# ‘I’m full of gaps’: Depression in Florian Zeller’s *The Son*

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**Abstract**

Florian Zeller’s play *The Son* (2019) explores how parents may be complicit in destabilizing their children’s mental health, in addition to the impact that children who do not conform to ideal norms have on the lives of their parents. Through its cryptic dialogue, the text suggests that depression is a state that exists partly beyond linguistic representation. This article posits that Zeller’s characteristic modes of language use and storytelling, brought to life here in Christopher Hampton’s English translation, provide an apposite vehicle for the on-stage representation of depression.

Florian Zeller is an acclaimed contemporary French playwright, whose plays (translated into English by Christopher Hampton) frequently concern the domestic tribulations of upper middle-class families. *The Son* (2019) is a play in his "family trilogy," together with *The Mother* (2010) and *The Father* (2012). Beneath the overarching theme of family and its discontents, each play has a specific subtheme. *The Mother* centres on a matriarch's struggle with feelings of abandonment and isolation as her family grows up. In *The Father,* Zeller considers the impact of dementia on memory and, by proxy, identity. *The Son* explores how an adolescent boy's mental illness threatens to destabilise his family.

In this trio of plays, Zeller is concerned with the ways in which characters' encounters with visceral, everyday life experiences affect our relationships with ourselves and others, in addition to the potential opportunities they signify for domestic life to unravel. The plays concern a specific type of family—white, middle class, and somewhat entrenched, as we will see, in the bourgeois narrative of the happy childhood. Against such an enshrined sense of normalcy, Zeller's work explores a single core theme from a variety of different lenses. In so doing, he draws on various structural devices, the most obvious of which is the replaying of key scenes, albeit with different outcomes. This highlights the myriad possibilities and realities at work that characters may experience, and from a dramatic perspective is an effective, albeit at times bewildering strategy. Similarly notable is the role played in Zeller's writing by pauses in dialogue, hesitations in characters' utterances, silences and gaps in time, memory and understanding. The nature of language and its ability to represent (or fail to represent) one's internal crises and turmoil is one of *The Son's* key themes.

Various forms of unsettled mental states, or more specifically, the many ways in which the mind can fail us and cast doubt over our pasts, actions and ultimately, who we are, arise in each of these three plays. In *The Mother,* the titular character's loneliness escalates throughout the play, until it reaches a crescendo of delusional paranoia. In *The Father,* the elderly man's dementia becomes a tool through which Zeller explores broader ideas about the instability of memory and the subjectivity of reality. *The Son* is more overtly interested in the nature of

mental illness itself. In its examination of a family languishing in the messy aftermath of a divorce, the play considers how parents may be complicit in destabilizing their children’s mental health. In addition, it examines the impact of children who do not conform to ideal norms on the lives of their parents.

In terms of broader scholarly debates surrounding mental health and literature, it is crucial to consider the way(s) in which, as the literary critic Kia Richmond suggests, “beliefs about mental illness are shaped by culture” (4). A play such as *The Son* may therefore act as a provocative means by which key discourses around mental health in the contemporary period are explored, assessed, and potentially revised.

## A Diagnosis of Depression

Zeller highlights factors that would typically warrant a clinical diagnosis of depression in his depiction of Nicolas, the eponymous son. These broadly correspond to the DSM-5 definition of depression—a mood disorder that presents with, among other things: “diminished interest, or pleasure in almost all activities, feelings of restlessness, fatigue, loss of energy, feelings of worthlessness and recurrent thoughts of death” (APA 161).[1] As the play progresses, the audience bears witness to Nicolas’s increasing level of suffering in this regard. Act One begins *in medias res* with the arrival of Anne at her ex-husband Pierre’s flat. The disjointed dialogue is suggestive of her inability to give voice to her son’s situation:

> PIERRE. What are you doing here?
> *Anne doesn’t answer.*
> Anne, I’m speaking to you…
> ANNE. I…
> PIERRE. Yes?
> ANNE. I don’t know, I…
> PIERRE. You don’t know?
> ANNE. No sorry, I mean. I don’t know where to begin. I…
> PIERRE. Has something happened?
> (Zeller 11)

[1] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th Edition.

Foreshadowing the way Nicolas will later struggle to explain the depression in which he is seemingly mired, for Anne, her son's state is something unnamable, and thereby unknowable. The conversation continues as Pierre makes further attempts to elucidate the specific nature of his wife's disturbance:

> PIERRE. What's the matter?
> ANNE. It's Nicolas.
> PIERRE. Oh yes? Has something happened?
> ANNE. Yes. He's not well. And I'm not well either. It's too difficult. I can't manage it.
> PIERRE. You can't manage what?
> ANNE. It's just impossible.
> (12)

Anne's use of language is enigmatic—why the evasive "it"? What might this pronoun, which manages to denote something simultaneously specific and ambiguous, conceal? Through this cryptic exchange, the play begins by suggesting that depression is, in essence, uncommunicable—a state that exists beyond linguistic representation. In this way, Zeller's portrayal of the condition echoes psychologist Robert Cole's description in his study *Adolescent Suicide*, in which he suggests there exists a "cloak of silence" (45) surrounding depression (and in particular childhood / adolescent depression), which he views as being an attempt to retain a culturally important sense of a happy childhood—supposedly a space free of such concerns. This is something Pierre buys into at first, neither able to bring himself to name Nicolas's condition as the depression it so clearly is, nor understanding how a middle-class child with a previously "sunny" (39) disposition, who has had every advantage in life, has fallen victim to it. "What is it," he asks his son in the play's second act, "about your life that isn't working?" (19).

## Language and Representation

Nicolas's state is no less a source of confusion for Nicolas himself, who, like his mother, has trouble putting his affliction into words. This is pertinent because, as Femi Oyebode asserts in *Madness at the Theatre*, a parallel can be observed between the omissions, dualisms and ambiguities of certain kinds of dramatic language and the psychiatrists' interpretive toolkit:

> Attention to language, to the explicitly stated, to the overt meaning, the unsaid and covert meaning, the *mis*-said and *mis*-heard are part of the stock in trade of psychiatry. Dramatic dialogue, particularly since Henrik Ibsen and in Harold Pinter, relies on the ambiguity of language, the very aspects that psychiatrists too work with in the clinic. (6, emphasis in original)

Nicolas's initial communication unfolds in an "unsaid and covert" register. His brief utterances and anxious, dismissive body language (nail biting, sighs and shrugs) when questioned by his father about his increasingly frequent absences from school are telling, as are the pauses in the dialogue between father and son which increase in frequency as their exchange continues:

> PIERRE. You can't decide to stop going to school just like that. It's not an option. Do you hear what I'm saying?
> NICOLAS. Yes.
> *Pause.*
> PIERRE. Are you having problems?
> *Nicolas sighs.*
> What? Why are you sighing?
> NICOLAS. No reason.
> PIERRE. Nicolas, I can't help you if you won't tell me anything. And stop biting your nails like that.
> *Pause.*
> I've spoken to your mother. She tells me you don't sleep

> at night. That you pace up and down in your room. That you… What is it you're up to?
> NICOLAS. Nothing.
> *Pause.*
> (Zeller 17)

Such silences, gaps in dialogue and ellipses are suggestive of the dramatist Harold Pinter and his "comedies of menace" (Raby 52), replete with pervasive subtexts of unease. As with the Pinter pause, as noted in the extract from Oyebode's work above, such breaks in dialogue are freighted with meaning. In *The Son*, they are consistently indicative of something that is, in essence, unsayable and here, as in Pinter's work, the "power of absence" becomes what Pinter scholar Mark Batty terms "an affective mediator" (35). In the above exchange, the pause mediates the connection (or lack thereof) between father and son. Pierre's intervention is no doubt intended to be fatherly and caring—but its impact is interrogative, and Nicolas fails to proffer the required articulacy. The phrase "I don't know" is also, in various iterations, repeated throughout the first three acts of the play. This theme of not knowing, of logic-defying uncertainty, is pertinent, both in terms of the impact of Nicolas's depression on the family dynamic, as well as his own subjective negotiation of the condition. As the reviewer Jules Morgan puts it:

> Each thought and attempt to explain revert[s] to not knowing how. This is often the nature of depression; feelings and thoughts exist elsewhere and are often out of reach and impenetrable. "He's different from the others," [Anne] says. Why, Pierre asks, but Anne does not know. How much does Nicolas know about himself? (300)

When Pierre does finally succeed in encouraging Nicolas to attempt to share his distress, the "confidence" (Zeller 19) he receives is abstract—seemingly uncommunicable in solid terms. Like many depression sufferers, Nicolas describes the condition "weighing [him] down" (19), resulting in a general sense of disturbance: "My head feels like

it's exploding […] I feel as if I am going crazy […] I don't understand what's happening to me" (20). Nicolas's encounter with depression's slippery nature is at odds with Pierre's characteristically logical and solution-focused response. Reminiscent of a "medical model" approach to mental health, Pierre's initial stance is that Nicolas's "problem" is merely a "difficult phase" to which a "solution" (21) must be sought,[2] and the subsequent scene concludes on an ominous note of dramatic irony with Pierre's assertion that "it's not going to change anything in our lives" (24). The literary work of the play can expose the faultiness or insufficiency of medical models when looking at the specificity of the individual case of depression. Ultimately, Zeller's work suggests, there is no one size fits all description or treatment. Through his portrayal of Nicolas and Pierre, Zeller reveals two distinct perspectives on depression and, in so doing, affords the audience a greater degree of insight into the factors that have shaped this father and son. As a result of his attempts to understand what is happening to his son, Pierre is prompted to reflect on his own troubled upbringing. In Act Three, he discusses his memories of his own father with his new partner Sofia and considers the effect the abandonment by this man had on him as an adolescent, before decisively proclaiming: "I don't want to be that kind of man, that kind of father" (23). This episode is also notable for its foreshadowing of Nicolas's subsequent desperation for his father not to "abandon" (94) him in the psychiatric hospital in scene fifteen. What begins with Pierre's reflection on the type of father he wants to be shifts throughout the play into an angry rumination on the father he has been up until now, and the role he may potentially have played in precipitating his son's decline:

[2] Originating in the field of Disability Studies, the "medical model" of disability (as distinct from the social model) divorces illness from its social and cultural contexts and instead considers it as a phenomenon to be rectified, treated or "fixed," much as an engineer might mend faulty machinery (Davis 1997).

> PIERRE. Is it because I fell in love with another woman? Is that it? Is that my crime? What business is it of yours? I have the right to reinvent my life. Shit! It's my life! You hear me?
> *Pierre is almost shouting.*
> (Zeller 79)

Through this, and later similar outbursts—Anne shares her own feelings of guilt and "failure" (38) as the play progresses too—Zeller considers the ways families and particularly parents may seek causal explanations for mental illness and attempt to attribute blame to themselves. The play, then, also explores some of the internal conflicts that parents are struggling with themselves, thus destabilizing different members of the family, and consequently risking derailing the family's coherence.

## Locating a Sense of Understanding

One of the central questions the play poses is, why do people become unwell? What factors play into a condition like depression, and to what extent do situations such as family breakdown and divorce affect the mental health of young people? [3] These questions are left unanswered—the cause of Nicolas's suffering remains ambiguous (even to himself), and, in this way Zeller highlights what Cynthia Trowell, the author of a "survival guide" for young adults suffering from depression, sees as depression's ghostly quality. It may "cover you like heavy clothes" (Trowell 53), but the provenance and nature of such "clothes" is typically multifaceted and difficult to inculpate. Anne sees something abject in her son's misery, however:

[3] In this way, Zeller also explores the Brechtian idea of characters' "madness" emerging from their negotiation and interaction with the world's inherent absurdity. For Nicolas, this "madness' appears to stem, at least in part, from the breakdown of familial stability.

> PIERRE. He's a teenager, Anne. Have you ever seen a teenager radiating happiness?
> ANNE. It's not just that. He's different from the others.
> (35)

Difference is ascribed to Nicolas in Zeller's description of him in ghostly, ethereal tones—a "mental image" (24) and apparition (46). The sense of otherness surrounding him is subsequently compounded by Sofia's protestation in scene ten, in which she attempts to communicate her discomfort about leaving Nicolas alone with his little brother while she and Pierre go out for the night:

> SOFIA. He's weird, Pierre. Don't say he isn't. In fact, he's ultra-weird. The look in his eyes, it's worrying sometimes. He… I mean, let's face it, open your eyes, he's not right in the head!
> (65)

Despite Sofia's view of Nicolas being one that echoes a commonly held ignorance about individuals suffering from mental health issues, her description of him, replete with intonations of strangeness, does correlate with many people's first experiences of depression, in addition to the perceptions of others who bear witness to it. In his study of *Experiences of Depression*, the philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe likens both the newness and strangeness of depression to the first-time sufferer as being comparable to:

> The feeling of strangeness that sometimes arises as one explores a place, even a familiar place, while sick, tired or jet-lagged. It is as one interacts with the environment that various things are anticipated and do not then appear quite as expected. This sometimes culminates in an all-enveloping sense of one's relationship with the world being somehow "not quite right", "out of kilter." (63)

This description corresponds to Nicolas's experience of outsiderness, of feeling "disturbed," "strange" and "absent" in the various environments he finds himself in (Zeller 26-7). He discusses his perceptions of others and how he feels excluded from his peers' world of "having a laugh, having fun" (28), and in scene eight, responds to Pierre's suggestion that a degree of socialisation may be healthy by explaining his lack of connection to people his own age and resentment that he even needs to negotiate the "complicated" terrain of adolescence at all: "I'd have liked never to be my age. It's too complicated for me. Too many responsibilities. Too much pressure. I preferred it when I was a child" (47). This is not, in itself, unusual. Many young people struggle to seamlessly progress through the stage of psychosocial development that psychologist Erik Erikson terms identity vs. confusion—the purpose of which is to establish a sense of self and gain an understanding of where the individual fits in the world. From an Eriksonian perspective, Nicolas seems to experience a significant struggle with this process and the depression he is feeling results from the fallout of this internal turmoil. His assertion in scene four that his academic learning is "full of gaps" (27), may also be accurately applied to the process of what educational theorist Peter Jarvis calls "learning to be a person in society" (2012), arguably the key learning journey with which adolescence is concerned.

## Adolescence

In tandem with depression, adolescence itself becomes a contested discourse in the text. It aligns with what the critic Clementine Beauvais views as a "temporal" form of "otherness of childhood relative to adulthood" (43). For Beauvais, this "temporal 'shard' in consciousness" results in a form of "existential wait" (43). This partly derives from changing perspectives on childhood and adolescence in the contemporary period, wherein young people are all too often viewed as human *becomings* rather than human *beings*. Therefore, adolescence is not recognised as a period of life complete with its own values. Rather, it exists as little more than an unfortunate limbo phase which must simply be "passed through" en-route to adulthood.

Viewed in this way then, *The Son* is concerned with Nicolas's apparent inability to proceed through this threshold—to take on board the adult roles and responsibilities that await him—at a socially acceptable pace (at least in the terms that are determined by this particular societal / family unit). This process is explored in the play when Pierre gifts Nicolas a smart jacket which his son rejects as being ill-suited for his age: "I'm not sure people my age wear jackets" (47). For Nicolas, the jacket is indicative of adult "responsibilities" and expectations—a signifier of the "pressure" of growing up (47). His rejection of the garment symbolises his Peter Pan-esque rejection of adulthood and its entanglements. In fact, Nicolas displays various traits of what the psychologist Dan Kiley termed in his eponymous 1983 book "Peter Pan Syndrome." Whilst not a clinical definition or diagnosis, Kiley considers how various challenges associated with the process of maturation can result in varying degrees of emotional disconnect (including, notably, depression). The psychoanalyst Bud Harris describes this in his work *Resurrecting the Unicorn* (2008):

> The Peter Pan type has difficulty relating and often leaves relationships […] While young he often appears as a sensitive but intelligent underachiever. He may have talents but during this time he is generally confused, as evidenced by an unsound educational history. (24)

Peter Pan syndrome-like issues and anxieties can certainly be seen to stem from and relate to the various inflexible forms of social regulation and conditioning inherent to the bourgeois family unit. For Nicolas, being unable to adapt to the underpinning expectations inherent to the family (at least during this phase of his life) results in this form of hindered social development.

In a nod to Zeller's mental health-themed literary predecessors,[4] the audience is given glimpses of Nicolas becoming violent and destructive,

[4] There are distinct intertextual references in the play to works such as, for example, Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* (1988) and Lionel Shriver's *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (2003).

destroying Sofia's flat at the end of scene four, and subsequently angelic in Anne's description of him as being: "like a little sunbeam […] my little sunbeam" (39). For the duration of the play, Nicolas's behaviour shifts somewhat erratically. He sometimes regresses into a state of infantile dependency, whilst also being sweetly kind, helpful and empathetic, albeit at other times cruel, violent and manipulative. Through his depiction of Nicolas in this way, Zeller shows how depression's disturbances of mood can be unnervingly swift and dramatic. The theme of adolescence as an undefined and ambiguous limbo existing between different phases also notably aligns with depression's characteristically erratic behaviour, capable of shifting from infantile and dependent to angry and cruel.

## Familial Contexts and Attachment

Nicolas's parents frequently contrast his current state to his happier and more stable years as a younger child. Both parents attribute blame for his current condition to themselves, and particularly to their divorce. Indeed, as the psychologist Steven Griggs comments: "Growing up in a broken home increases a person's risk of developing depression" (4). He also continues to consider how young peoples' experiences of emotional turmoil, including depression, stemming from parental divorce can impact on their abilities to form "healthy attachments to people" (16). Nicolas's challenges in this regard are evident. He has not been attending school and his few friendships have evidently dwindled. His primary attachment is to his step sibling Sacha, and this is initially the relationship Pierre hopes can provide something of an anchor for Nicolas whilst staying at his father's house. However, this arrangement is thwarted by Sofia in her mistrust of Nicolas and unhappiness about the prospect of leaving him alone with her child.

Nicolas, although superficially part of a family, is then, for all intents and purposes, alone for much of the play. As the play progresses, images of Nicolas's aloneness become increasingly overt and visceral, emphasising his isolation. He is sitting alone on a park bench when Sofia witnesses his truancy in scene twelve. He is also alone and anonymous in the psychiatric unit at the end of the play—an outsider even

among the "crazy" individuals—the "anorexics and psychopaths" as he puts it, who populate it (Zeller 90). The play's final scenes depict different outcomes of how far down the rabbit hole of depression Nicolas will ultimately sink and reaches a crescendo at the end of scene twelve in which Pierre's last-ditch attempt to encourage his son to return to school backfires, resulting in a volley of retributions and a physical fight. The scene ends with Nicolas's departure, followed by the (unseen) event around which the action of the play pivots—the suicide attempt that results in his hospitalisation in the opening of scene thirteen.

## The Clinical Gaze

In one of the play's various Chekhovian references,[5] Nicolas has evidently injured himself with a knife (although, this happens offstage)—suggestive of the one Sofia finds under his bed in scene nine.[6] The notion that the situation can return to "normal" is beginning to look increasingly less likely by scene thirteen when Pierre is informed that his son is now facing psychiatric intervention. Pierre, Zeller's stage direction asserts, is "stunned by the word […] psychiatry" and there is a sense, from this point in the play, that the family have reached a point of no return (85). The scene in the clinic is also unsettling in its suggestion that what Nicolas's family are currently encountering is commonplace. The language the doctor uses is non-specific, and almost quotidian ("we're familiar with these situations" / "these cases") (85). In this way, Zeller considers how, even in the attempts made by well-meaning doctors in clinics and hospitals to be humane, there remains a lingering sense of dehumanisation about such institutions, evident in the doctor's detached discussion of "isolation" and "observation" (84).

This is a phenomenon commented on by Michel Foucault in *The Birth of the Clinic*, in which he considers how the medical professional's "clinical gaze" can almost be said to invite dispassion in its role as, what he terms, a "locus of systematic truth" (48). Nicolas protests at

[5] Such as the dramatic principal of "Chekhov's Gun," in which a weapon introduced in an early scene of a play foreshadows its use in a later one.

[6] Nicolas's propensity for self-harm has been established earlier in the play. It is, he explains, a way to gain "relief" and "to channel pain" (55).

his incarceration, pleading with his father to sign his release papers to allow him to return home and, against the doctor's advice, Pierre agrees. Scene sixteen begins encouragingly. The family drink tea and eat madeleines together before debating the possibility of seeing a film at the cinema.[7] They are interrupted in their deliberations about this, however, by "a detonation immediately recognisable as a gunshot" (Zeller 104).[8] It is obvious to both Pierre and the audience what has just occurred, and the stage is immediately plunged into a "blackout," "remain[ing] silent and empty for some time" (104).

## Ghosts and Unanswered Questions

The play's epilogue is set three years after the preceding events. Pierre is lost in a reverie in which Nicolas is cast in the role of prodigal son, arriving home after living abroad in Berlin. His life, it would appear, is now "very good"—"everything is fine" (106). More than this though, he has evidently taken the intervening years to reflect on what occurred three years prior and has decided to:

> […] turn it into something positive. So here it is…
> *He hands him a book.*
> PIERRE. What's this?
> NICOLAS. My first novel.
> PIERRE. It isn't? You wrote this? […]
> (*Reading the title*) Death Can Wait. Fantastic. When's it coming out?
> NICOLAS. In two months. And if you open it, you'll see, it's dedicated to you […]
> So, obviously, it talks a bit about what you already know….

7 In yet another intertextual reference, Zeller recalls the famous madeleine scene in Proust's *Swann's Way* (1913), in which the protagonist experiences waves of nostalgia when the taste of his tea-soaked madeleine awakens childhood memories. Similarly, in *The Son,* the discussion between the characters as they drink tea and eat madeleines is laced with nostalgia about "the good old days" (102), seemingly, a reference to the time before Nicolas's depression hit.

8 Another (more literal) "Chekhov's gun" moment that anticipates this incident, comes in scene nine when Nicolas stumbles across his father's old hunting rifle hidden behind a cupboard.

> All those slightly testing years… for you and mum… All those difficult moments… But at least its ended well. I wanted to dedicate it to you… Because I know that, if it wasn't for you… I couldn't have…
> *Pierre takes him in his arms, preventing him from finishing the sentence.*
> (107-8)

Here, Zeller suggests how mental illness, like any aspect of the human experience, can be used as fuel for creative endeavour.[9] In the above dialogue between Pierre and Nicolas, Zeller considers how one *possible* outcome of Nicolas's depression is that of his gradual recovery. For example, an ability to overcome the condition and to view this period of his life from a more detached perspective. In this way, he would have been able to engage with his reflections of it positively. It has "ended well" (108) and resulted in the completion of his book. This also evidently functions as a form of atonement—a balm for his family. Pierre is, as the stage direction suggests, especially "gratified" by the arrival of his author son who, *"after all these years has turned into a talented young man with a great future"* (109, emphasis original). Depression can of course breed creativity, but only if one recovers to the extent where one can engage with the experience from what Eric Maisel terms a "meta position" (77).[10] Indeed, if what Zeller initially presents the audience within this final scene appears somewhat optimistic, this is, as we gradually come to realise, because we are being shown Pierre "lost in thought" (104), imagining what *could have been*. Nicolas, as he appears in this scene, is a

[9] This is, from a biographical standpoint, the case with this play itself, which Zeller suggests was written as catharsis to help him deal with an "unfortunate" experience "as a father." This is, he explains in an interview: "the only play I've ever written in which I knew what I wanted to say from the start, perhaps because it was the only one to be so directly connected to my life" (qtd. in Cappelle, 2019).

[10] Eric Maisel comments interestingly on this in *Van Gogh Blues* (2012) in which he argues: "brooding about meaning is depressing and unproductive but stepping back, taking a deep breath, and examining meaning from the meta position, as an observer of your predicament […] helps enormously" (77).

chimeric dream, a ghost who, when Sofia enters the scene, is exposed as a figment of Pierre's wishful thinking:[11]

> SOFIA. Pierre?
> *Pause.*
> What are you doing?
> Pierre? Are you talking to yourself?
> *Pause. Nicolas takes one last look at him and disappears.*
> (109)

When Nicolas leaves the stage here, it is for the last time. In the final dialogue, Pierre voices his various regrets regarding Nicolas to Sofia, the "should haves…" and "could haves…" that he now wrestles with (110). The play ends with Sofia attempting to comfort him, assuage his guilt, and focus his attention onto Sacha, his other son:

> SOFIA. There was no helping him and nothing you could do to stop him […] Think about your little boy…. He'll be four soon. Think about him. And everything will be all right. Do you understand me? Everything will be all right.
> *She cradles him. Little by little his grief is calmed. Pause. Blackout.*
> (111)

Zeller's ending highlights the inherent uncertainty and questions surrounding the lottery of parenting. What went wrong with Nicolas? Could it have been averted if things had happened differently? How will Sacha's life unfold and how will Pierre parent this son differently? Ultimately, will everything *really* be alright? George Bernard Shaw writes that "there may be some doubt as to who are the best people to have charge of children, but there can be no doubt that parents are the worst" (485). Whilst we might imagine Zeller approving of Shaw's sentiment, what he really illustrates in *The Son,* however, is that such

[11] There is also a key correlation between these dreamlike scenes and the earlier point made regarding mental health and perception, in addition to the way in which language, like the ghostly Nicolas in this scene, can appear chimerically evasive in its attempt to represent depression.

a contention is understandable—predictable almost. Each of us, this play suggests, are products of our own parents, who, as the poet Philip Larkin put it, "fill you with the faults they had, and add some extra, just for you" (qtd. in Booth 365).

By virtue of being a human being tasked with offering counsel and guidance to a fellow human as they negotiate the rocky road of childhood and adolescence and attempt to come to terms with their own fallibility in a world of what Nicolas terms "responsibilities and pressure" (Zeller 47), parenting will always be an impossibly challenging task, and one whose course will rarely run smoothly. In this way, depression functions in the play as a trope through which the playwright provides a distillation of such concerns. Like life more generally, depression is fraught with complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions. It is wily and elusive of coherent comprehension. Such characteristics can be applied to parents' understandings of their offspring, and likewise, children's perceptions of their parents.

Ultimately, Zeller's achievement as a playwright in this play, in addition to the wider trio which it concludes, is to situate the crises of individuals amidst wider concerns. Depression, as has been noted, is frequently entangled with bourgeois discourses regarding selfhood, maturation, and family. As the psychologist Lawrence Rubin suggests in his 2012 volume exploring the relationship between mental illness and popular media: "recognition of the psychological aspects of popular cultures enables deeper understanding of our collective and projective selves and of the forces involved in constructing them" (3). Zeller's work appears broadly in agreement with such an assertion, highlighting how language functions as a device through which mental illness and its associated crises may be communicated and represented. In this way, the absences, gaps and omissions in our internal lives that words have the potential to convey echo that which remains hidden, unsaid and unknown about mental illness. However, as Nicolas's experience demonstrates in *The Son*, language may also evade the genuine essence of one's subjective experience of mental health—something which remains, at root, uncommunicable.

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Dr. Ben Screech is a Lecturer in English and Education at the University of Gloucestershire in Cheltenham, UK. He primarily teaches and researches writing for (and about) young people but has also published on contemporary writing more generally.