

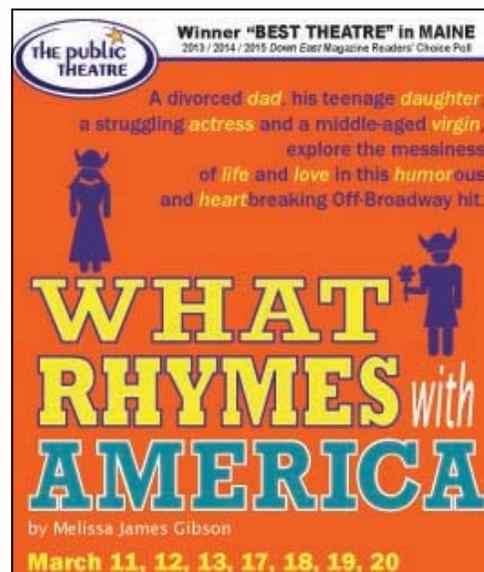


# WHAT RHYMES with AMERICA

By Melissa James Gibson

A Study Guide by Martin Andrucki

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# ***What Rhymes with America***

By Melissa James Gibson

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**A Study Guide By Martin Andrucki**

**Dana Professor of Theater, Bates College**

**THE PLAYWRIGHT.** Melissa James Gibson was born and raised in Vancouver, British Columbia. Following high school she moved to New York to pursue a career in acting. After three years, she changed course, and enrolled in the College of General Studies of Columbia University. After completing her undergraduate work there, she attended Yale Drama School, where she studied playwriting.

In 2002 her drama won an Obie Award for playwriting. (“Obie” is short for “Off-Broadway,” which refers to a theatrical community in New York distinct from the world of large theaters and often commercial productions that characterize the Broadway stage.) She has also been the recipient of the Whiting Award and the Steinberg Award, both for playwriting.

In addition to her work for the stage, she has written for television, producing scripts for *House of Cards* and *The Americans*.

*What Rhymes with America* premiered at The Atlantic Theater Company in New York in 2012.

**THE SETTING.** The action of the play flows freely among various locations in contemporary New York City, each of them evoked by one or two bits of scenery: a phone booth; a hospital bed; a doorway; a mattress on the floor. These create the unhappy urban world of the play’s four characters: Hank, Marlene, Sheryl, and Lydia. All of these locations are what the playwright has referred to as “cuspy locales.” (See, for example, her interview with Julie Haverkate of Theatre Communications Group.) The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines “cusp” as a, “point of intersection of two . . . arcs or curves,” or as, “A transitional point or time.”

For the playwright, such places, “are essentially thresholds between public and private. They’re dynamic, as they’re often sites of negotiation, where people cut to the conversational chase as they’re in transit.” Thus, Hank stands outside a locked door, begging his daughter to let him in, stuck between inside and outside. Lydia visits her father in a hospital room, a transitory place between illness and health, or in this case between life and death. Hank and Sheryl share a smoking break outside a theater

during the intermission of an opera in which they serve as supernumeraries, or “extras”—sort of in the cast; sort of not.

One of the play’s characters, Lydia, an aspiring writer in her 40s, describes her unpublished stories as taking place, “in a variety of cuspy architecture / Stories that are both / interior and exterior . . . / Stories that feel big and small / at the same time”

As with Lydia’s stories, the “cuspy-ness” of the physical locations in *What Rhymes with America* are integral in creating a world in which characters struggle to move from one phase of life to another. Hank is going through post-separation trauma, looking for a way to start over. Marlene, a 16-year-old, stands at a point of particular difficulty, the cusp between adolescence and adulthood. Sheryl, convinced that she was born to be an actor, has to face the real possibility that this dream will fail. And Lydia, at the moment she is about to pass from virginity to sexual initiation, remains like a bride in a farce, stuck at the threshold.

**THE PLOT.** As the action begins, Hank “stands in a hallway, outside an apartment door.” The door is locked, and Hank is begging to be let in. From inside the apartment, his sixteen-year-old daughter, Marlene, explains that her mother, Hank’s estranged wife, wants him kept out.

As the scene develops, Hank struggles to establish some sort of normal father-daughter connection with Marlene, an objective made impossible by the locked door. He asks about her mother, about school, about her teachers, about volleyball, and Marlene evades every conversational gambit with an exasperating response: grudging, curt, or evasive.

She’s clearly uncomfortable talking about her mother or herself, so she changes the subject to Hank. She asks about his research, his finances, and his job security.

Hank answers Marlene’s questions just as she answers his: reluctantly, evasively, uncomfortably.

But despite the resistance of both to talking about themselves, this “cuspy” encounter still manages to reveal crucial information about these two characters. Marlene, we learn, is studying for her SAT exam and writing college applications. She sees herself as a “weak link,” feels that she lives most of her life alone, and wants college to provide “far-awayness.” She works as a volunteer at a chaotically-run hospital, worries that she might be “going insane” and that her teeth might be “going buck,” and emphatically does not want to talk about her mother with her father.

As for Hank, he says he still loves his wife. But the feeling is emphatically not mutual, mostly because he gambled away her retirement money in various ways, including bad investments. He’s living temporarily in an apartment somewhere, and doesn’t know his neighbors. His academic research has been a failure, and his job is on the line. He can’t afford to pay his daughter’s allowance, and is carrying only six dollars in cash.

Meanwhile, he has temporary work, the details of which he withholds from his daughter, except to say, “It involves international stuff,” and, “It’s more of a support staff thing.”

The scene ends with Hank handing the six dollars to Marlene through the temporarily slightly-ajar door—which, they agree, doesn’t count as a violation of her mother’s ban on door-opening.

In what the author terms a “split scene,” the action glides from the hallway to a loading dock behind a theater, where Sheryl, dressed in a “Viking-esque costume,” smokes a cigarette. She is soon joined by Hank, similarly smoking and costumed. This, then, is the “international,” “support staff” position he tells his daughter about: he is playing an extra—one of many—in the swarming cast of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Richard Wagner’s colossal four-part epic, also known as *The Ring Cycle*.

He and Sheryl fall into desultory but intense conversation, ranging from the philosophical to the mundane. At the philosophic end, they decide that, “No one cares how anyone is.” Swinging over to the mundane, they worry that the wardrobe supervisor might be catching on to the fact that they’re smoking in costume—an infraction strictly prohibited.

Waxing philosophical again, Sheryl declares, “suddenly you wake up and your life has been a whole string of terrible ideas you know / you wake up and realize that you have lived a life of pleather.” (“Pleather” being imitation leather made from plastic.) But she has a chance to redeem that life, and to transform the pleather into real suede. An aspiring actress, she has the “biggest” opportunity of her life coming up—an open audition at which “big people” will be present.

But again, philosophical gloom shadows her hopes. “I freeze up,” she says. “I’ve never given my best at an audition / only my adequate.” But this time she vows to “OVER prepare,” moving beyond adequate to life-changing success. She will do a speech by Lady Macbeth, even though, she admits, she’s “too old for her.” But she will compensate for that by her ability to understand the character’s rage at her husband, who, like her own, was a “f\*\*\*-up.”

She wonders how, after our deaths, “will anyone even know we were here. . . . One day the world will wake up and discover I have vanished.” (The last word she pronounces in the manner of Lady Macbeth, with three foreboding syllables.)

And on this emotionally ambiguous note, the action shifts—again via a “split scene”—taking us now to the hospital where Marlene is working as a volunteer. A dying man is lying on a hospital bed, while the man’s daughter, Lydia, searches frantically for a pen so she can write him a last letter. The letter, read aloud by Marlene, says, “I need your help but you can’t help me. . . . I wish I could help you / But this is goodbye isn’t it. . . . It’s okay if you want to let go.”

Meanwhile, the doctor in charge has disappeared and is nowhere to be found, a situation that confirms Marlene's earlier description of the hospital as a place of total administrative disarray.

The scene splits again, and discloses Hank standing at "the last pay phone in New York City," speaking to his ex-wife Gina's answering machine. He begs her to return his call because, "there are still some things to say / there is Marlene of course but / there are also other things to say." Before he can finish his thought, his time runs out, he is cut off, and the scene splits again, this time into three parts.

One area of the stage shows Hank standing at the payphone, "paralyzed;" in another Sheryl rehearses her audition monologue. The third location is the hospital, where Lydia's father has died. This triptych shows us all the characters of the play in different places at roughly the same moment, wrestling with the problems that will dog them throughout the rest of the play.

Hank continues to pursue reconciliation—or at least communication—with Gina, and gets nowhere. Sheryl pours her heart into a Shakespearean soliloquy about how far one is willing to go to get what one wants—a speech that will fail to get her what she wants. Hank visits Marlene at the hospital where she continues to elude him; Lydia, falteringly, tries to face the facts of life. In this case, the fact is mortality; later it will be sex.

Following the death of Lydia's father, the action moves forward three days, and next shows us Marlene in her room, playing guitar and composing a song, while, on another part of the stage, Hank and Lydia share coffee and personal information.

In her song, Marlene wonders when it was she "stopped trying," and asks if she should "join a cloister," or just "stop crying."

During the course of what seems like the prelude to a date, Lydia tells Hank that she writes unpublished stories set in "cuspy" places about characters who "cower" and "recoil" a lot. She also informs him of her increasingly-expensive chewing-gum habit and of her recent loss of a job writing "copy for a medical journal." When Hank asks if she has ever been married, she replies, "I've dated briefly . . . Relationships are hard. . . . Sometimes it's easier not to get to know anyone in the first place you know." "You're a goer," Hank observes in response to this information. "Oh, yeah," Lydia replies, "You stay. . . . Stayers are doomed." She then gives him her dead father's "southwestern style belt buckle."

For his part, Hank reveals the grim irony that his mother died after being run down by an ambulance. He also tells her that he both teaches and writes about economics, the writing consisting of, "Books, Articles, Rants / Howls of despair." He has, however, been silent for the past five years because he made "a bad forecast," which may not have been wrong—too soon to tell—but was certainly "depressing." Ever since he finds

that, “I think a lot about things I can’t do anything about.” If it weren’t for his daughter, he declares, he would have killed himself by now.

This split scene draws to an end back in Marlene’s room, where she sings more of her evolving song while wearing a papier-mache mask of God she has made for a class project: “IF I HAD TO GUESS YOUR FEELINGS FOR ME / MY FIRST GUESS WOULD BE SO-SO.”

Splitting again, the scene moves back to the loading-dock behind the opera house with Hank and Sheryl, smoking and, as before, costumed, this time as Ancient Egyptians. We infer that they are now extras in a production of Verdi’s *Aida*.

We learn immediately that Sheryl has failed at her crucial audition. In fact, the auditioners stopped her at the seventh line of her speech, an embarrassingly swift dismissal. “I just feel this um / Woe right now,” she says. To which Hank responds that he hates all out-of-control feeling.

Sheryl then tries to convince Hank that acting is a difficult proposition, and that even though they’re supernumeraries, they have to make an effort to perform with conviction and truthfulness. Hank, she implies, is failing in that regard. Hank defends himself, revealing the subtext he has invented for his character, whom he has given a name, and supplied with a wife, children, and a pacifist turn of mind.

As they contemplate the art of acting, at which she is desperate to succeed, Sheryl reveals the dire conclusion she has reached about life, namely that it, “just teaches you it’s bad to want things. . . . That’s what I’ve learned so far / Wanting things causes pain.” Whether she knows it or not, Sheryl here is affirming the second of Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths: suffering is the product of desire. But rather than launching her on the road to Nirvana, this realization simply plunges her into deeper anguish.

Trying to alleviate her “woe,” Hank asks her to perform her audition piece for him as a way of showing her excellence as an actor (not “actress,” Sheryl insists). She proceeds to deliver the piece “very, very well” as the stage directions inform us. Hank applauds, but Sheryl tells him to stop, assuming he is merely patronizing her. But he insists his admiration is sincere. She allows herself to be convinced, and proceeds to demonstrate her understanding of Shakespeare’s verse by noting that, “He uses a lot of enjambment. . . . It’s when a thought . . . continues onto the next line “because that’s how thoughts work.” In other words, thoughts don’t conform to the tidy architecture of regular verse lines, but have lives of their own that leap from line to line. They make transitions; they’re “cuspy.”

Hank then announces that he’s going out on a date, with Lydia we assume, and that he’s anxious about it because he “can’t remember how to do any of it. . . . I haven’t been on a date in twenty-three years / I haven’t kissed anyone in . . . . years.” Estranged wife Gina, he reveals, “wasn’t much of a kisser.” Sheryl then declares

herself a “great kisser,” and proceeds to demonstrate her skill with Hank. The exercise is a success, the stage directions telling us that they both find it “nice.”

With his first kiss in years behind him, Hank announces that he has acquired a land line at his apartment, “In case Gina calls. . . .” “That’s messed up,” Sheryl says in reply, reminding us of what Lydia has said in the previous scene about Hank: “Stayers are doomed.”

The scene on the loading dock comes to an end as Sheryl discovers that she has burned a hole in her costume, and the action shifts to Hank’s apartment and Marlene’s bedroom. We have been to Marlene’s before, and as in previous scenes, she is playing her guitar and composing a song. This, however, is our first view of Hank’s apartment, which the stage directions tell us is “gross—dirty and depressing.” We recall that Hank earlier told his daughter that his place was only temporary, transitional—another of those “cuspy” places. This space includes unpacked suitcases and boxes, “a mattress with no box spring on the floor, a sheet with no under sheet,” a refrigerator holding only a carton of spoiled milk. It has none of the features of a home: order, permanence, the touch of personal care. And it is here that Hank has invited Lydia for their first date. The odds of a good outcome seem unfavorable.

At the outset, Lydia hands Hank the papier-mache head of God that we saw earlier in Marlene’s room. It seems the girl has left it outside her father’s door. The date then proceeds. Both being unpracticed at the rituals of courtship, they circle awkwardly around the social and sexual protocols of the situation. To kiss or not to kiss? To share a drink or not to share a drink? Getting nowhere on these matters, they begin talking about their personal circumstances.

Lydia is moving out of her apartment, possibly leaving the city, though she dreads the necessity of driving that will entail because she has a tendency to follow the car in front of her whether it’s going her way or not.

Hank, we learn, has been in this dismal place for fourteen months, and still the suitcases and boxes remain unpacked. Possibly the milk has also been there that long.

About Lydia we discover that its seven years since she has kissed someone; that she used to smoke a lot of marijuana; that she’s never had sex. Given the heavy pot-smoking, a fairly reliable aphrodisiac, Hank finds this fact quite surprising. But Lydia tells him that being high always made her philosophical, determined to have a “meaningful” experience. Unfortunately, every time she was on the cusp of consummation, “something else happened to prevent it from happening. . . . as the years went on . . . I just got sort of paralyzed.”

As they jointly meditate about their foibles and failures, “Lydia leans in to kiss him. They figure it out, sort of. They fumble around and wind up with their shirts off. Lydia still wears her bra.” As they continue to make out, the phone rings. Caller ID tells Hank its Gina, his estranged wife. And he takes the call. So much for the date.

There follows a bitter telephonic wrangle, of which we hear only Hank's side. At its climax, he tells Gina that he still loves her, as Lydia, wearing her parka over her now naked chest, sits and listens. Once again, Eros knocks at her door but doesn't enter.

Gina hangs up on Hank; Lydia collects her purse and heads for the exit, but pauses to pick up Marlene's God head. "I think this should be mine," she says, and leaves.

Marlene resumes her song: "THE UNIVERSE IS A MESSED UP PLACE / . . . I BROADCAST SPEECHES ON HOW TO FIX IT / FROM HERE AT THE EDGE OF MY BED."

Another scenic splitting yields the image of three of the four characters—Marlene excepted—on the phone. Hank is at the payphone, and Lydia and Sheryl are at separate locations. We hear Sheryl's voice as a recording on Hank's answering machine. Hank and Lydia are talking to each other.

Sheryl tells a long story about a bizarre turn of events at her last performance of *Götterdämmerung*. Having heard and reheard Wagner's fantastic tale of a magic ring, Rhinemaidens, dragons, giants, gods, and magic helmets, she says that she "came to a great realization. . . and I heard myself say quietly at first . . . I want that ring. . . ." "And as the realization became more powerful, she became loud enough for the entire theater to hear her, proclaiming, "The Ring was engraved with Exactly One Word / SHERYL / AND SHERYL WANTS THAT RING." With that declaration, she leapt off stage, out the door, and down the street, pausing only to phone Hank with her news. But she only reaches his answering machine.

Meanwhile, Hank is on the phone with Lydia, proposing to read to her a poem he has written. Lydia, however, has her own agenda, which doesn't include listening to that poem. Nonetheless, Hank regales her with it. The name of it is "Uncle," as in the phrase "cry uncle," which means to give up or surrender.

Say  
Who is that guy  
Looking at you at me  
Across the room  
The look on his face is what  
Does he know  
We don't  
I'm just gonna say it  
Uncle  
Uncle  
Uncle  
Uncle  
Uncle

He makes a bid for Lydia's admiration by pointing out his use of "enjambment," the fancy word he just learned from Sheryl.

Sheryl, at this point, begs Hank, via his answering machine, to tell her what to do with her life now that she seems to have destroyed her future as an actor, the "one thing" she "was born to be."

Amid these conversations, we hear Marlene singing: "OHHH / THE UNIVERSE IS A MESSED UP PLACE / AND THERE'S NOWHERE THAT'S SAFE TO TREAD."

Hank learns yet again about the hazards of the universe when Lydia responds to his poem by asking for her bra back as well as the fancy buckle she gave him earlier. And she also wants him to give up—to erase—any memories he might have of her breasts. Having demanded the dissolution of whatever connection they may have had, she declares her emotional sovereignty and affirms the value of her life: "I don't feel foolish. . . . And it's Not against the law to be a late bloomer. . . . And if I die tomorrow I will Not be full of profound questions regarding whether or not I even / scratched the Surface of the Surface of this thing called life on earth. . . . And maybe you did me a favor / And maybe this experience will inspire me in different ways . . . And maybe I'll be all right and maybe I won't be all right / But Maybe I Will so . . . Thanks"

Their conversation ends after she extracts a promise from him that he will mail her the bra and the belt buckle—the latter wrapped inside the former—in a big envelope. The ensuing silence is punctuated by Marlene, singing, "IF SOMEONE WERE SMART THEY'D CHARGE ADMISSION TO / YOUR PRETTY LITTLE HEAD."

The play ends where it began, outside a closed door, with Hank on one side and Marlene on the other. As in the first scene, Marlene responds grudgingly to Hank's conversational overtures. Informing him that she has gotten back her SAT, she says, "I give up," virtually quoting her father's poem. "Mediocrity is the new normal / So I've adjusted my goals."

She then informs him that she's been arrested for shoplifting. Distraught, Hank asks, "What do you want your life to be." She doesn't want to discuss this question, but when Hank asserts that she will "go on to do great things," she insists instead that she will wind up doing "a lot of average things. . . . I'm a behind the scenes person dad."

When Hank asks why Gina didn't tell him about the arrest, Marlene comes out with the awful truth: "Because she hates you / Because she's in love with someone else . . . / Because she says she's never been so happy in her entire life." Stunned, Hank says that, "We were trying . . . to equip you . . . Leave you equipped. . . . I want your life to be wonderful. . . . I will love you Marlene / forever I will love you to death."

Marlene, as in the first scene, slides her hand through a narrow opening of the door; Hank takes it, and they both slide down to a sitting position, joined but still separated. Marlene, who earlier was assessing the singability of various words, now asks her

father, “What rhymes with America,” to which his answer is, “Nothing / Nothing rhymes with America.”

Marlene tells her father that her mother “doesn’t want me to talk to you anymore.” As the lights begin to fade, Hank begs her to ask one small favor from his ex-wife:

HANK. Just ask her to say my name  
Will you do that?  
MARLENE. Okay  
HANK. You’re not going to tell her are you?  
MARLENE. Shhh / Shhh / Shhh

### **CHARACTERS.**

**Hank** is the character who ties the parts of the play together. He is Marlene’s father; Sheryl’s fellow Viking; and Lydia’s almost-lover.

Aristotle tells us that characters in a drama define themselves by the choices they make, by the things they decide to do or to avoid. But to understand those choices, we need to know why characters make them: what are their motives, their overarching objectives?

The first scene of the play clearly shows what makes Hank tick. He stands outside the locked door of an apartment, pleading with his daughter to let him in. He wants to know about her teachers, to attend her volleyball games, to take her on a college tour. And he wants her to tell her mother that he still loves her. So Hank’s longing to cross the threshold of that apartment is a metaphor for his ruling motivation: to be let back into the lives of his daughter and estranged wife. Like Adam outside Eden, he is a man who has been expelled from the only world he has known. Unlike Adam, he imagines he can be re-admitted.

In the next scene he indulges in a moment of vapid philosophizing when discussing his coffee habit with Sheryl: “It is what it is,” he pronounces. But this cliché immediately gets turned into something more deeply true and far-reaching. Sheryl asks, “What isn’t what it is?” And Hank’s reply is a revelation: “Everything that matters.” He reveals the essence of his character in three words. What matters to him is exactly *what isn’t*—and what will never be: his re-entry into his lost life as husband and father.

Hank is not unaware of the impossibility of his objective, and at some level he realizes that he needs, as Marlene says, “to move on.” He attempts to show that he’s doing just that by telling her that he’s “going on a date” with somebody “fantastic.” It’s not true; but serves for the moment to demonstrate, as he says, that he is “not pathetic.” Which means that he is just that, and he knows it.

So the pursuit of his overarching and hopeless objective—resuming his lost life—drives him to try to prove that he is not pathetic. And this leads to his date with Lydia, who actually is, in odd ways, fantastic. The date, of course, is a disaster, brought on by

Hank's inability to stop himself from chasing after his unattainable goal. When Gina calls, he instantly abandons Lydia, and plunges into a conversation in which he tells his estranged wife that he still loves her, that her rejection of him might actually be fatal, and that, "I'm hoping you'll say . . . / it's not too late because it's only too late if you say it's too late . . . PLEASE TELL ME IT'S NOT TOO LATE."

So even as he's attempting, by means of his date with Lydia, to demonstrate to himself that he's moving on, and that he's not pitiful, he shows that he's stuck, pitifully, in the same old place.

He ends the play as he began it, outside a door, begging to be let in—a man seemingly incapable of change. As he acknowledged to Lydia, he is a "stayer."

The hospital scenes are the only times when **Marlene** is on stage in full view with other people. Otherwise she is standing behind a closed door, or alone in her room, singing and playing her guitar. And sometimes in her room she wears her papier mache God-mask. Seeking concealment seems to be her prime objective.

Even in the hospital, she tries to avoid her father. At one point, Hank has to plead with her just to look at him: "How About You / look at me Marlene while I look away. . . . I Might Be Begging You To Look At Me Marlene that / might be what I'm doing right now."

It's not difficult to understand why Marlene, a 16-year-old whose parents are going through a bitter divorce, would want to find a refuge from the emotional tumult of her world. All she sees in Hank's attempts to reach out to her are snares that will pull her into the war between her parents. As she makes clear, Gina wants no part of Hank, and wants Marlene to have nothing to do with him either. If she opens up to her father, she betrays and antagonizes her mother; if she complies with her mother, she wounds her father. The only escape is escape: closed doors, solitude, masks.

Immediately following Hank's plea to be looked at, Marlene launches into a discussion of her God-mask:

It's . . . easy because if you just go with whatever fantasy you have of kindness . . . or all-knowingness. . . . It's strangely helpful and illuminating . . . it's strangely comforting even for people like me who aren't easily comforted. . . . My God turned out really good."

The only element in her life about which she expresses satisfaction at any time in the play is this comforting image of a kind and omniscient being that she can hide behind; a being totally different from her angry mother and confused father.

**Lydia**, unlike Hank, is a "goer." She's not married, but she has "dated briefly / Serially / Relationships are hard." But despite the transitory nature of these "relationships," she has sometimes followed her "exes / Just to just to see how they were I don't know/ I

have trouble getting over people / . . . Sometimes it's easier not to get to know anyone in the first place. . . ."

So she has trouble staying with people, and trouble getting over them. In other words, she's playing a zero-sum emotional game. When she gives her late father's belt buckle to Hank early in their brief relationship, she's clearly intent on establishing yet another relationship—one that ends with her demand for the return of that buckle. Again, zero sum.

As with the people she has dated—whom she drops but also follows—she shows a deep streak of ambivalence about having children. "I did want them up until recently or I thought so / But I'm old enough that / I worried the kid would have three heads / And I don't think I could handle that."

She describes the stories she writes as taking place in "transitional spaces / . . . . Stories that are both / interior and exterior / you know / Stories that feel big and small / at the same time."

In the course of her abortive date with Hank, we learn that she has been living in her father's apartment—not her own place—and now must move out. She may leave the city, but dreads the need to go back to driving because she usually finds herself just following the car in front of her rather than heading for her own destination. On the other hand, she observes, "change can be good / Or bad and how are you supposed to know." When Hank says he would like to take back the stupid things he's done, she replies, "I know me too but if / you could actually take all those things back what would you be left with." As to her sex life, she's been on the verge of consummation a number of times, but "every time it seemed like it was about / to happen something else happened to prevent it from happening." Eventually, she "just got sort of paralyzed."

In her last phone conversation with Hank, she issues a sweeping declaration about their relationship and her life: "I saw it for what it was / And as far as I'm concerned it wasn't / . . . And it's Not against the law to be a late bloomer / And the fleetingness of happiness Is part of its charm / . . . And maybe I'll be all right and maybe I won't be all right / But Maybe I Will / So Thanks."

So looking at Lydia, what do we see? A person who wants and doesn't want children; who writes unpublished stories that are interior and exterior, big and small; who has no home of her own; who follows other drivers instead of going her own way; who thinks change can be good or bad; who does and doesn't want to take back the stupid things she's done; who has never had sex despite repeatedly coming to the brink of consummation; who saw her relationship with Hank "for what it was," though she also decides that actually "it wasn't"; who thinks she might—and then again might not—be "all right." What do these mutually-canceling qualities add up to? "A late bloomer," as she puts it. So perhaps her major objective is to continue trying to bloom despite repeated failures; to carry on through the contradictions until she finds something in life that doesn't cancel itself out.

**Sheryl** reveals the essence of her character in her first scene: “I wanted to be an actor and instead I’m a Viking.” The pain of that frustration lies behind virtually everything she says and does; it underlies her conviction that hers has been a life of “pleather.”

Given this thwarted longing, her choice of Lady Macbeth’s Act I scene for her big audition is telling. As the scene begins, Lady Macbeth is reading a letter from her husband informing her that the Witches have prophesied that he will be king. She is elated, but full of “fear” that Macbeth, “too full o’th’ milk of human kindness,” will fail to do what is necessary to gain the crown, namely kill everyone who stands in his way. Then a messenger arrives with the news that Duncan, who now occupies the throne, will be spending the night under her roof. All that’s necessary for Macbeth to seize power is to murder the man who will be his unsuspecting guest. To arm herself for that crime, Lady Macbeth implores “the spirits / That tend on mortal [i.e. deadly] thoughts” to “fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty.” In effect, she is praying to the devil to help her become queen.

Sheryl attributes her sympathy for Shakespeare’s character to the rage they both feel at their “f\*\*ked-up” husbands. But that leaves out an equally important similarity between the two: intense and thwarted ambition.

Perhaps it’s Lady Macbeth’s willingness to do anything to get what she wants—including submitting to demons—that Sheryl finds so attractive? Sheryl’s yearning for success as an actor parallels Lady Macbeth’s desire for royal status and power. Is Sheryl prepared to go to the same extremes to achieve her objective? The stakes are high. At one point, after her audition has failed, she says, “there isn’t anything else I can be / Because I was born to be one thing . . . / And when you’re born to be one thing that’s a problem.” These are her last lines in the play, and they describe a kind of life or death situation. If she can’t be an actor, what can she be? Can she be at all?

Lady Macbeth gets to be queen, but the price she pays is madness and suicide. Sheryl essentially goes mad on stage in the middle of a performance when she seizes the Wagnerian ring and runs from the theater clutching it, declaring it hers. That’s also a kind of suicide—the self-inflicted death of her career. Who would hire her again after such a fit of artistic insanity?

Sheryl’s happiest moment on stage comes when she invites Hank—who hasn’t kissed anyone for years—to practice for his upcoming date with Lydia by kissing her. “I’m a very great kisser,” she declares, and goes on to describe in detail the particulars of her skill. They do kiss, and it’s reasonably successful. But the shadow of failure hangs over her genius as a kisser just as it does over her talent as an actor. Having gotten rid of her “f\*\*k-up” husband, she seems to have no one to kiss herself; while Hank, prepped by her for his encounter with Lydia, nonetheless botches their date, turning their evening into a fiasco.

**THEMES.** The title of the play pretty much tells us what it's about. The answer to the question, "What rhymes with America," is, "nothing."

Every character in this play is like a word looking for a partner to rhyme with.

So what's a "rhyme?" Most simply, it's a juxtaposition of words that draws our attention to the fact that they sound alike. Rhymes demonstrate that words make music together. But in the best rhymes, words don't just sound alike; they mutually enrich their meanings.

Take one of the most beautiful songs from Shakespeare's plays, *Twelfth Night's* "O, Mistress Mine." It's a love poem in which the singer advises a young girl to stay put until her lover shows up: "Trip no further, pretty sweeting; / Journeys end in lovers meeting. . . ." "Sweeting" means something like "sweetheart," and people become sweethearts as a result of meeting, and go on meeting because they are sweethearts. So "sweeting" and "meeting" don't just sound alike; they "rhyme" in a deeper sense: they make sense of each other.

Sadly, nobody finds another to rhyme with in this play. Hank forlornly pursues his daughter and estranged wife, but one constantly fends off his attempts to communicate, while the other attempts to cut him entirely out of her life.

Marlene stays mostly behind doors and masks. She can make the words in her songs rhyme—"oyster" and "cloister" for example. That's a good combination, since oysters do seem to be solitary beings—like her. She lives her life, as she says, essentially alone. In view of the toxic atmosphere around her family, her father's vow to "love her to death" is actually rather disturbing, sounding more like a threat than a blessing. Who would want to rhyme with that?

As to Sheryl, she and Hank hit it off during smoking breaks, but at the most difficult moment of her life, after her freak-out on stage, she doesn't reach him, only his answering machine.

And Lydia, the "late bloomer," has left behind a string of unconsummated relationships and stories that have gone unpublished. If lovers rhyme with lovers and writers with readers, then Lydia is a word standing alone.

The only person we hear about who does make a successful connection with someone else, who discovers another person to rhyme with, is Gina. She's been dating for months, is in love, and has "never been so happy in her entire life." But we hear this from Marlene. Is it true? We have no way of knowing because we never see Gina. Happiness in this play remains invisible.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.

1. Can people “rhyme” with each other?
2. Why does Lydia give Hank her father’s belt buckle and then take it back again? What will she do with it next?
3. Why does Sheryl disrupt the opera performance and grab the ring?
4. What does the physical setting of the first and last scenes tell us about the meaning of the play?
5. Why does Marlene like her God-mask so much?
6. Why does Sheryl choose speeches by Lady Macbeth for her big audition?
7. Why does Lydia always end up just following whatever car she happens to be driving behind?
8. How and why did Hank become a supernumerary (i.e., extra) at the opera? What does it mean to be an “extra?”
9. What kind of relationship will Hank and Marlene have in the future?
10. Will Sheryl ever find success as an actor?