

Lives Gone Astray: The Impact of Dysfunctional Families on Literary Characters

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Abstract: This article aims to highlight the depiction of the negative effects of unfavorable family situations on literary characters. The vastness of the topic compels me to concentrate on the portrayal of some characters from American plays written in the first half of the 20th century. The discussion will, therefore, focus on three American dramatists who have very skillfully drawn the lives of some of their characters who are thrown off balance because of the disturbances in their families. These dramatists are Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee. Each of them has presented characters suffering from different psychological problems, the causes of which were rooted in almost the same types of problems, that is, their dysfunctional families.

Family has a lasting impact on the human psyche. The sense of security and emotional support provided by a stable family lasts for a lifetime, even when the caring members cease to exist. On the other hand, lack of familial love, care and shelter can result in a lifelong sense of loss and insecurity, not to be substituted by any other kind of fulfillment in life. It is like a hole that can never be closed. Nancy Chapin in her article "Honor thy Father and Mother" states:

Parents are transmitters of attitudes that the child adopts in forming a self-image. Our personal narratives are initially largely constructed through our relationship with our parents or other significant adults. The relationship that we form with our parents is elemental to the concept of self, forming the base of our identity. (47)

As literature is the mirror of life, it depicts vividly this aspect of human psychology. The same thing goes the other way round, that is, writers are profoundly influenced by the reality or their immediate environment. This family-individual relationship, their impact, both positive and negative, on each other and the consequences are also revealed through the characters of a literary piece. How these characters think and react to different situations is conditioned by how they grew up. Our world is made up of our thoughts. But the sanity of our thought depends on the development of our mind which is nurtured by the family. Literary characters, being the representation of real human beings, are also affected by their adverse familial situations and are shown to suffer the way normal people do. To justify this line of thought, this paper is going to present five characters from plays written by three famous twentieth century American dramatists namely Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee. The characters to be discussed are Edmund and James (Jamie) Tyrone from Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Biff and Happy Loman from Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, and Jerry from Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*.

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It is undeniable that the national character of the American drama was drawn primarily by Eugene O'Neill. Afterwards, it developed through the later works of O'Neill himself, along with Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Elmer Rice, Sidney Howard, Robert Sherwood, and other playwrights of the 1920s. The huge Broadway success, O'Neill, single-handedly and very successfully introduced the elements of realism into American drama. In the autobiographical play, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, he modeled the characters of Edmund and James (Jamie) Tyrone after himself and his elder brother. These two characters reflect the effects of familial imbalance on children. In fact, all four members of the Tyrone family are shown to suffer from the bitterness resulting from their inability to forgive and forget. According to Lillian Feder:

O'Neill transforms his own painful experience into the prototypical emotional crises of modern human beings sustained by neither religious nor social bonds and left only with an awareness of emptiness that somehow must be filled. The isolation of the characters in *Long Day's Journey*, O'Neill's tragedy of his own family life, is the 'curse' that drives them to drink, drugs and grandiose fantasies, substitutes for the selves they cannot acknowledge and the love they can neither give nor receive. Each time they approach or are confronted with authentic feelings, they return to the illusions that feed and destroy them. If they express what they feel, they instantly retract the trenchant remark, the impulsive gesture, love and hate cancelling each other out to nothingness. (338)

How children are treated by their parents has a direct impact on how the children see themselves. The level of exposure the children get in society is also regulated initially by parents, which in turn determines the social adaptability present in them as adults. Both the Tyrone sons had to pay heavily for the instability they had to experience all through their childhood. Their father's insecurity with his own financial condition, which itself was the result of his traumatic childhood wholly spent in earning money and supporting his family, had much to do with his choice of a financially secure but artistically frustrating career path. This choice brought in him dissatisfaction and disappointment as he was aware of his own potential for becoming a truly gifted Shakespearean actor. This discontent with life found expression through his inconsistent role as a husband and as a father. Mary's exclamation bears testimony:

Oh, I'm so sick and tired of pretending this is a home! You won't help me! You won't put yourself out the least bit! You don't know how to act in a home! You don't really want one! You never have wanted one – never since the day we were married! You should have remained a bachelor and lived in second-rate hotels and entertained your friends in barrooms! (67)

This irregularity takes its toll on the other members of the family. Mary, who has shunned her dream of becoming a pianist to marry James, a man with such a career that they would not be able to live in a place long enough to make a home to raise children properly in, is thrown into deep depression. She lacks the company to share her problems with and get some sort of relief. Along with it, comes the physical pain she has to suffer frequently after giving birth to her youngest child, Edmund. The cheap and incompetent doctor brought by James, administered Morphine, an easy but potentially dangerous drug, to Mary to help her cope with the pain. But she becomes an addict,

rendering her even more unfit to take care of her children. Mary could never forgive her husband for this. She utters her feelings again and again: "I knew from experience by then that children should have homes to be born in, if they are to be good children, and women need homes, if they are to be good mothers" (88). She also felt that the way her sons were brought up was not fitting at all. All this together push her deeper into the addiction and deteriorates their family situation even more.

The Tyrone sons grew up in a wretched family where both of the parents had trouble coping with their own problems. They could never, therefore, provide a healthy environment for their sons to develop mentally. As Jamie is ten years older than his brother Edmund, he has to suffer more and was the more affected of the two brothers. In Jamie's own words:

Listen, Kid, I know you think I'm a cynical bastard, but remember I've seen a lot more of this game than you have. You never knew what was really wrong until you were in prep school. Papa and I kept it from you. But I was wise ten years or more before we had to tell you. (57)

Again:

I've known about Mama so much longer than you. Never forget the first time I got wise. Caught her in the act with a hypo. Christ, I'd never dreamed before that any women but whores took dope! (163)

Jamie resents that he had to deal with their family troubles longer than his younger brother. His long exposure to this dismal family environment leaves him as a bitterly cynical, alcoholic, pessimistic, and jealous yet caring man with no ambition in life whatsoever, teetering on the edge of destruction. The decline in his physical health is indicative of his suicidal and irregular lifestyle. Jamie's character is carried over into another play by O'Neill, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. It presents the eleven years older Jamie, renamed as Jimmy Tyrone. Here Jamie carries himself through his self-destructive life to his destiny of an untimely death caused by alcohol. He is the Tyrone son who has to suffer most for the negativity prevalent in his family. Losing all hope and aspiration to survive, he succumbs to his dark fate. Sarwar Chowdhury presents the matter in a nutshell through the abstract of his article "Rebellion of the O'Neill Son: *A Moon for the Misbegotten*." He says:

Among the son characters portrayed by Eugene O'Neill, Jimmy Tyrone in *A Moon for the Misbegotten* is outstanding because of his inability to break with his past; the memories of his family life linked to his parents, particularly his mother, affect him so much that he fails to build a family life of his own and remains unmarried. Jimmy's abnormal life-style is a protest against the loss of his past bliss; it is the O'Neill Son's rebellion against life, a rebellion that, of course, leads him towards sure destruction. (104)

This type of anomaly in Jimmy, i.e., Jamie, is the direct and very common pattern in which children from dysfunctional families behave and lead their lives. Ross Mackay in his article, "The Impact of Family Structure and Family Change on Child Outcomes: A Personal Reading of the Research Literature" discusses some more adverse effects on children from troubled families, such as problems with schooling, physical health,

mental and emotional health, social conduct and behavior, peer relations, criminal offence, substance abuse, early departure from home and early-onset of sexual behavior. Further impacts on their early adulthood and beyond include early marriage, marital dissolution, lone parenthood, low occupational status, economic hardship, poor-quality relationship with parents, unhappiness, discontent with life, mistrust in others, and reduced longevity. Very realistically, both Jamie and Edmund exhibit most of these signs or would most certainly have in the future.

The younger of the Tyrone sons, Edmund, who is actually a representation of O'Neill himself, is more fortunate, compared to his elder brother James. This fact can be attributed to his being less exposed to his degenerated family as well as his strong personal character. He, being the youngest member of the family, has also the luxury of being treated with the most care and affection. All these issues combine to lessen the effect of the negativity he is subjected to. That is why his character appears to be almost a steady and normal one, compared to the other members of the Tyrones. Still, he bore the scars of his depressing family environment. His nervous and emotional nature, problem with alcohol, fragile health, suicidal vein, gloomy attitude towards life, inability to choose a career, and restlessness can be attributed to the lack of security and serenity at home. Edmund's character is modeled on the playwright's own life in that O'Neill had two failed marriages, considered suicide, and had an alcohol problem, all of which were very possible outcomes in the case of Edmund. However, the tragedy is, with the talents and potential present in Jamie and Edmund, they would have fared much better in life if they had a regular childhood with normal parents.

Like Jamie Tyrone, Biff Loman, in *Death of a Salesman* is the older son of Willy Loman. Biff has long been internalizing Willy's vision of success which, in simple terms, meant to be rich and, at the same time, to be well liked. This philosophy of Willy's becomes clearer from the following conversation between Biff and Willy when Bernard leaves them after trying in vain to persuade Biff to practice some math in order to avoid failing in school:

Willy: Bernard is not well liked, is he?

Biff: He's liked, but he's not well liked.

Happy: That's right, Pop.

Willy: That's just what I mean, Bernard can get the best marks in school, y'understand, but when he gets out in the business world, y'understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him. That's why I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonises. Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want. You take me, for instance. I never have to wait in line to see a buyer. "Willy Loman is here! That's all they have to know, and I go through.

Biff: Did you knock them dead, Pop?

Willy: Knocked 'em cold in Province, slaughtered 'em in Boston. (25-26)

Willy gets so carried away by this theory of personal attractiveness as being the only way to success that he fails to give proper importance to the well-established ethics of fidelity and truthfulness. He even supports Biff's habit of stealing and covers it up with the more acceptable term "borrowing." He has his own set of values which

are neither very noble nor very practical. Willy was aware of it at the last stage of his life. In a radio broadcast, Miller said:

The trouble with Willy Loman is that he has tremendously powerful ideals. We're not accustomed to speaking of ideals in his terms; but, if Willy Loman, for instance, had not had a very profound sense that his life as lived had left him hollow, he would have died contentedly polishing his car on some Sunday afternoon at a ripe old age. The fact that he has values. The fact that they cannot be realized is what is driving him mad – just as, unfortunately, it's driving a lot of other people mad. (qtd. in Williams 175)

In the same broadcast, he says that his plays "...set forth what happens when a man does not have a grip on the forces of life and has no sense of values which will lead him to that kind of grip" (qtd. in Williams 175).

These two statements might seem contradictory. But according to Dennis Welland, they are not. He says, "The two statements are not, as some critics argue, contradictory. They are in fact reconciled by Biff's epitaph on his father: 'He had the wrong dreams. All, all wrong'" (58).

This in fact summarizes the tragedy of Willy's life. Biff internalizes his father's philosophy, and then knocks them out of his life. According to his father, Biff had great potential. Indeed he did. In high school, he was the star football player, not only "liked," but "well liked" by his father's standards, gifted with personal attractiveness and with scholarships to three universities on the basis of his athletic excellence. But as a human being, he is not flawless as we already know that he inherited his father's flawed view of success which allows him to steal and bunk classes. Consequently, he fails in math and loses his scholarships. But this failure was nothing compared to what he was going to confront next. When Biff fails in math, he goes to Boston to meet his father and ask him to talk to his math teacher. He believed that once his father met his teacher, he would talk him out of this mess. Such was his faith in his father's abilities and personal charm. But in Boston, he accidentally discovers his father's affair. This shock changes him completely. According to Bernard, "he'd given up his life" (74). The problem with Biff, at this crucial stage of growing up was the destruction of his role model, his father. After this episode, Biff stops applying any of his natural gifts to advance in life and ultimately, refuses to grow up. He keeps everything to himself but his changed attitude towards his father does not escape his mother, Linda's notice. She confronts him much later:

Linda: ... [to Biff] And you! What happened to the love you had for him?
Youwersuch pals! How you used to talk to him on the phone every night!
How lonely he was till he come home to you!

...

Biff: He threw me out of this house, remember that.

Linda: Why did he do that? I never knew why.

Biff: Because I know he's a fake and he doesn't like anybody around who knows! (45)

Still he keeps everything a secret to save his mother from heartbreak. But he himself cannot get over the disappointment and loses all his ambition. This state of

arrested development continues for almost fifteen years after dropping out from high school. Yet, perhaps, this negative phase of his life ends with his last encounter with Willy. Biff clearly sees what went wrong, how his father lived his life based on some wrong ideals, and how erroneously he tried to instill them in his sons. This realization helps him to get over everything and ultimately forgive his father. But Happy, his younger brother, unfortunately keeps on nurturing his father's faulty values. He continues to live a life of pleasure and money-making ideas. Biff, though he initially fails to make any progress in life, seems to be liberated by his understanding and forgiveness. Miller, in his essay "The Family in Modern Drama" says:

If, for instance, the struggle in *Death of a Salesman* were simply between father and son for recognition and forgiveness, it would diminish in importance. But when it extends itself out of the family circle and into society, it broaches those questions of social status, social honor and recognition, which expand its vision and lift it out of the merely particular towards the fate of the generality of men. (223)

Biff's inability to advance in life, which on the other hand means his inability to have any positive contribution towards society, is the direct outcome of the wrong notions of life, success, and himself implanted in him by his father. In Biff's own words: "And I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody! That's whose fault it is!" (104)

He does not want to be a "fake" like his father, and at the same time, he does not have his own code of conduct to lead his life. Unlike Jimmy Tyrone in *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, it is not possible to guess what becomes of Biff after his father's death as Miller did not leave any hint. But at least, one thing is certain, it is that whatever he'll do, he'll do it on his own terms, by applying his own judgments. At last, at the age of 34, he is able to start anew, freeing himself from the shackles of his father's worthless philosophy of life.

The most important character that needs to be discussed in this context is Jerry, from Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*. He is the most important because he is the most affected by the problem we are dealing with here. In this one act play, Jerry mentions his family only once, in a paragraph of disjointed sentences while talking to Peter about his empty picture frames. From this conversation, we come to know that his mother left her family for another man when Jerry was only ten and half years old. When she died in a dump one year later, his father brought her body back home to be buried. But his alcoholic father was also killed in an accident a few weeks later, which, in Jerry's words, "sort of cleaned things out family-wise" (30). Then he remembers his aunt, his mother's sister, who according to him, "was given neither to sin nor to consolations of the bottle" (30). She possessed a very indifferent attitude towards life. But this aunt, his last link to a family, also died on the afternoon of Jerry's high school graduation, a day, which was supposed to be celebrated with all the family members. On Peter's exclamation to such a sorry history, he replies:

But that was a long time ago, and I have no feelings about any of it that I care to admit to myself. Perhaps you can see, though, why good old Mom and good old Pop are frameless. (30)

Jerry had, indeed, lost feelings for his family, but at the same time, he had lost feelings and interest in everything in life. Theories of psychoanalysis focus on an individual's childhood environment. Freud held the view that much of the child's personality is formed by the time it turns five. If this is the case, those who had a troubled childhood are prone to developmental and adjustment problems in the society. Jerry seems to be the perfect example of it. He keeps on merely living and breathing. He has lost all interest in what is called a good life. This destruction of all familial bonds ultimately brings about his separation from the world, turns him into the alienated modern man, deprived of genuine happiness, incapable of forming any ties, and even most of the time, oblivious of his own bleak existence. This wretched life of Jerry's had its initiation at the split between his parents. His lack of experience in forming meaningful relationships in childhood or whatever short period of time he had spent with his disturbed caregivers (father, mother, aunt), seems to haunt him till the end of his life. Unable to relate to his fellow beings, he pathetically turns to animals to establish some kind of communication. While trying to rationalize his attempt to have a meaningful contact with his landlady's dog, he says:

It's just . . . it's just that . . . it's just that if you can't deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere. WITH ANIMALS! Don't you see? A person has to have some way of dealing with SOMETHING. If not with people . . . SOMETHING.(39)

Jerry's isolation in childhood, the lack of love or meaningful relationship with his parents, and later, his dismal boyhood without a proper guardian culminates in his chronic disability to connect with human beings, his schizophrenic indifference towards life, and turns him into a "permanent transient," an "outsider." His self-destructive nature is in fact a gift from his irresponsible parents, so engrossed in their own world of adultery and alcohol. It is true that Jerry's life does not revolve around only one misfortune. It is rather a chain of misfortunes, for which Jerry himself is responsible. But undoubtedly this whole cycle of unfortunate incidents is set in motion by some people other than Jerry himself. They were two individuals whom he called Pop and Mom.

Having discussed the characters, now the question arises, are these the logical outcomes of the given situations? That is, is this the way these characters should turn out or behave, given the familial turmoil of different levels they had to go through? The answer might be drawn from the effect these characters had on the readers. They were able to move the readers so much because the readers could comprehend the authenticity of the situations and their outcomes portrayed through the characters. These tragedies were felt even more strongly because of the reader's understanding of the reality behind them. The characters discussed above have behaved in a very plausible manner, in sync with their respective family situations. They were not allowed to have a stable homely environment to grow into decent individuals. Both Edmund and Jamie Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey into Night* had shown great potential in their childhood, which made their parents hopeful of their future success. But the unfortunate parents could not nurture their talents properly because of their own personal demons of addiction, frustration, and fear of poverty. Biff and Happy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* were so full of their father's faulty and impractical philosophy that they could not even build up their own values. Biff does show some signs of emancipation because he was lucky enough to be knocked out of these wrong notions

by accident. This accident revealed how fake his father had been and, at the same time, how valueless his values were. But still, at that early age, he could not determine his ways, for he had none of his own values to guide him in the absence of his father. However, towards the end of the play, he appears to be optimistic. But Happy haplessly keeps repeating the same mistakes committed by his father as he could not be exorcised of his father's philosophy of life. He had been so poisoned by these faulty values that he was rendered beyond any correction. The most pathetic and unfortunate character of all though is Jerry in *The Zoo Story*. The very dark beginning of his life with his mother's adultery, alcoholic father's death, aunt's insufficient care, and subsequent series of unfortunate events veers his life towards such depths that he cannot think of any positive or curative measures to redeem himself and lead at least a normal life, if not a good and wholesome one.

None of these characters seem improbable or unreal, as they all conform to the possible outcome of the given situations. All that they do together is once again affirm the need of a balanced family environment for children to grow up with a stable mind to lead a normal life. If one of the aims of literature is to make people conscious of what should be done or what wrongs in this world should be removed, all five characters of these three famous plays seem to work on the same plane, at least partially. They all show us how strongly human beings are influenced by their families and how badly they can be destroyed by the carelessness of their parents. This, obviously, is no new discovery in the field of literature or psychology, but this point definitely needs to be emphasized more and realized in the present state of moral decay and familial disintegration.

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