



Pearson
Edexcel

GCE English Literature

Component 1:
Drama

Sweat, Lynn Nottage

An Introductory
Guide





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An overview

Sweat was written by Lynn Nottage in 2014. It went on to win the Pulitzer prize for Drama in 2017 and has been performed in both the USA and the UK. On their [website](#) announcing *Sweat* as the winner, the Pulitzer Prize judges describe Nottage's play as 'a nuanced yet powerful drama that reminds audiences of the stacked deck still facing workers searching for the American dream'.

Set in both 2000 and 2008 in the 'Rust Belt' town of Reading, Pennsylvania, the play revolves around the lives of a group of friends who work at Olstead's, a steel tubing factory/mill. The bar is the main setting, and we see the characters interact, laugh and argue as their jobs, fortunes and lives change over the 8-year period.

Although it is set in the specific location of Reading and in very specific times in US history (2000 and 2008), the play addresses issues that affect everyone – the economy, race relations, workers' rights, relationships, loyalty and regret.



Key themes of the play

- **Change** – the idea of change is an important theme in the play, and it manifests itself in different ways. We are instantly struck by the physical and psychological change in Jason. When we see him in the opening scene in 2008, he has white supremacist tattoos and shouts racial slurs at his Black probation officer. However, when he is then seen in the bar in 2000, he is friends with Chris, an African-American, which demonstrates how much he has changed in the intervening years. Likewise, many of the workers change from 2000 in terms of their physical well-being. Tracey goes from being in full time employment to unemployed and a drug user. We also see how Brucie, Cynthia's husband, underwent this change when he was losing his job in 2000. As well as the physical impact of change, the theme of change is represented in the working conditions of the friends. They go from having hard, but steady and well-supported jobs in 2000, to either non-existent or less well-paid and insecure jobs. This is due to a change in both the law with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and also political and economic change in the country. These changes in circumstances, which are largely out of the control of the group of friends, then cause a change in the dynamics and nature of their personal relationships with each other and their families.
- **Nostalgia and regret** – linked to the theme of change, the theme of nostalgia and regret is a strong theme in the play. By switching between 2000 and 2008 throughout the play, we as an audience are able to see the characters in happier times. In 2000, they sit in the bar and reminisce about both their and their families' jobs at the steel mill. Although it is hard, they appreciate the stability of the job, the union benefits and the support it has given to their families. They even question Chris, who wants to give up his job and go to college, as it is a safe and secure job. They have a lot in common and talk about life past and present working in the factory fondly. Cynthia is also saving for a holiday in Panama, Jessie talks about travelling around the world and Jason wants to retire at 50 with his pension. Even Stan, who has a limp and cannot work in the factory due to an accident, remembers his time there warmly. However, this nostalgia turns to regret. After the mills start cutting down on hours and employing non-union, cheaper workers, everyone's hours are cut, and others lose their jobs, and their hopes and dreams die. Jason and Chris attack Oscar as he becomes one of the cheaper workers at the factory and all of the workers are left to think 'what if' about their life choices and to regret decisions and actions they took before their livelihood and way of life was turned upside down.
- **Relationships** – relationships, and the importance of relationships, are a key element of the play. All of the characters are interconnected with each other either by familial ties or through long friendships. There is no one character who stands out more than the other and the ensemble nature of the play ensures that the audience is able to see how, much like in real life, no one is good or evil – everyone is just trying to get on with their lives the best they can. In the first scenes in 2000, we can see that Tracey and Cynthia, although they are very different to each other, are close friends who support each other. Cynthia is keen to go for a promotion and Tracey supports her and goes for it herself too. Their relationship is then irrevocably broken when Cynthia is promoted and after Jason and Chris go to prison. Another interesting relationship which develops is the one between Stan and Oscar. In 2000, Stan and



Oscar both work in the bar together. Oscar is a young Colombian-American who is working for a minimum wage.



When Jason and Chris fight with Oscar, Stan is also injured and suffers a brain injury. In the scenes in the bar in 2008, it is revealed that Oscar is now not only the manager of the bar, but that he looks after Stan as ‘that is what you do’. Unlike Tracey and Cynthia, who have lost the close bond with each other and with their own sons, Stan and Oscar have been able to bond and support each other in adversity.

- **Work, poverty and status** – the concepts of work and working for a living is a key element of the play. It is also linked to the status it gives you in life. In 2000, most of the workers are established at the mill and although the work has an impact on them physically, they feel they can retire and enjoy their lives in some comfort. They are all on the same level and feel that they are equal to each other. However, Cynthia’s promotion – and her description of the far better working conditions of the managers – causes discomfort and conflict within the friendship group. It also allows us as an audience to see how the lower paid workers are not given the same benefits and that the work is physically demanding for the mill workers. Through the character of Brucie, Cynthia’s ex-husband, we can also see the impact that closing the mills and cutting down on jobs can have on the social status of a person. He is out of work and asking for money and feels as though he has no purpose. By 2008, all of the other workers are feeling this and that the future they thought they had has now gone. Nottage’s play not only highlights the financial impact of poverty, but also the physical and mental impact of it on people’s lives as they struggle with addiction, depression and hopelessness.
- **Racial identity** – Nottage describes each character in the character list in terms of their racial identity, e.g., African-American, white American of German descent, Colombian-American etc. In the opening scenes of 2000, the group of friends seem a strong united community; Jason and Chris are friends as are their mothers, Tracey and Cynthia. However, the audience know from the opening scene set in 2008 that Jason has become a white supremacist and is no longer friends with Chris. As the play unfolds, Cynthia’s promotion causes a rift with Tracey, who blames her for the decisions of the management to cut their wages and claims she only got the promotion over her because she is Black. The treatment of Oscar is perhaps the most shocking; Tracey claims he doesn’t belong at Olstead’s or indeed in Reading and threatens him which eventually climaxes with the fight that leads to Stan’s injury and Jason and Chris’s imprisonment. Nottage exposes to the audience how the community of Reading is fractured along racial lines because of the economic hardships suffered by the characters. The friendship between Oscar and Stan at the end of the play, and the hints of rapprochement between Chris and Jason, leave the audience with the hope that these divisions are not irreversible.



Literary features that shape meaning

- **Dialogue and naturalistic language** – one of the distinctive ways Nottage shapes meaning is through her use of dialogue and naturalistic language. The dialogue is short and fast with many times when the characters' dialogue overlap and they talk over each other. This creates a sense of naturalism but also a feeling that the group are close knit and are connected to each other. Likewise, the dialogue unapologetically has a lot of swearing and use of expletive language. This adds the naturalistic tone of the play and makes it feel more authentic and real. The characters also talk in contractions and with a shorthand using phrases such as 'useta' or 'K'. Although we might get used to the characters' swearing, Nottage ensures that the racial slurs stand out and still shock the audience. This underlines that this language, and the views that are underneath the use of such phrases, are highlighted as unacceptable and something which needs to be addressed in the play.
- **Characterisation to show prejudices** – Nottage uses her characters to shape meanings within the play and to represent certain themes and issues. The character of Oscar, a young Colombian-American barman in 2000, is beaten up and racially abused for taking a non-union job in the factory. This job, which was rejected for being too low paid by Jason, was more than Oscar has ever earned which brings the differing treatment and payment of workers into the play. Oscar's character and his treatment by the others also highlights what Nottage describes as some 'ugly truths' about the 'complexity of our multi-cultural country and crisis'. However, by 2008, Oscar is in a much better place which may also show that the 'American Dream', which is depicted as being lost in the play, may be achievable, but only after a tremendous struggle. Both Tracey and Jason are used to show the underlining prejudices to other races. Tracey in 2000 stresses a number of times that she isn't 'prejudiced' but then talks about the Puerto Rican workers and immigrants who are getting work in the state. When we first meet Jason in 2008, he has white supremacist tattoos, and is racist towards his parole officer, which emphasises his huge change from when we first meet him in 2000.
- **Staging and setting** – Nottage's use of the bar as the main set for the play helps to shape meaning as it allows the audience to see the characters in a relaxed setting and to hear their thoughts about life and what is going on in the world. The fact that they are drinking alcohol and celebrating in some scenes also allows them to talk in an unguarded and realistic way and to show the way 'real' workers were acting and thinking. The innovative use of news headlines and dates also helps to shape the meaning. Nottage gives the date, temperature and the main news of the day at the start of each scene. By giving the national headlines and then the more local headlines, it allows the audience to see both the disconnect and the impact global decisions can have on everyone's lives. In the production staged at the Donmar Warehouse in London in 2017, they used a projection design which showed a news ticker that ran across the set. This was accompanied by audio clips of archive news reports. Therefore, the audience were able to read the news clips and relate them to the action being played out on the stage.



- **Timelines and foreshadowing** – Nottage’s use of alternating timelines allows the audience to see and empathise with the characters and their changing situations. The opening scene, which is set in 2008, is instantly intriguing as Jason and Chris have clearly been in trouble and have committed a crime which we know nothing about, and this allows us to watch the circumstance unfold. The moving of the timelines also allows the audience to feel pathos for the characters as we see their hopes and dreams in 2000 being dashed and left unrealised by 2008. The change in time also allows for some foreshadowing. Brucie is in the process of losing his job in 2000 and turns to his friends for money and begins to become reliant on drink and drugs; this then happens to Tracey in 2008. There are also conversations in the bar in 2000 – the discussion of Freddie burning down in house in 2000 – which then begin to make more sense to the group in 2008 when they are faced with the same dire financial circumstances.



Contextual factors

- **The author's own life and influences (Langston Hughes – interviewing people)** – Lynn Nottage is a prolific and acclaimed American playwright having written many plays and has won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama twice. Her plays focus on the rights of women, low-paid workers and the Black community around the world. To prepare for writing *Sweat*, she interviewed a number of workers in Reading, Pennsylvania to gain some insight into their lives. These interviews were used to inform the play but were also turned into a multi-media performance called *This is Reading, This is Home*.
- **NAFTA and unions** – the characters in the play refer to NAFTA and the role of the unions. NAFTA stands for the North America Free Trade Agreement. It was set up in 1994 to ensure that there were no tariffs or charges for goods between Canada, Mexico and the United States. Whilst this meant that goods were largely cheaper, it also meant that many US manufacturing jobs were lost as they could be done cheaper elsewhere and that wages were suppressed and/or kept very low for the workers. Many manufacturing workers are part of a union which is set up to protect their rights and to ensure that they get vital services such as pensions and health benefits. These unions are not as powerful as they once were as workers have been forced to accept lower wages and fewer benefits in order to keep their jobs.
- **The American Dream** – Nottage highlights the 'American Dream' – an idea and concept which is aspirational and implies that anyone can come to America and succeed if they work hard enough, and how this does not apply to everyone. She also hints that the way that American workers are treated ensures that they may never have a chance of achieving this dream, no matter how hard they work.
- **Reading, Pennsylvania and the Rust Belt** – the play is set in Reading, Pennsylvania which is a real city and one in which Nottage spent over two years in researching the play. It has a large unemployment rate due to the loss of many manufacturing and steel worker jobs and is the poorest city of its size in America. Nottage describes Reading as 'a microcosm of what was happening.' Pennsylvania is one of the states known as a 'Rust Belt' state. This term is used to describe states in the Midwest of America which were known for a lot of steel production and this production has declined dramatically, leaving the area to decline or 'rust'.
- **Donald Trump and American politics** – many of the reviews, and Nottage's comments in interviews, mention that *Sweat* reflects the situation which led to Donald Trump being elected as the US president in 2016. The play is set in 2000 and 2008 and Nottage points out how many of the lower paid workers were becoming more and more frustrated by politics and legislature which was leaving them behind. By disenfranchising the working classes of America, an environment was arguably created which made Donald Trump, who pledged to 'Make America Great Again', more and more popular as he promised more jobs and more prosperity for United States citizens.



Further information and reading

Sweat by Lynn Nottage (New York, 2017). This edition of the play contains a section outlining the production history and a brief section about the author.

For further information about Lynn Nottage and her thoughts on *Sweat* and the issues it raises, the following links provide some useful background.

- [Lynne Nottage on Sweat](#) – this interview on YouTube shows Lynn Nottage talking about her play and the themes she wanted to introduce.
- [Theatre talk with Lynn Nottage](#) – this 30 minute video is a discussion about *Sweat* and theatre in general with Lynn Nottage on the panel.
- [PBS report on Sweat](#) – this clip from the American channel PBS shows an interview with Nottage as well as footage from the play.
- [Blog from Nick Hern Books](#) – this blog was written by Lynn Nottage and she discusses the themes of *Sweat*.

For reviews and opinions on the stage productions of the play, the following links will provide some useful background.

- [The Guardian](#) – review of the Donmar Warehouse production.
- [Wall Street Journal](#) – this review from the WSJ requires a one-off login but reviews the Broadway production and argues that it explains Donald Trump's win in the 2016 election.
- [Behind the Scenes: creating SWEAT](#) – interview with director Lynette Linton and designer Frankie Bradshaw to discover more about the process behind the production.

For some background reading on the context of the play, the following links are useful:

- [NAFTA](#) – a guide to understanding NAFTA
- [NAFTA](#) – this is another guide to NAFTA and outlines the pros and cons of the agreement.
- [American unions](#) – this article in *The Guardian* looks at how the death of American unions is causing income inequality in the US.
- [The American Dream](#) – this article outlines the main arguments about the American Dream and the history of the idea.
- [Donald Trump](#) – this article from *The New Yorker* requires a free login. It outlines the circumstances which led to the rise of Donald Trump and how he became President.