

next to normal analysis  
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## I. Given Circumstance

### A. Environmental Facts

**1. Geographic Location:** We are on Earth, in the U.S.A, in a suburb of eastern Ohio near the border of West Virginia and Pennsylvania. The majority of the show takes place inside the Goodman house, but it also takes place in a doctor's office, in a piano practice room, at the high school, and a hospital.

**2. Date:** The play takes place in a modern time. It is 2013/2014. We begin in September of 2013 and end on March 1<sup>st</sup> 2014.. DIANA says, "A freak September ice storm with no warning," in the beginning of the play. The next indication of time happens when HENRY says to NATALIE, "We've been going out for nine weeks and three days." Which places us in December. DR. MADDEN then says, "It's been four weeks..." to DIANA regarding the treatment, which places us in January. DIANA then undergoes two weeks of ECT, which places us in mid to late January. HENRY says to NATALIE, "It's been weeks..." and invites her to a spring formal dance on March 1<sup>st</sup>. We are now in early February. There are then mentions from DAN regarding that it's been two weeks. HENRY mentions to NATALIE that, "Tomorrow's the dance." Which means that its February 28<sup>th</sup>. HENRY then shows up for the dance on March 1<sup>st</sup>, which is where the rest of the show takes place.

**3. Economic Environment:** The Goodman family does pretty well for themselves. Dan has a steady well paying job working for an architectural firm. The family is able to pay for all the costs of Diana's years of continued treatment without hurting too terribly much. Money never arises as a factor in her therapy. They are able to pay for family vacations, Natalie to take piano lessons, and a fairly nice suburban home.

**4. Political Environment:** The political environment is less of a right wing vs. left wing type of world. The politics of the play lie in the treatment of people suffering from mental illness, including factors such as medication and the relationship between the doctor and patient. There is a serious argument to be had regarding the medication of a patient in the play. We see Diana constantly being forced to change medications, to a comedic degree during

*Psychopharmacologist and I*. We also see she doesn't like how it makes her feel empty and numb in *I Miss the Mountains*. However, we do see that they made her more stable and able to function on a day to day basis based on Dan's observations in *It's Gonna be Good*. Natalie of course begins to abuse her mother's drugs, which is a whole other political factor in the show regarding drug abuse, particularly by teenagers. We see this take a destructive affect on Natalie's life, forcing her to lose control and become less motivated and goal oriented. The effects of the drugs, from an outside perspective, on Diana when taken appropriately are deemed as "good," however the same drugs have a "bad" effect on Natalie. But from each of their personal perspectives, the drugs are having a "bad" effect on Diana and a "good" effect on Natalie. This is where the controversy lies in the drug use in the show. It is all a matter of perspective. The Dr. argues that Diana is improving with the drugs, while she feels like she has become a shell of herself. The argument is which is really "improvement."

**5. Social Environment:** The social environment is the show. The family dynamic is the central focus of the show. Each character serves a social role to each other character through one-way or another. Diana is the central character, around which the story and other characters largely revolve. They primarily link back to her and her illness. Dan is her loving supportive partner, Natalie is her replacement child, Gabe is her golden child, Henry is what Dan used to be when they were younger, and the Dr. is an ineffective means to improve her life.

The social interactions are all tainted by Diana's illness. This permeates everything in their lives. She sees and believes fully in the fact that her son is there. The other characters are aware of this, which causes an unnatural circumstance for them to exist in. The characters are trying their best to live "normal" under very un-normal circumstances, thus creating an un-conducive social environment for the family to thrive in.

**B. Previous Action:** Diana and Dan met in their college while trying to complete their undergraduate degrees in architecture. They hit it off and began dating. Diana became pregnant so Dan proposed. They got married and had a baby named Gabriel. Gabe died at the age of eight months old due to an intestinal obstruction. They had their daughter Natalie as a means of "replacing" their son. Diana was diagnosed as bipolar within a year after their son dying. Sixteen years have passed and "it turned out bipolar didn't totally

cover it.” The Goodman family is still trying their best to maintain “normalcy.” Diana has been experiencing hallucinations of her son as if he has been here and aging the entire time. We learn that Dan has also been experiencing the hallucinations of Gabe, but chooses to completely ignore him until the end of the play (*I Am The One Reprise.*)

**C. Polar Attitudes of Characters:** The characters in this show are all dynamic changing characters.

**Diana** begins the show as a dependent wife and mother experiencing hallucinations and bi polar behavior. She feels lonely and angry when she is told that she has a problem and feels that no one could ever understand. She is high strung and anxious. At the end of the show she is grasping control and taking action for her own life. She makes the choice say good bye to her family and hallucinations to do something about her illness. She is feeling stronger and reassured.

**Dan** begins the show as the steadfast loving rock for Diana. He will do anything to keep her afloat and well. He is tired, but will never stop trying to fix things. He is also constantly ignoring any sign of Gabe being “alive.” At the end of the show he is beaten, broken, and lost. He has given into the hallucination. He has lost his strong exterior grip on life and the safety of his wife. He can no longer bury his own troubles underneath everything happening with Diana.

**Natalie** is an obsessively hard worker. She feels anxious and determined at the beginning of the show not to slip into this fucked up life her family has led. She wants to get out of here and away from all of it. At the end of the show, after undergoing some serious dynamics in the middle, she is returned to her original state, but not without change. She has calmed down a bit. She trusts that maybe the world won’t completely destroy her. She believes that there will be some light at the end of the tunnel.

**Henry** is a parallel to Dan, but much younger. He is still full of life and hope for Natalie and his future with her. He will do anything to protect her and has yet to become exhausted like Dan. His significant change results because of watching Natalie’s spiral. He feels guilty for introducing her to drugs at all by first offering her pot. He cleans up and tries harder to save Natalie than he has ever tried to do anything.

**Gabe** and the **Dr.** don’t undergo any large particular change during the show. Gabe is a constant being ever present, and the Dr. serves a larger purpose of representing doctors as a whole.

## II. Dialogue

**A. Choices of Phrases and Sentence Structure:** The characters speak very colloquially. The sentence structure is modern and casual. However, given

that it is mostly song, there is a bit of a difference in analyzing the structure. With basic song structure, you are bound to have repetition of phrases and lines. However, I still think that is an important thing that happens intentionally in this story. The story was chosen to be told through song for a reason and the fact that things get repeated in songs is just as much a factor as any. People always say that when a character repeats something it is because they are trying to get something important across or it's a change in tactic or a number of different things. Everyone has an opinion on why a character might repeat something. Personally, I feel that there is no hard and fast rule about why it is important, so much as that it is. So it could be a new tactic or it could be an emphasis. Whatever it is, it happens a lot in this show and I don't believe that is an accident. It falls on a case-by-case basis, but it is most definitely important and definite each time.

**B. Choice of Images:** The image that is consistently referenced throughout the show is light. There is a ton of "light" imagery. The finale is simply called "Light." The act 1 finale is called "A Light in the Dark." Light is an incredibly important image to the show. It symbolizes so much for these people. It symbolizes hope and tomorrow. A life that they have never known. They have been living in the past for sixteen years. They finally begin to see that they "need some light" if they ever want to make it tomorrow. The light is attempting to permeate their twisted and broken lives.

The above is not to say that it is the only important "image" in the show, but rather to emphasize how incredibly important "light" is to this, not only as a design element, but as an image and an idea.

#### IV: Characters

##### A. Desire:

**Diana:** Diana wants independence. Ever since the death of her son she has been chained down by either his memory, or her husband trying to carry her, or by doctors telling her what to do. She hasn't been able or allowed to live her own life ever since that event.

**Dan:** Dan wants stability. He has been seeking a state of normalcy and stability ever since Gabe's death. He is blocked by a different obstacle at every turn. He's been trying to "hold" his "house together" ever since it became his house.

**Natalie:** Natalie wants love. She wants to feel love and attention, but doesn't know how to accept it when Henry begins to show it to her. She recognizes that she was only born to replace Gabe and has never felt truly loved or valued ever since then. Henry begins to show her

the love she craves, but it is so new for her that she doesn't even know how to begin to accept it.

**Henry:** Henry wants Natalie. He wants Natalie in his life as a partner and he wants to help save her from the tragedy that she lives in. He is blocked by Natalie's unwillingness to accept help or love.

**Gabe:** Gabe wants control. Gabe is seeking to control and manipulate the lives of the family members. He wants to be ever present in their lives and he wants them to acknowledge his existence, even if it simply in their minds.

**Dr. Fine/Madden:** The Dr. is a tough character to nail down these sort of things for. He serves his purpose in the show as a doctor, but largely he wants to heal Diana. His goal is to heal her by any means and at any cost. He will try any method to heal her, and encourages Diana not to give up on treatment.

#### **B. Will:**

**Diana:** Diana is of an incredibly strong will. She has been fighting her delusions and illness for sixteen years now. She refuses to be kept down by it. She later refuses to accept her memory loss and the holes it left. She wants her life and she won't stop until she finally has it.

**Dan:** Dan is also incredibly strong willed. He has been fighting for the stability and well being of his family for as long as they have been a family. He is unwavering in his goal. Every day is a new challenge and he never weakens his resolve. Even at the end of the show when Diana leaves him with nothing, he still remains strong. He loses his grip a bit, but recognizes that he needs help and seeks it, instead of succumbing to his issue.

**Natalie:** Natalie is of a strong will, when she chooses to apply it. She is incredibly strong willed and independent, as she has had to be for her entire life. However, when it comes to the pressures of drug abuse, she has a very weak will. She fights Henry for the whole second act, despite her knowing that he is the right choice. Her will is in flux, but like her parents, she is of a strong resolve.

**Henry:** Henry is also strong willed and consistent. He is unwavering in his pursuit of Natalie from the first time they speak in the practice room. She rejects him at every corner after she begins abusing drugs, but he still refuses to give up and asks that she doesn't give up on him. He will seek Natalie and to help Natalie for his entire life.

**Gabe:** Gabe isn't real. He is dead. The persona we see in this show is a character in Diana and Dan's minds. However, this character is ridiculously strong willed. He refuses to leave them alone.

Presumably, Dan has been ignoring Gabe for the last sixteen years, but he won't let him go. Gabe has been holding onto the two of them for this entire time and refuses to leave or be forced away. Despite medication and treatment, he always finds his way back into the center of things.

**Dr. Fine/Madden:** The Dr. is of a strong will, but not stronger than any of the family members. He is ultimately defeated in his goal of healing Diana, as she chooses to walk out on him. He is unable to keep her and save her. He doesn't fight her enough to keep her. This is obviously professional of him, but the family members are all of stronger wills than he.

### C. List of 7 Adjectives:

**Diana:** Strong, scattered, sexy, lost, tortured, unnerved, broken.

**Dan:** Tired, hopeful, resilient, ignorant, dedicated, unwavering, stoic.

**Natalie:** Anxious, hard-worker, scared, angsty, independent, focused, troubled.

**Henry:** Loving, dedicated, romantic, sweet, optimistic, stoner, philosophic.

**Gabe:** Manipulative, controlling, dominant, charming, charismatic, determined, active.

**Dr. Fine/Madden:** Professional, eccentric, rock star, committed, confident, calming, dynamic.

## V. Idea

**A. Meaning of Title:** *Next to Normal* is about the life the Goodman family is living. They are the "perfect living family, so adoring," but there is something that's not perfect about them. They are trying to live a "normal life," but they have "no clue what that is." From the beginning of the show we witness a family, just doing its best to live "normally." Its "just another day" in their house and everything is great and normal and there is definitely nothing wrong here. But they are not "normal," and there is definitely something wrong here. Its this attempt to live normal that factors into the meaning of the title. Natalie states that she doesn't "need a life that's normal. That's way too far away. But something...next to normal would be okay...Close enough to normal- to get by." This is the recognition that they are not "normal" and will never be "normal," particularly if they keep trying to pretend they are/could be. They will be better served leading a life that's "next to normal," and accepting the good and the bad that comes with that.

## **B. Philosophical Statements in the Play:**

- “Cause what doesn’t kill me doesn’t kill me, so fill me up for just another day.”
- “They say love is blind – but believe me, love is insane.”
- “Most people who think they’re happy just haven’t thought about it enough. Most people who think they’re happy are actually just stupid.”
- “Cause crazy is perfect and fucked up is perfect.”
- “Day after day...wishing all our cares away...trying to fight the things we feel...But some hurts never heal. Some ghosts are never gone, But we go on. We still go on.”
- “Day after day, give me clouds and rain and gray. Give me pain if that’s what’s real. It’s the price we pay to feel. The price of love is loss, but still we pay. We love anyway.”
- “Day after day. We’ll find the will to find our way, knowing that the darkest skies will some day see the sun, when our long night is done. There will be light.”
- “When we open up our lives, sons and daughters, husbands, wives and fight that fight...There will be light. There will be light. There will be light. There will be light.”

**C. Super-objective with Explanation:** The super objective of this play is to embrace your reality as it exists. The characters in the show are constantly denying the truths and given circumstances of their world and reality. Diana can’t accept that it’s an illness, Dan can’t accept that he can’t save her, Natalie can’t accept that her life could be ok. These are all truths and facts of their world, but they are striving for what is “normal.” All of their lives are somewhere outside of “normal.” They’re holding strong external frameworks of how their lives should be, when they should be striving for acceptance of what their lives are. Not what they “should be.” At the end of the show when each of them finally comes to terms with the facts of their realities they are able to see that it’s not so bad. They find that their less than “normal” lives are actually as manageable. They find that they can live and fight every day to keep going. They don’t become complacent in their circumstances, but they accept that it is where they are. They are no longer fighting for the external appearance of “normalcy.”

**D. Metaphor with Explanation:** Next to Normal is a picture frame with a family photo inside. The frame is perfect. It has four sharp edges and looks clean and pristine. It’s polished. It gives the appearance of structural stability and strength. The photo inside the frame is ruined. You can still see the remains of a beautiful family photo, but it has been torn, and crinkled. Its edges are burned. It has rips that have been reconnected by tape. The picture

has been furiously torn out of this frame and placed back in over and over so that it doesn't appear as damaged as it is. The glass in the frame is shiny and polished and clean. There is a single small crack in the glass though. A hairline fracture that may go unnoticed, but if seen, completely ruins the appearance of strength and stability that the frame was. The crack is largely passed over because of the attention to the angular, perfect frame and the attention to the damaged ruined picture inside. But all three parts are equally important.

## **VI. Fuchs "Visit To A Small Planet"**

### **A. Questions**

#### **1. What is space like here?**

The world takes place in a variety of interior settings. Primarily the Goodman home. The space is sharp, angular. It reflects an idealized outward image that no one can maintain.

#### **2. How does time operate on this planet?**

Time moves in a linear fashion, but at a much more rapid pace than our world. We take large jumps in time. It is a bit frantic and scattered like the characters.

#### **3. What shapes convey tone on this planet?**

The shapes are very angular in nature. The world is sharp and rigid. There are 90 degree angles and pointed edges to convey crispness over a ruined interior.

#### **4. Is this a public world or a private world?**

The world exists privately within the confines of the Goodman family and their immediate associates, Henry and their Dr.

#### **5. Who has power on this planet?**

Many characters believe they have power or are in control on this planet. In fact I would say that every character believes to hold power except for Natalie. In actuality, Gabe is the individual with the power of the world the family lives in.

#### **6. What does the world demand of me?**

It demands empathy. It demands that I journey with these people through their tragedy and feel empathy. It asks me to discover light in the void of darkness.

#### **7. What is the mood of this planet?**

The planet is tragic. The inhabitants are faced with unimaginable grief and struggle and are forced to find their lives in that. The mood is bleak, but hopeful.

### **8. What does the world sound like?**

The world is full of music. It is aggressive and violent, but also soothing and reminiscent. It is fueled by passion and emotion.

### **9. How do people appear on this planet?**

People are wearing masks. They are not what they feel. They are frames standing still and “normal” hiding from their broken, tortured insides. They refuse to ever let anyone see them cry. Metaphorically speaking.

### **10. What is language like on this planet?**

Language is blunt. Characters are unafraid to speak their minds here. They have a need to say what they want to say.

## **B. Images**

**First:** A happy, steady family looking forward to another day of life.

**Second:** A loosely held together family fumbling through the dark to survive.

**Third:** A broken, scattered family believing a light will save them from the darkness.

## **VII: William Ball’s “A Sense of Direction”**

### **A. Elements:**

1. Theme
2. Plot
3. Character
4. Language
5. Spectacle

## **VIII: Developmental Dramaturgy**

**A. Play’s Intention:** Next to Normal intends to strike you. It shows us that “The price of love is loss. But still we pay.” That sentence is so important to me. It speaks volumes about this show. It intends to prove that love and loss can not be separated, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t love. It doesn’t mean we shouldn’t feel. It seeks to prove that feelings and emotions exist and should be felt. The good ones and the bad ones. We should not seek to be “normal” shells of people or perfect frames with no inside. We should exist as people that feel and struggle and love and hurt and everything in between.

**B. Play’s Issues:** Next to Normal deals with an enormous wealth of issues. It tackles mental illness and the family dynamic at the forefront, but is also about grief, closure, love, loss, drug abuse, patient/Dr. relationships, and acceptance. Mental illness is such a broad term to provide as a theme though.

More specifically the show explores, depression, manic bi-polar disorder, and severe anxiety.

**C. The Experience:** If we do our jobs then the audience will feel hope. They should leave the theatre with a renewed sense of hope and “light” in their lives. They will have witnessed the tragic events, but at the end of it all they are reminded that life will go on and “there will be light.” Life hurts us, beats us, breaks us, attempts to destroy us, but at the end of all of that shit, “there will be light.”

#### **IX. Additional thoughts:**

-There is a quote in *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway that comes to mind throughout this analysis. It says, “The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong in the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry.”

The people living in this world, in this house are strong, brave, fighters that the world is seeking to break and kill. They are put through hell because of how resilient and refusing to die they are. They are broken and stronger in those broken places. And at the end of the play, rather than rolling over and accepting death, they resolve to keep fighting. They resolve to push on and find a better day. This quote didn’t fit anywhere in my analysis, but I felt the need to include it and an explanation. It resonates with me and with this play a bit. It might be a bit too bleak because it doesn’t quite turn upward at the end like the show does with a touch of hope, but the sentiment is just too strong for me not to comment on.

-It is interesting to note that Dan never sings a true solo in the entire show. His one number that is as close as it gets is “I’ve Been.” This song is invaded by Gabe in the middle though. Dan is never truly alone for the entire show. He always is aware of Gabe’s presence, but he chooses to ignore him.