



A Study Guide by Martin Andrucki
Charles A. Dana Professor of Theater, Bates College

Pulitzer Prize Finalist

Marjorie Prime

By Jordan Harrison

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MARJORIE PRIME

By Jordan Harrison

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A STUDY GUIDE

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THE PLAYWRIGHT. Born in 1977, Jordan Harrison earned his B.A. at Stanford University in 1999, and his M.F.A. at Brown University, where he studied with the Pulitzer-Prize-winning playwright, Paula Vogel. As he tells us on his website, he was

a 2015 Pulitzer Prize finalist for *Marjorie Prime*, which premiered at the Mark Taper Forum and had its New York premiere at Playwrights Horizons. A film adaptation, directed by Michael Almereyda, premiered in the 2017 Sundance Film Festival. Jordan's play *Maple and Vine* premiered in the 2011 Humana Festival at Actors Theatre of Louisville and went on to productions at American Conservatory Theatre and Playwrights Horizons, among others. Other plays include *The Grown-Up* (Humana Festival), *Doris to Darlene, a cautionary valentine* (Playwrights Horizons), *Amazons and their Men* (Clubbed Thumb). . . . Jordan has two new plays premiering Off-Broadway in the '17-'18 season: *The Amateurs* at the Vineyard Theatre, and *Log Cabin* at Playwrights Horizons. . . . For three seasons, he was a writer and producer for the Netflix original series "Orange is the New Black."

THE TITLE. The words "Marjorie Prime" refer to an artificial being that looks and talks like a real person named "Marjorie." "Primes," the playwright explains, "are not physical robots. They are artificial intelligence programs—descendants of the current chatbots—that use sophisticated holographic projections." And unlike real human beings, they don't die. The author suggests that the actors playing the Primes be positioned on stage in a way that will "help establish the sense of their immortality . . . the way that they far outlive the flesh-and-blood problems of the people they're mimicking."

THE SETTING. We learn at one point that Marjorie was born in 1977. As the drama begins, she is 85 years old. This means that the action takes place in 2062, and beyond. However, the author tells us

that, “The set should never broadcast that we’re in the future. Rather, the audience should catch on” through various bits of information—like Marjorie’s mentioning the year of her birth.

The play is divided into three “Parts.” The author’s stage directions for Part One tell us very little about the physical setting of the action: there is a room on one side of which is an open kitchen and entryway, and on the other, a hallway leading to “*unseen bedrooms*.” He does supply one detail whose importance will become clear in Part Two. Marjorie “*sits in a recliner*,” a “*lumpy chair that doesn’t go with the rest of the décor—clearly it’s been added for her comfort*”.

The stage directions for Part Two again call our attention to that piece of furniture, or rather to its absence. The “*recliner has been replaced with a more stylish chair*”. Obviously this change is important, or the playwright wouldn’t bother highlighting it. As Part Two unfolds, we learn that the replacement of the chair signifies the replacement of the real Marjorie by a Prime, a hologram that has no need for physical comfort.

Part Three occurs in the same room, though it has become “*more spare somehow. A bright void of a living room*.” In addition, there is, “*A feeling that a great deal of time has passed. Centuries maybe. Planets have turned, bones have been bleached, but none of it has touched this little room*.” “*Maybe*” the stage direction suggests, “*the ceiling flies away and the living room furniture sits under the Milky Way*”.

So, the house, like the characters who once inhabited it, might also have become a kind of Prime—a dematerialized simulacrum of its old self.

THE PLOT. The play explores the life of a family, four of whose members we see, and four we don’t. The four who appear on stage—in some form—are: Marjorie and Walter, husband and wife; Tess, Marjorie’s 55-year-old daughter; and Jon, Tess’s husband of the same age. The characters we never see are Damian, Tess’s older brother who committed suicide at age 13; and Tess and Jon’s three children, all adults living their own lives. At the start of the play, only Walter, Marjorie’s late husband, is a Prime. As it continues, both Marjorie and Tess also become Primes. Jon remains human. So we encounter one character only as a Prime; two characters as humans and primes, and one character as a human only.

As Part One begins, the real Marjorie—flesh and blood, aged 85—is in conversation with the Prime version of her late husband, Walter, who has been dead for 10 years. But the Prime we and Marjorie see is an image of Walter as he was in his early 30s. During the opening scene, neither Walter nor Marjorie directly acknowledges Walter’s Prime-ness, though it soon becomes apparent that there’s something askew in a young man’s telling his aged wife about the night he proposed to her after they saw the film, *My Best Friend’s Wedding*—which was released in 1997, 65 years earlier. Marjorie regrets that they didn’t instead see the movie *Casablanca* in an old theater with velvet seats. Having said that, she immediately realizes that she can simply program Walter to “remember” that version of the story the next time he tells it. And in fact, the next time is in Part Three, and Marjorie’s invented “memory” is the version we hear.

This exchange provides a kind of precis, or summary, of the plot as a whole: in each of the first two sections, one of the human characters talks to a Prime, answering questions and providing information about the identity of its human forerunner. Thus we learn about the history of the family and its members.

In Part One, the Prime is Walter. In Part Two, two additional human characters are replaced by Primes: Marjorie, who has died between Parts One and Two, and Tess, who committed suicide sometime after her mother's death. In Part Three there are no human characters, only the Prime versions of Walter, Marjorie, and Tess, whose conversation consists of the exchange of information supplied to them by their human tutors—most of which we have already heard.

Primes are called into existence by the grieving survivors of their human originals: Marjorie resurrects Walter to comfort her as death approaches; Tess summons her dead mother to help her overcome her grief; Jon conjures his departed wife for similar reasons. Only Jon does not appear as a Prime despite the fact that he has three children who, presumably, survive him and might summon him as a Prime.

The details of this family's story gradually emerge as we witness the interactions among the humans, between the humans and the Primes, and among the Primes.

Walter proposed to Marjorie after they saw *My Best Friend's Wedding*, circa 1997. At that time, Marjorie, born in 1977, would have been about twenty. Walter Prime, who appears to be in his early 30s, is described as looking "*like a young career man from 1998.*" That would put Walter's date of birth at about 1965 or '66, making him 11 or 12 years older than Marjorie.

From the conversation between Marjorie and Walter Prime, we learn that there is some level of discord between Marjorie and Tess. "You're very serious," Marjorie says to Walter. "You're like them. Especially Tess. . . . Everything gets me in trouble with her—she's the mother now" (10). She also expresses disapproval of Jon, calling him "over solicitous," but immediately retracts her criticism as "not fair; I like him. I didn't but now I do". So there's a history of strained relationships between the generations.

Early in their marriage, before they had children, Marjorie and Walter decided to liven things up by acquiring a dog. This they did at the city pound, choosing a black poodle, "But not the fussy kind." Instead this was a dog that would fetch sticks and run on the beach, and they named her "Toni." But after a "long time" Toni died. Then Tess was born, and when she was three, they acquired another dog, Toni Two, not exactly the same as her predecessor, but close.

Their scene draws to a close with Marjorie praising Walter for being a good imitation of her late husband, and asking him to stay with her "a while." And Walter responds, "I'll be right here. . . . I have all the time in the world." Which, given the immortality of Primes, is true.

The next scene introduces us to Tess and Jon, who have sharply different attitudes toward Walter. His ghostly, artificial presence disturbs Tess, while Jon feels that the Prime's companionship lifts Marjorie's spirits and brings her some peace. "Does it bother you that she's talking to a computer", Jon asks, trying

to pin down the source of Tess's aversion to Walter. Tess's response clarifies the matter: "It bothers me that you're *helping* it pretend to be my dad—or some weird fountain of youth version of him. . . . Both of you are helping it". Tess is insisting that Walter's performance as her father is nothing but the product of information supplied to "him" by Jon and Marjorie, who are colluding in the creation of a spooky simulacrum that only seems human. "We buy these things. . . . And we *listen* to them. . . . We treat them like our loved ones".

Jon shrewdly suggests that Tess is jealous of the Prime, and Tess responds by asserting that, "she's being nicer to that thing than to me," confirming the tension between mother and daughter hinted at earlier.

But despite Tess's disapproval, Jon is an enthusiastic partisan of Walter: "I can already see the change in her. . . . New things are already coming to the surface. . . . The other day she said . . . 'Why did they have to tease him so much?'" Tess immediately assumes that her mother was asking about Damian, a name we first hear at this moment. We pick up some fragments of information about him through elliptical comments by Tess and Jon. "I thought she'd forgotten," Tess says. "Partly it was the way it happened. . . . She blamed everyone. Anyone who made him feel not normal". What precisely happened to Damian, and how, and in what way he might not have been normal are all left unexplained. Whatever befell Damian, Tess says, "I think it was always with her. . . . Maybe he'll still be with her, even when she doesn't know our names any more". When Jon suggests that they remind Marjorie of Damian, Tess objects, implying that the memory would be too painful, disrupting the peace her mother is seeking in her old age.

Jon asks, "How much does she have to forget before she's not your mom anymore"? This is a question whose implications hover over the entire play: what is the relationship between memory and identity? Is there a point where loss of memory causes us to stop being ourselves? Can a human identity be created by supplying a machine with a batch of someone's memories?

Marjorie enters, fresh from a nap, and declares that she likes Jon, now that he's cut off his beard. "That was thirty years ago", Tess observes. Marjorie also approves of Jon's having "stopped worrying about impressing me", which reminds us of her pro- and anti-Jon remarks in the previous scene. Tess and Jon then refresh Marjorie's memory about her grandchildren, Mitchell and Raina, who never call, except for money, and Micah, a chef at a Michelin-starred restaurant. (Michelin is a French company that produces automobile tires and also publishes travel guides which award stars to especially high-quality restaurants that tourists might visit.)

In the following scene between Jon and Marjorie, we learn that she had fallen the previous evening, winding up in the emergency room, where, as seems to be her habit with men, she flirted with the doctor. This reminds Jon of Marjorie's old admirer, Jean-Paul, a "tennis pro" who continued to pine for her even after she married Walter, writing her love letters for years. But despite Jean-Paul's ardor, Marjorie chose Walter: "He wasn't the most beautiful man I was with, but he was the best lover". An "*awkward*" revelation for her son-in-law, as the stage directions inform us.

Out of nowhere, Marjorie asks Jon how long ago her mother died. Jon remembers meeting the woman only once, the first time "Tess brought me home for dinner." "I remember you didn't put your napkin in

your lap,” Marjorie says, “And your beard was nearly to the floor”. So again, we hear about a hirsute young Jon who met with Marjorie’s disapproval.

Jon leaves to check on Tess, while Marjorie listens to a recording of “Winter” from Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*. Once a violinist, she has played this music in an orchestra, and the memory stirs her to call out to her dead husband: “Walter, I’m scared. . . . This is *it*, isn’t it—there isn’t anything after”. Walter Prime hears her call, and arrives, offering to comfort her. He talks about her violin-playing and her tennis-pro admirer, showing that he has been picking up additional information about her life—presumably from Jon.

When Jon returns with Tess, she takes him aside and declares that “We should treat her the same. . . . As always, instead of smiling like idiots whenever she mentions your beard, when we all know it meant that you . . . weren’t the right *class*”. Marjorie’s objections to Jon, in other words, went much deeper than his appearance, and traces of them still exist.

Again, a question about the past seems to pop up out of nowhere: “Is Damian asleep”? Marjorie asks, and when she is informed that Damian isn’t there, she launches into another memory, this one about a trip she and Walter took to New York at Christmas time—attending a play, window shopping at the fancy department stores, and “sitting on a park bench . . . watching these big orange flags in the park. These orange sorts of flags everywhere”.

What she must be remembering is an installation in Central Park in February, 2005 by the artist Christo, which involved the erection of thousands of “gates” hung with saffron-colored nylon fabric. So it wasn’t Christmas. Marjorie tells Tess that she was left with baby sitters, but Tess, 55 years old in 2062, wouldn’t have been born until 2007. So perhaps Marjorie is mis-remembering. Marjorie particularly recalls not wanting to get up from her bench because, “if we got up, that would mean we had to start the rest of our lives”. The magical time-out would be over, the game would resume, and the clock, inevitably, would run out. As it is soon to do for Marjorie.

Tess catches sight of a Bible on a side table, and demands to know what it’s doing there. Marjorie tells her a visiting caretaker left it, thinking it might provide some comfort. This angers Tess, who was raised as an atheist. Now she sees her irreligious mother being lured by the caretaker into embracing “her fairy tale now that you have a little more reason to believe in it. . . . You hear things like this—people preying upon the elderly.” “She’s not prey,” Jon objects, and Tess reprimands him for, “Taking sides like always”. The escalating tensions upset Marjorie who has “an accident”. She exits being led to the shower by Tess.

Jon then summons Walter Prime and tells him the story of the visit to New York that he has just heard from Marjorie, describing it as having taken place not “long after your son died.” Damian committed suicide at age thirteen, when Tess—born in 2007—was ten. That is, he died in 2017—which in turn means he was born in 2004. So another inconsistency is added to this memory. If Marjorie actually did see the Christo installation in February, 2005, it wouldn’t have been Christmas, Tess wouldn’t have been born, and Damian would not have just died. Instead he would have been about a year old. So a

“memory” riddled with chronological contradictions, gets passed on to a Prime as if it were an authentic datum of a person’s life.

During his scene with Walter Prime, Jon provides him with information about Damian. He informs Walter that Damian committed suicide. “He spent a lot of time in his room. He got into fights at school. Not fights he started, but kids would tease him and he fought back”. Damian’s death was particularly shocking to his father who was certain that he “had made a nice life for” his son. But, says Jon, “You didn’t always know how to show that you loved him.”

Damian’s major source of affection, according to Jon, was his dog, Toni Two—which, we infer, he killed at the same time he committed suicide: “Maybe he thought she could come with him that way”?

According to Jon, the impact of Damian’s death on Walter and Marjorie was overwhelming, “You never got over it,” he tells Walter Prime. “For fifty years Marjorie never said his name, she hid all the pictures. It was that hard”.

How does Jon know all of this? As he tells it, Marjorie never even spoke Damian’s name, while Walter, who didn’t know how to show his love, must have been deeply reluctant to discuss the subject. That leaves Tess as the major source of information about Damian, but she was just ten years old when he died, so how clear and reliable would her memories be? Maybe Jon is creating his own narrative about Damian, using bits and pieces of information gleaned from the boy’s emotionally reticent father and his little sister—a fabricated “memory” which Walter Prime will add to his autobiography.

We later learn that other manufactured memories have developed in this family’s life. Jean-Paul, for example, was not, as repeatedly alleged, the world’s eighth-ranked tennis pro. “He played in *college*”, Tess points out, reprimanding Jon for inventing a myth about Marjorie’s old admirer. And Jean-Paul didn’t lead some kind of international life of glamor. Instead, “He had a dry-wall business”. But Jon, who fed the misinformation to Marjorie, defends his deceptions, saying, “It made her feel special”.

As Part One ends we see Jon forcefully insisting to Walter that Marjorie “never forgot Damian. . . . She never forgot”.

Part Two begins with Tess and Marjorie seated together on the sofa —the latter “*a bit more smartly dressed and made up than before*”. As noted earlier, the recliner is gone, replaced by a more “*stylish chair*.”

Tess compliments Marjorie on her sweater, which she gave her mother three Christmases ago, indicating by her tone of voice her resentment that her gift was never worn. “Three years isn’t a long time,” Marjorie Prime responds, “Not for me,” reminding us that Primes are immortal. Being holograms—collections of pixels—Primes can’t actually wear clothing, so we should assume that the “sweater” Tess refers to was given to the real Marjorie three years earlier. Tess views the fact that Marjorie never wore the gift as a small but galling rejection of her generosity, and she has evidently

arranged for Marjorie Prime to wear a simulacrum of the garment as a way of compensating herself for this slight.

They chat for a while about dogs and about Tess and Jon's travel plans, an exchange of commonplaces and "memories" that leads Tess to compliment the Prime on her excellent imitation of Marjorie. But, notes Tess, Marjorie Prime must do less smiling if she is to be truly like the original. And she must also be less sweet-natured and considerate. Tess informs Marjorie that she was her only child—untrue—but that she has three children of her own. She fills the Prime in on some of Marjorie's less endearing qualities: vanity, poor sportsmanship, occasional rudeness, peculiar restaurant habits, lack of female friends, malicious sarcasm. But despite her shortcomings, says Tess, Marjorie's marriage to Walter was a happy one: "You and Dad fought, but loved each other".

The fact that that there is so much fundamental biographical information that the Prime has yet to learn suggests that she has been on the scene for a short time. Or perhaps Tess, who found Walter Prime off-putting, has also had similar feelings about Marjorie Prime, and as a result has not actually spent much time communicating with her since her arrival, however long ago that was.

We learn that Tess's daughter, Raina, doesn't talk to her, though Tess doesn't say why. It might have something to do with the fact that Raina is not holding down a job, and instead is in a band whose music sounds like "playing a bag of broken glass". Jon, we discover, acts as their go-between.

Tess asks herself why she has chosen the 85-year-old Marjorie as her Prime, instead of a much younger version of her mother. This leads the Prime to observe, "You haven't said much about me and you. Are we close"? A question that suggests again either that Marjorie Prime has just arrived, or that Tess has been keeping her at arm's length.

"You weren't a bad mom," Tess replies, "But we didn't tell each other things, secret things". Marjorie Prime suggests that this is why Tess has chosen the older version of her mother—to have a Marjorie "you still have things to say to". Which leads Tess to speculate on why Marjorie chose such a young Walter to be her Prime: "I wonder if it was a way to. . . go back to the beginning, before anything had happened".

"Does Jon know we're talking," Tess asks, implying that talking is something they normally don't do. Jon does know, and he's been talking to Marjorie too: "He wanted to help me be more real. To help you. You've been so down." "Pity from a computer," Tess responds, "That feels. . .". She leaves the thought unfinished.

Tess reveals that she has been "so down," that Jon wants her to see a therapist:

It feels like I made all the right choices, all my life—I woke up early, I studied for the test—and now here I am talking to my dead mother, and the person who loves me the most in the whole world thinks I'm *broken*.

The next scene finds Jon and Tess sorting through Marjorie's papers: old photos, newspaper clippings, letters. One letter is from Jean-Paul, the "tennis pro," declaring his enduring love for Marjorie even after Walter's death. Tess is stricken by a surge of guilt over the way she treated her mother. "I judged her. . . . I did. For talking to Walter Prime. For not going outside enough, for not reading more. Why couldn't I just let her be? She was so tired".

Jon tries to reassure her by telling her that Marjorie loved her "so much," a proposition Tess seems to doubt, saying, "She never even— ". But again, she leaves the thought unfinished. Instead she turns in a radically different direction: "I hated him, Jon. . . . I hated Damian, for changing her. When he died—I didn't know how to make her love me as much as him. . . . I think we didn't talk more because if we started talking, we would end up talking about *him*".

Jon then confirms what we began to suspect in the previous scene: that Tess has been avoiding Marjorie Prime. Lately, however, communication between them has increased, even though Tess—having been a sceptic about Primes— is embarrassed about that. It even seems that her ersatz Mother "cares more" about her than the real Marjorie did. Which baffles Tess, who's convinced that the Prime "is a backboard. It can't be interested or not interested. It's programmed to appear interested. So, you can get . . . fooled". The "backboard" metaphor is arresting. Like the board behind a basketball net, the Prime originates nothing; it is a surface off of which real people bounce their thoughts and emotions, which return to them like the rebounding ball.

Jon urges Tess to meet some friends for dinner at an Indian restaurant, but she demurs, saying she doesn't feel like it: "I haven't felt like it for a year. It is not an affectation. Wake up, put on clothes, go out, eat . . . go to sleep, wake up, put on clothes, repeat, repeat. . . I'm scaring myself". Now in her late 50s, she is beginning to dread old age: "Halfway through our lives. . . . There's the half where you live and the half where you live through other people. And your memory of when you were young. . . I don't know why we have to keep each other alive for so long". "You can't keep mourning forever," Jon says, but Tess has come to the point where she views further living as a "distraction" from death.

This is followed by a brief, wordless scene, in which Tess sits "*staring out, ever so slightly downward,*" while Jon "*watches her for a few moments. He is about to speak but then he doesn't*".

We next see Jon and Tess seated together, the latter seeming "*like herself—but herself on a good day*". Jon's first line alerts us that things have changed: "Do you know your name"? So either Tess has succumbed to premature dementia, or Jon is talking to a Prime—which turns out to be the case. He proceeds to quiz her on the basics of her identity: What's your family name? Do you have children? How long have we been married? He then produces a piece of paper on which he has written down notes about the more complex aspects of her personality: her enjoyment of confrontation, her reading habits, her familiarity with the Latin names of things, her habitual worrying.

Then he gets to the hard part: "I think, the last year, you were done, and you were living for my sake". He tells about their trip to Madagascar, which ended with Tess's hanging herself from a tree in the forest—the second child of Marjorie to commit suicide. At the end of his story, he makes a jarring

discovery: Tess was right about Primes; they're nothing but backboards. "I'm talking to myself". Yet Tess Prime presses Jon for more information so that she can improve her performance.

Presumably he supplies that information, because in Part Three, Tess Prime regales the Primes of Walter and Marjorie with the story of her honeymoon. But that narrative is different from most of the rest of the information the Primes exchange in Part Three, because the audience hasn't heard it before, so Jon must have continued to supply Tess Prime with data about Tess's life.

Part Three as a whole is a kind of fugue—a musical composition in which various themes are repeated by different instruments. Thus, we hear Walter telling about seeing *Casablanca* in a theater with velvet seats, and Marjorie saying how she didn't always like Jon, and Tess telling how her son is a *chef de cuisine*. These are all themes from earlier in the play being recycled among themselves by the Primes who learned them from their human teachers, and then from one another.

The last line of the play completes the fugal composition when Marjorie Prime quotes something Tess told her back in Part Two. Tess was describing how the real Marjorie would ask about Walter after his death: "Sometimes every day—'Where's Walter?' . . . And then, after we reminded you, you would say, 'How nice that I could love somebody'". As the play ends, Walter Prime is reminiscing about a photo of Damian and Toni Two running on the beach:

WALTER. You put the photograph away but you never forgot. Don't you remember?

MARJORIE. I do now.

TESS. Me too.

(Deeply felt.)

MARJORIE. How I miss them. . . . All I can think is how nice. How nice that we could love somebody.

Whom is Marjorie missing? Damian and Toni? Or all the humans who have taught her and the Primes everything they know? And is her expression of love the sign of an actual emotion? Or is it just a mechanical repetition of the words once spoken by her human counterpart and told to her by Tess? Is it a genuine sentiment, or just a phrase bouncing off a backboard?

THE CHARACTERS.

Primes and the Idea of Character. When thinking about Primes and character, we need to keep in mind what Walter Prime says at the beginning of the play: "I sound like whoever I talk to". Such a quality is pretty much the opposite of being a character. The word "character" descends etymologically from a Greek term for a sharp stick, an instrument used to inscribe identifying, and indelible, markings on a surface, something like a branding-iron. To have a character is to be marked by certain permanent psychological and physical features. Character is a constant orientation of the soul, made evident in habitual actions: Jack is a liar; Jill will tell it like it is; Smith is considerate; Jones is a bully. Primes, by contrast, are infinitely malleable, as we see when Walter Prime repeats a false memory about seeing *Casablanca* that Marjorie has planted in his information bank.

So anything said by Walter Prime, or any of the other Primes, does not grow out of their characters, but is only the recycling—with appropriate but not substantive variations—of what they have heard from humans.

There might be one sense in which Primes can be said to possess “character.” As we see in the case of Walter Prime, the human client can specify certain desirable features. Marjorie wanted a young Walter, and she got one. Presumably, then, the client could also choose particular temperamental elements: a Walter who is not only young and good-looking, but sympathetic, helpful, agreeable, and so on. And if those qualities turn out to be unsatisfying, the client might reconfigure the Prime’s personality, as Tess attempts to do when she tells Marjorie Prime to smile less.

And since all the Primes have been ordered-up to provide emotional support to their human companions, they are bound to be agreeable, kind, and helpful. Of course, one could imagine a human contrarian acquiring a depressed, or curmudgeonly, or spiteful Prime, but that would be a different play.

As to **Walter, non-Prime**, we don’t get to know much about him. We never see him in his living, human state, and we only learn about him through what others say.

During Walter Prime’s first scene with Marjorie, he spends most of his time telling her two stories: one about the dogs and one about the night he proposed marriage. But all the information in these stories must have come from Marjorie, so they don’t tell us much about the real Walter. The only clue we get to his character comes from a teasing remark Marjorie makes at the beginning of the dog story, when Walter Prime describes the real Walter as having “a good strong jaw,” which elicits a playful reprimand from Marjorie: “He was a little too pleased with himself”. Walter Prime instantly revises the narrative: “He had a good strong jaw and was a little too pleased with himself”. So we learn that Walter was—allegedly— a bit vain.

The next tidbit we glean about him is also dropped by Marjorie who tells Jon that her late husband wasn’t “the most beautiful man I was with, but he was the best lover”. Although Walter’s vanity may have led him to be “too pleased with himself,” his sexual prowess was something to be proud of.

Later on, when Marjorie is by herself listening to Vivaldi, she is overwhelmed by the conviction that her death is imminent, and that nothing—no after-life—will follow it. At that moment she cries out for Walter, suggesting that he was someone she could rely on for comfort at moments of distress—an impression strengthened by the story of her visit to New York. “And I just remember sitting on one of those benches with your father and not wanting to get up. . . . Because if we got up, that would mean we had to start the rest of our lives”. Again, Walter seems to have provided shelter from the stress and pain of existence.

We get a few additional scraps of information from Jon’s conversation with Walter Prime about Damian’s death. “You thought you had made a nice life for him”, Jon says, suggesting that Walter was somehow detached from his suicidal son. Worse, “You didn’t always know how to show that you loved him”. This seems to contradict what we have learned from Marjorie: was Walter the emotional stalwart of her memory, or was he emotionally out of touch with his son, as implied by Jon?

One final bit of information about Walter emerges as Tess is tutoring Marjorie Prime about her human counterpart: “You and dad fought but you loved each other. Neither of you seemed to be more in love than the other, which is always lucky. Maybe he loved you a little more”. So, according to Tess, there was a touch of a-symmetry in her parents’ relationship, with Walter’s position being the weaker . . . maybe.

* * *

We understand the nature of characters by learning what they want and how far they will go to get it. **Marjorie** is 85 years old, drifting toward death, passing into and out of consciousness, confused much of the time about what’s going on around her. At the end of the play’s first scene, she says to Walter Prime, “We don’t have to talk. We can just sit. Sometimes I get so tired”.

One quality that makes characters on stage vivid is the intensity of their volition, the energy with which they pursue their objectives. Marjorie is running out of such energy. It’s not that she doesn’t still have objectives, it’s that they are modest and quiet: to sit, to rest. Or, as she says later, “I don’t have to get better. Just keep me from getting worse”.

Keeping Marjorie from getting worse is the main action of Part One. Sometimes she cooperates in the project, sometimes she doesn’t. She happily accepts Walter Prime as a therapeutic presence, but she resists eating even a spoonful of peanut butter to keep her strength up.

“I’d like to feel in control”, she says, fully aware of how little agency she exercises over her life. And perhaps her flirting with the emergency room doctor is way of exerting “control,” since flirtation is a kind of emotional manipulation. As is the teasing she continually directs at Jon. She’s also exerting a kind of control when she intentionally shocks him about her sex life with Walter.

But no amount of flirting, joking, or word-play can conceal the fact of her immanent death. She describes watching television and suddenly just losing consciousness. “That’s how it should happen when it happens”, she says, referring to life’s final moment. When Tess objects to this remark, Marjorie responds: “I know. Let’s all pretend we live forever”. That’s a delusion that’s no longer available to Marjorie; fear has taken its place. “I’m scared”, she cries out to her dead husband.

Marjorie’s last lines in the play are sad and disquieting. After having her “accident,” she is led off to the shower, saying, “I’m sorry. . . . I’m so sorry.” It’s hard to see this regret as limited to the fact that she has just soiled herself. Instead, coming as these words do at her final moment in the play, we’re tempted to hear them as a summing-up, a final statement about the life she is leaving. What is she sorry about? Perhaps the answer comes a few moments later when Jon tells Walter Prime about Damian: “It was Marjorie who had the hardest time. For fifty years she never said his name, she hid all the pictures. It was that hard. . . . But she never forgot him. . . She never forgot”.

* * *

Tess reveals a lot about herself in her first line: “I still don’t like it”. The referent of “it” here is the presence of a Prime in the house, but there’s much else that Tess dislikes: the policies of Senior Serenity, the social service agency that helps care for Marjorie; various aspects of her mother’s behavior, past and present; religion and the Bible; the Indian seasoning, ghee; various aspects of the behavior of her children—especially Raina’s membership in a band that plays atrocious music; the Jean-Paul legend; Damian, whom she says she “hated”, and, perhaps most of all, herself. “Here I am talking to my dead mother, and the person who loves me the most in the whole world thinks I’m *broken*”. To which Marjorie Prime responds, “You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself”.

Tess is quite clear throughout the play about her dislikes, but about her goals or objectives, she doesn’t have much to say. Even her interest in traveling to Madagascar arises from a kind of negative motivation: “it’s the place that seems the least like anywhere else”. Visiting Madagascar, then, is essentially a rejection of the rest of the world.

When she confesses to having hated Damian, she reveals something that might explain why she’s so “hard” on herself: “When he died—I didn’t know how to make Marjorie love me as much as him. . . I think we didn’t talk more because if we started talking, we would end up talking about *him*”. So she has lived her life in the shadow of Damian, who has always maintained first place in Marjorie’s affections. She is the not-Damian who has had to struggle to be noticed, and perhaps her frequently- and strongly-expressed dislikes are her attempts to call attention to herself. She even finds that Walter Prime is a serious rival in the competition for her mother’s affection: “Am I supposed to not notice that she’s being nicer to that thing than to me”?

Having failed to make Marjorie love her as much as Damian, she must now face the fact that her mother’s approaching death means that she will never achieve that goal. She has lived her life as the wrong person, with a mother who never forgot the lost, favored son.

And despite that, she acquires Marjorie Prime, an artifact that will keep this distressing mother in her life. Why would she do such a thing? Perhaps Jon, a Prime fan, insisted. But it seems clear that she has the ability to resist her husband.

Does she want to create a new Marjorie that will be the mother she craved? But if that were her objective, why would she advise Marjorie Prime to smile less, and not to call her “sweetheart?” And why would she spend so much time teaching Marjorie Prime about her mother’s shortcomings, thus recreating the difficult Marjorie whose love she lacked? “It feels like it cares more than mom did”, Tess says, meaning that the Prime shows her more affection than her real mother, a fact she finds disturbing. Possibly she fears being suckered into thinking of the Prime as the real Marjorie: “I just mean . . . with people, you can tell when they’re really interested because sometimes they’re not. But the Prime, it’s a backboard. It can’t be interested or not interested. It’s programmed to appear interested. So, you can get . . . fooled”.

So there seems to be a fundamental ambivalence about Tess’s attitude toward Marjorie Prime. On the one hand, as a Prime sceptic, she wants to keep her emotional distance. On the other, she feels herself

being “fooled” into seeing the Prime as genuine, as a new and improved version of her mother. While being sucked in, she is constantly pulling back, which leaves her confused rather than comforted.

When tutoring Marjorie Prime on her relationship with her mother, Tess says, “Some people have a point where their parents stop being their parents to them—you start talking as one adult to another. I’m not sure we ever had that”. The pronoun “we” is ambiguous at this moment. It can either be a narrative “we,” as would be the case if Jane, talking to Mary, said of herself and Louise, “We were never close.” On the other hand, it could signal that Tess, as she speaks, is including the Prime and herself in that pronoun, with “we” embracing the two of them— mother and daughter. The Prime responds with what seems like an attempt at emotional seduction: “Maybe I’m the Marjorie you still have things to say to”. The Prime is luring Tess into believing that, by talking to a “backboard,” she can fill in the blanks in her relationship with her mother. Tess must decide whether to go with this as a solution to her unhappiness or to reject it as self-delusion. And the temptation to accept the Prime’s invitation to intimacy can be powerful: *“Again TESS is strangely moved. The empathy from MARJORIE feels real”*.

But it becomes clear that Tess does not embrace Marjorie Prime’s offer. Instead, in the following scene, she continues to rummage through her mother’s possessions, “sifting through her letters, polishing her tea sets”, trying to connect with the real Marjorie. When Jon urges her to stop grieving and get on with her life, she replies, “Now that she’s dead it feels like. . . Like we’re just waiting our turn”. Which means that without Marjorie, life has become meaningless to Tess; or, perhaps, that trying to elicit Marjorie’s love was the purpose of her existence, and with Marjorie gone, that purpose has disappeared. Hence the trip to Madagascar, the island like nowhere else—which could be a way of describing death.

After Tess’s suicide, we get a lot of retrospective information about her as Jon tutors her Prime: she liked confrontation, she was suspicious of technology, she never stopped moving, she never asked for help. One characteristic leaps out: she wanted to be better with her kids than Marjorie was with her. Given the fact that two of her three children only call for money, and that her daughter won’t speak to her, we have to assume that she fell short on that score. Was that because of Marjorie? Did her mother’s neglect make Tess try too hard to impose her love on her own children? Did that fail, adding another reason for her suicide?

* * *

Walter, Marjorie, and Tess are succeeded by Primes. **Jon** isn’t. Why? We might begin to answer that question by examining the reasons why Marjorie, Tess, and Jon opt for Primes as substitute loved-ones. Marjorie is frightened at the prospect of death. “I’m scared” she calls out to her absent husband, and she begs Walter Prime to “keep me from getting worse”. So her Prime offers the promise of prolonged life and an escape from the terror of annihilation. Tess accepts the presence of Marjorie Prime, despite her skepticism about the Prime phenomenon in general, because she still has unresolved emotional problems with her dead mother; she’s still hoping to be loved. Jon acquires Tess Prime for similar reasons—to settle unfinished emotional business created by his wife’s suicide.

Jon does have survivors—his three children— who might want his Prime in their lives. But they are seemingly uninterested in calling Jon Prime into being. Maybe that’s because he was a successful father who left behind happy children who don’t need the emotional crutch of a Prime. That’s the kind of parent Jon seems to be. It is Jon, after all, who keeps the channels of communication at least partly open between Tess and Raina, and it is he who defends Mitchell and Raina’s carelessness about money: “They’re in their twenties, it’s their job to be prodigal”.

The emotional generosity he shows toward his children is also evident in his dealings with Marjorie and Tess. Tess accuses him of always taking her mother’s side in disputes or disagreements; and Jon goes out of his way to teach Walter Prime details about his marriage to Marjorie so that he can be a more comforting companion to her.

Jon tries to bring Tess around to embracing Marjorie Prime as a device that can help her get past her grief and resume a normal life. For the same reason, he urges his wife to undertake psychological therapy to overcome her growing depression.

Jon would prefer to vacation in Spain, but Tess wants to visit Madagascar, the island that’s like nowhere else. Evidently, Jon acquiesces to Tess’s wish, though his agreeableness doesn’t prevent Tess’s suicide in that unique place. And as an enthusiastic supporter of Primes, he predictably has his dead wife summoned back into virtual existence to help him deal with his loss.

So, throughout the play, Jon’s objective, the goal that defines his character, is to help people—himself included—cope with their emotional difficulties by embracing the healing potential of Primes.

It is therefore ironic that this advocate of Primes doesn’t become a prime himself. One reason for that, as we have seen, may be that Jon didn’t leave his children any psychological messes for his Prime to clean up. But there might also be darker grounds for the absence of his Prime.

In the course of teaching Tess Prime about her human forerunner, Jon makes a painful discovery:

(JON . . . directs this inward, to the real TESS.)

JON. Tess. You were right. . . . You were right. It’s nothing. It’s a backboard. I’m talking to myself. I’m talking to myself.

Jon’s objective has been to help people find comfort and healing through their Primes, but at this moment he realizes the hopelessness of that goal. The Prime is nothing but an echo chamber for the human beings who come to it. It has no inner life, no character, and therefore no capacity to provide solace. Realizing this, would Jon want Jon Prime to exist? It seems more likely that he would have prohibited his own replication. And so he doesn’t join Walter, Marjorie, and Tess in Part Three in their infinite exchange of echoes.

THEMES. Is the dog, Toni Two, a kind of Prime of Toni One—a way of replacing a beloved presence with a virtually-identical other? And if so, doesn’t this remind us that our lives are in fact populated by Primes of many kinds? Statues of Greek and Roman heroes and portraits of kings and presidents are

political Primes. Saints' relics are religious Primes. Family photo albums are full of personal Primes, as are home movies and videos. And the library of classic movies is a vast repository of pop-culture Primes, where Dorothy is always dancing along the Yellow Brick Road, and Rick is forever walking into the fog with Captain Renault. What about live theater? Is the actor on stage Hamlet's Prime? Or is the actor who performs the same role night after night repeatedly "Priming" the character he plays? Or even priming himself as he was the night before?

So the basic premise of *Marjorie Prime* is rooted in history and human nature: we want to hold on to what we love—to replicate it if possible. And it seems as if the technology needed to create Primes is not so very far over the horizon. Right now, we carry Siri around in our pockets and have mini-conversations with her. What's next? The voices of our late loved-ones? Let's remember that decades ago, Natalie Cole was singing duets with her dead father on the album *Unforgettable*.

The question raised by the play is: are the Primes in any way *people*? Jon wants to believe that they are. He thinks that if enough memories of their deceased originals are fed into their data-banks, some kind of spontaneous generation will occur, creating a human presence. Sadly, at the end of Part Two, he discovers that that's not true. Ironically, though, In Part Three the stage is occupied exclusively by Primes; they have become the *dramatis personae*—the "characters of the play."

The Latin word "*persona*"— which gives us the word "person"— is itself an instance of irony, since it is derived from the ancient word for "mask," specifically the theatrical masks worn on stage to create an instant, generic identity for a performer. So "person," which we take to mean an authentic human being, is actually descended from a word meaning the opposite: a fake face used to establish a fictive identity. In that sense, the Primes are "persons"—talking masks, but with no human actor behind them.

We might also think of the family as a nursery of Primes, a mechanism for the creation of human likenesses. We tacitly affirm this when we talk about a child as a "chip off the old block," or as being the "spit 'n image" of a parent, or when we say "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree." Behind these figures of speech there no doubt hovers some collective memory of *Genesis*: "And God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness". The Prime Mover began by creating imitations of Himself, and human parents have been following His lead ever since.

If Toni Two, as has been suggested, is the "Prime" of Toni One, we can ask if there are other "Primes" in this family, replicas of their predecessors. The most obvious bit of repeated behavior within this little clan is suicide, the cause of death of both of Marjorie's children. Why does that happen? In Damian's case, we have very little evidence that would help us to understand his action. Tess describes him as "different," but offers no specifics defining what that difference was. Jon says he liked snakes and lizards, but that doesn't seem strange or different for a thirteen-year-old boy. He also says that Walter was reticent about showing his love for Damian, but that hardly rises to a motive for suicide. Whatever Damian's reasons, the shadow of his death has lingered over the family for decades, warping the relationship between Tess and her mother. Damian's death locked Marjorie into a perpetual state of unfulfilled love for her absent child and a constant state of emotional estrangement from her daughter. Is it possible that Tess began subconsciously considering suicide herself as a way of rivaling her brother's command of Marjorie's maternal devotion? But with her mother dead, there would seem no point in

Tess's carrying through on that inclination. Except that after Marjorie's death there is no longer any hope of commanding her love. So with no reason left for her existence, Tess might have decided to act on the suicidal tendencies that developed while Marjorie was still alive, thus becoming her brother's virtual Prime.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.

1. Do you have technological devices that resemble "Primes" in any way?
2. When you look at or listen to a recording of a person, do you feel that the real individual behind the sound or the image is really present in some way?
3. How certain are you that your memories—or those of other people—are accurate?
4. If Primes actually existed, would you feel comfortable interacting with them?
5. Do you have any friends or relatives whom you would like to have "primed?"
6. Why do you think Damian killed himself? In what way do you think he was "different?"
7. Why do you think Tess killed herself?
8. What major realization does Jon experience while talking to Tess Prime?
9. What does it mean to say that a person has "character?"
10. Why do you think Raina has stopped speaking to Tess?