drawn to cruel people as a repercussion of her chasing her cruel mother's love her entire life. Violet's neglect of Karen rooted emotional damage deep within her psyche, and ultimately altered Karen into a co-dependent and spineless woman.

Ivy—the middle Weston daughter—experiences her own type of emotional damage at the hands of Violet, but in a contradictory way to Karen, and yields different consequences as well. Ivy is the only daughter that stays in Oklahoma to take care of her parents, and because of this, she has much more face-to-face contact with her mother. Contrary to Karen's lack of attention from her mother, Ivy gets the majority of her mother's attention because she stayed close to home. The overexposure to Violet that Ivy is

exposed to creates a very subdued exterior in Ivy. In Act I, Violet begins to interrogate Ivy about Barb and her side of the family. Ivy replies in very succinct, necessary words, not giving any extra information than what is needed. Violet then begins to berate Ivy, calling her “hopeless” and a “schlub” (Letts 25). Violet’s volatile temperament is directed towards Ivy so often that it begins to wear her self-image down. Constantly being called names and having her appearance bashed takes its toll on Ivy, though not as obviously as would have been thought. Later on in the play, it is shown that Ivy is a very passionate and caring woman when her relationship with Little Charles is introduced. Ivy’s subdued exterior comes from the emotional damage of years of Violet’s harsh words. Ivy has learned to remain calm and she does not try to defend herself or question her mother, because she knows that that will only spur her mother’s wrath on further. Violet has inflicted so much emotional damage on Ivy that it has turned her presence from a passionate and lively woman to a quiet and reclusive one. Ivy also seems to absorb some of the disdain her mother aims at her. In the beginning of Act III, Ivy makes it very clear to her sisters that she does not “feel that [sisterly] connection very keenly,” and only considers them to be “accidentally connected by genetics, a random selection of cells. Nothing more” (Letts 102). Ivy’s emotional distance from her sisters is due to underlying anger, because she “resents the responsibility she’s had to take for watching over the horror of her parents’ latter years” (Isherwood). Violet’s neglect of Karen may have turned her into a more out-spoken and dependent person, but Ivy suffered overexposure to Violet, and in the end became a shell of herself.

Barbara, or Barb, is the oldest Weston daughter, and displays her emotional damage in ways completely unique to those of her two sisters. In Act II, Bill describes Barb, telling her, " You're thoughtful, Barbara, but you're not open. You're passionate but you're hard. You're a good, decent, funny, wonderful woman...but you're a pain in the ass" (Letts 77). However harsh, such descriptors can only be expected of Barb, given her status as oldest child. Barb undoubtedly shouldered the burden of being the oldest child, and was expected to act as a role model to her younger sisters, especially when Violet had her fits. Barb's emotional damage runs deeper than it does in her sisters, and manifests itself as a power complex. The most evident example of Barb's power complex occurs at the tail end of Act II, when Barb physically tears a pill bottle from her crying mother's hands and screams at her, " I'M RUNNING THINGS NOW!" (Letts 97). This quote may seem straight-forward in meaning, but the underlying connotation is much heavier. In the context of the scene, this line denotes that power has shifted from Violet to Barb, ultimately transforming Barb into a newer version of her mother. This tone shift at the end of Act II sets up the subsequent events in the rest of the play. A more disguised example of Barb's need for power happens directly after Steve is found harassing Jean in the middle of the night. When Barb and Bill approach the scene, they are distraught about what happened and immediately begin asking Jean what is going on. Jean repeatedly tells them that nothing happened, and asks, " what's the big deal?" (Letts 120). When Bill tells her that her only being fourteen is the big deal, she replies with, " Which is only a few years younger than you like them" (Letts 120). Barbara slaps Jean for this comment, sending her daughter crying into the house.

Although Jean said nothing derogatory to Barb, and was, in a deluded way, <https://assignbuster.com/emotional-damage-to-the-three-weston-daughters-in-august-osage-county/>

standing up for her mother, Jean's comment is interpreted as a blow to Barb's inability to keep Bill from cheating on her. Barb cannot stand that she looks ridiculous because Bill is involved with another woman, and tries to shut down Jean's ridicule of her. Barb's reaction further proves that the emotional damage she suffered as a child and as a grown woman has caused her to develop a strong power complex.

Each Weston daughter suffers severe emotional damage, whether it be at the hands of their mother Violet, or by the people that came into their lives later on. Karen's lack of attention morphed her into a very dependent woman who always needs a man in her life. Ivy's over-exposure to her mother and her verbal assaults transformed Ivy from a passionate and happy woman into a subdued and cautious one. Barb's pressure of being the oldest daughter in the Weston family caused her to develop a deep power complex, one that appears to gradually grow throughout the play. In Act III, Ivy says to Barb: " Well...that's not true. You weren't [Beverly's] favorite. I was. You're mom's favorite" (Letts 104). This quote perfectly exemplifies the unbalanced dynamic between the Weston girls and their mother, the most hurtful and heartbreaking factor in the emotional damage each daughter carries.