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The Writing of Trauma and the Imagination of Redemption in Pulitzer Prize Family Dramas after 9/11

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Abstract

Introduction: In the aftermath of 9/11, mainstream American theater was criticized for its alleged failure to respond directly to the terrorist attacks and their political repercussions. Yet from 2007 to 2010, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama was awarded consecutively to trauma-centered plays, among which *Rabbit Hole*, *August: Osage County*, and *Next to Normal* employ the white middle-class family as a microcosm to articulate the collective death anxiety, ethical breakdown, and mental distress that defined the post-9/11 era.

Methodology: Drawing on trauma theory and cultural studies, and situating the analysis within the political-cultural context of the late Bush administration, this paper conducts close textual readings of the three plays. It examines their distinct trauma-narrative

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strategies (e.g., the tension between avoidance and obsession, accumulation of death imagery, ghostly metaphor) and their respective visions of redemption (e.g., indigenous cultural counter-model, the attitude of living with trauma) to disclose how these works achieve artistic translation and critical reflection of post-9/11 collective experience.

Results & Discussion: *Rabbit Hole* captures the national dilemma between remembrance and forgetting through a couple's divergent grief over sudden loss. *August: Osage County* exposes the total collapse of family ethics as a mirror of America's social crisis, while the Cheyenne housekeeper Johnna offers a redemptive paradigm rooted in indigenous tradition. *Next to Normal* uses the haunting ghost of a dead son to represent the diffusion of violent trauma and psychological suffering, ultimately advancing a model of healing resistance and existential redemption- learning to live with trauma rather than eradicating it. Together, the three plays demonstrate that post-9/11 cultural identity reconstruction hinges on empathetic engagement with individual trauma, unflinching acknowledgment of societal fractures, and inclusive respect for diverse values.

Conclusion: These three Pulitzer Prize-winning family dramas, through oblique yet incisive micro-narratives, avoid the sensitivities of direct 9/11 representation while producing a powerful artistic translation of the era's collective anxiety and psychological anguish. They reflect mainstream American theater's political commitment to the zeitgeist of the late 2000s and its interrogation of the Bush administration's anti-terrorism framework, offering redemptive imaginations that prioritize survival, empathy, and coexistence over hollow myths of national superiority.

Keywords: Pulitzer Prize family dramas after 9/11; *Rabbit Hole*; *August: Osage County*; *Next to Normal*; trauma;

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