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ABSTRACT

When an educator was invited by a Chinese university to teach a seminar in American drama, she used "family drama" as the organizing theme of her course because she was (and is) convinced that from Eugene O'Neill on, American playwrights have been obsessed with family disintegration and the failure of family harmony. This paper is an outgrowth of the course that the educator gave, first in China and then in her own university. The paper first presents a historical overview of the changing shape of the American family. It then explores how four major American dramatists have portrayed tensions within the family in what became their significant works. The following plays are discussed in detail in the paper: "Long Day's Journey into Night" (Eugene O'Neill); "Death of a Salesman" (Arthur Miller); "The Glass Menagerie" (Tennessee Williams); and "Raisin in the Sun" (Lorraine Hansberry). In addition, the paper discusses two other plays the educator has used in her course: "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" (Edward Albee) and "Night, Mother" (Marsha Norman). It finds that in each of the families portrayed by the dramatists, the tensions of the family between security and freedom are played out again and again, taking people over the same questions in search of answers. (NKA)

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Family Values in American Drama

By

Joanne Brown

Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers
of English (92st, November 21-24, 2002, Atlanta, GA)

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FAMILY VALUES IN AMERICAN DRAMA

This paper has grown out of a course in American drama that I taught, first in China and then in an expanded version at my own university. When a Chinese university invited me to teach a seminar in American drama for their graduate English majors, I used “family drama” as the organizing theme of my course because I was (and am) convinced that from Eugene O’Neill on, our playwrights have been obsessed with family disintegration and the failure of family harmony. In fact, some critics would make the case that, given the dynamics of our modern social structures, it is the crucial subject, one echoed in the subtext of our national headlines and plots of popular films: parents abuse children, who turn against them, sometimes murderously—or parents commits the almost unimaginable crime, killing their own offspring; husbands abuse wives, who retaliate with knives and guns—or spouses plot to do away with their partners in order to collect hefty life insurance policies. The family, in other words, becomes a personal hell. Yet we live in a culture that idealizes the family as the perfect unit of human community, the perfect container for our lusts and loves. With politicians of both parties aggressively pro-family, only occasionally—as with a celebrity case or two—do we allow ourselves to think the unthinkable: that the family may not be the consummate living arrangement after all. Rather, it can be a nest of pathology and a cradle of gruesome violence.

We have an ideal of domestic harmony that has been fundamental to our definition as a culture, and the failure of this ideal has preoccupied many of our most serious dramatists. In order to provide a context for the tensions that beset the American family onstage, it is helpful to understand how the modern family has evolved. Social historian John Demos

has traced the changing shape of the American family back to our nation's founding and divided its development into three general periods, while making clear that the end of one stage and the beginning of the next are so fully merged that one might best think in terms of a transitional process. He begins, obviously enough, with the colonial period, when the basic family unit—a man and woman joined in marriage and their biological children—was often augmented by non-kin: orphans, apprentices, hired laborers, a variety of foster children “bound out” for a time, even convicts and indigents. The “master” of the house provided care, restraint, and a measure of rehabilitation where necessary, and those under his roof gave him their service. Thus, the home was a community of work, a unit in the economic system of the time. All labored together to produce the subsistence on which the whole group depended. And their leisure-time activities (mostly visiting friends and neighbors) were also framed in a family context, as were education, health care, and religious worship. However, the family itself was inextricably joined to a larger community. Members of this wider community, for example, might intercede when the family experienced difficulties—whether economic, religious, or interpersonal. Thus, magistrates and other local officials would compel a married couple “to live more peaceable together” or to alter and upgrade the “governance” of their children.

This pattern began to break down in the early decades of the 19th century, when the country became more urban, less rural and agricultural and some American families—usually middle-class—migrated to the country's urban centers. When economic systems change through industrialization, family patterns also change. Accordingly, men now left the home to earn a living, while women stayed there with the children engaged in domestic

activities. Many people felt that the brave new world of 19th century America was, in some respects, a dangerous world, a deep threat to traditional values and precepts. To get ahead in the ongoing struggle for success, a man had to summon energies and take initiatives that might exhaust him and involve terrible consequences. At the same time, he needed to retain some place of rest and refreshment, an emblem to counteract the rigors of what commonly became known as “the jungle.”

This matrix of ideas sharply redefined the family. In contrast to colonial days, the life of the home and the wider society represented for many Americans entirely different spheres. Home—and the word itself became highly sentimentalized—was pictured as a bastion of peace, of unwavering devotion to people and principles beyond the self. Gender roles became highly differentiated. The husband-father took exclusive responsibility for productive labor outside the home, not just the breadwinner but the family’s sole representative in the world at large. The wife-mother, increasingly idealized, was expected to confine herself to domestic activities and create the “perfect home,” selflessly laboring to meet the needs of her husband and children. The children carried the hopes of the family into the future; their adult lives would reflect the efforts of their parents, rewarding or betraying them. The crucial element of the family was a protective one. If the notion of the family as community summarizes the colonial part of this social history, for the 19th century the appropriate image is the family as refuge or security.

Far from joining and complementing other social networks, as in the earlier period, the family began to stand increasingly apart from the larger community. By mid-19th century, this isolation caused observers (especially “conservative” ones) to reach an

unsettling conclusion: the family was set on a course of decline and decay. From this period derives one of our most enduring images of the family—the myth of the family’s golden past, the belief that there is some ideal state of domestic life which we have tragically lost.

To some degree the image of the family as refuge or security remains with us today. There is a continuing sense of the home as a buffer against the demands and pressures of society at large. And yet for many decades the tide has been running in another direction, which brings us to the third period. Home is now less a bunker than the departure point of adventure into the larger world. Gender roles are less sharply defined: wives and mothers do their share of the breadwinning, so husbands/fathers are expected to help around the house. The children (at least middle- and upper-class) are elsewhere after school hours more than they are in the home, and family gatherings at the dinner table compete with parents’ volunteer or business obligations and children’s extracurricular activities along with their desire to be with their friends, whether at the mall, on the phone, or in front of the computer. If all were to go well, home should become a bubbling exchange of each family member’s separate but enriching experiences. But all does not invariably go well, so for the first time in American history, a negative image of the family has arisen, in which domestic relationships look dangerously like an encumbrance, inhibiting the quest individual self-fulfillment and his her own “space,” and the family severely limits our access to doing our own thing. Family members are caught between contrasting needs—the tensions between what Gail Sheehy has labeled in her book

Passages as the Merger Self and the Seeker Self. We yearn for the security of family and reject family structure. We are appalled by loneliness but strive for freedom.

Thus, the independence—and corresponding isolation—of the nuclear family system both emphasizes family life and leaves it vulnerable to many kinds of strains. Our culture presents us with these conflicting images in a variety of forms, and American dramatists in the last 60 years have been preoccupied with the subject. In play after play, they explore how the American myth of family harmony has been strained by the contradictions inherent in our culture that posit freedom against security, community against selfhood. The most characteristic moments of our serious drama are realistic scenes of alternating family strife and happiness as the protagonists search for freedom and long for security. They may escape the family, triumph over its repression, be destroyed by it. If they survive, they are likely to recapitulate the struggle in their own marriages or with their own children. Or each is left alone and anguished by the loss of family. The American dramatist typically chooses some portion along this continuum to present on stage as the dramatic action. The most powerful impulse in our plays comes out of the dilemma of family escape and loss.

In the time remaining, I would like to explore how four major American dramatists have portrayed these tensions in what became one of their most significant works: Eugene O'Neill in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Arthur Miller in *Death of a Salesman*, Tennessee Williams in *The Glass Menagerie* and Lorraine Hansberry in *Raisin in the Sun*.

Eugene O'Neill, commonly identified as the father of American drama as we know it, gave us his autobiographical take on family interactions in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, a seminal work in family drama. Set in the living room of the summer home of the Tyrone family

on a single day in August, 1912, the play reveals the history of each of the four Tyrones: the two sons, Jamie, an intellectual but a drunken failure; Edmund, the younger son with the dreams of a poet who has emulated his older brother's drinking habits; the father James, an aging actor who has sold out his talent and ambition to be a Shakespearean actor for commercial success as the Count of Monte Cristo; and the mother, Mary, recently released from confinement to treat her morphine habit. The play has little traditional plot; its principal events are the discoveries that Edmund has tuberculosis and Mary is on drugs again. Each of the successive four acts repeats the same pattern of blame and isolation, but with growing intensity.

This family is cut off from the world, turned in upon itself, with no resources or relations beyond it. When the Tyrones do go off-stage and into the world, it is a foray into an antagonistic environment. Mary goes to purchase her morphine, Edmund to learn he has tuberculosis, Jamie to drink and whore, and James to be bilked by ill-advised real estate investments. Although apparently free of any hierarchic structure, the equality of status among the Tyrones equates not to harmony but to a constant collision of egos. Suspicion and pretense are the major modes of encounter with one another, with a constantly shifting pattern of accusation and alliance. The family has no order to mitigate this pattern. Nor does anyone seem able to exercise the authority or power to destroy the family bonds in order to get free. The Tyrones are bound together in love/hate relationships, their raw emotions holding them simultaneously together and apart. Instead of communicating, they impinge on each other's loneliness. But no one is exactly at fault

because the ongoing shifts of blame and coalition preclude the audience's taking sides with anyone.

One of the chief motifs which permeates the play has to do with the idea of a home, a word that echoes throughout the action. The characters long for respite from their burdensome isolation, and home is emblematic of their intangible yearning to be done with the dilemmas of family life. James Tyrone, who refuses to purchase what Mary considers a proper home of which she can be proud, is an extreme example of the American always on the move, restless and rootless, yet longing for permanence that he equates with his wife's health. Although the sons never articulate a desire for a home, Mary's longing is so pervasive that her emotion encompasses the entire family. The home becomes a principal symbol for what is lost and yearned for—a place of rest, freedom, and harmony.

In her imagination, Mary escapes to her childhood home, which she remembers as a place of innocence devoid of human pain, and she envies her socially acceptable neighbors for their "decent, presentable home." Yet we learn through her husband that her memories are an illusion, that her father was a drunkard and her talent as a pianist, which she says she abandoned to marry James, was negligible.

Each of these family members struggles with his or her own loves and hates almost at random, with no outward social limits of authority against which they can measure themselves. But, although they are caught in a series of recurring emotional conflicts, there is never any resolution, never any clearing away of obstacles. In this way O'Neill pushes individualism—the isolation of the characters—to its furthest anarchical limits.

Yet the Tyrones embrace the constantly disintegrating family as the major, the only, ordering structure in their world.

Beginning in a sunny morning, this play ends late at night, the foghorn heard in the distance. James and his two sons, all drunk, sit downstairs listening as Mary rummages around upstairs. When she finally appears, she carries her wedding gown, so lost in the fog of drugs that she is back in her convent girlhood until her final speech, which closes the play. “Yes,” she says, just before the final curtain falls, “I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so happy for a time.” Poignantly, as Mary’s last speech hints, each of the Tyrones achieve dignity because they refuse to accept their painful isolation as final. The family of security lures them even as they are driven by the selfhood of freedom, an agitated collision of egos. O’Neill has called theirs a “hopeless hope.”

Given the closed world of the Tyrones, O’Neill seems here to equate the disintegration of family life with a universal condition of human nature. Arthur Miller has varied this portrayal by situating the individual and his family in a larger, social context, attempting to turn the connections and energies of the family situation outward. In *Death of a Salesman*, arguably his most notable play, he shows a clash between the private loyalties of the household and the public responsibilities of living in society. In an essay written almost fifty years ago, “The Family in Modern Drama,” Miller posits that all family drama asks, “How may a man make of the outside world a home?” He argues that this is true because the alienation we all feel is based not only on a sense of our dissatisfaction with our place in society but also on the remembered sense of “the safety, the surrounding of love . . . which all [people] have connected in their memories with the idea of family.”

As in O'Neill's play, the word "home" is a recurring motif in *Salesman*, but Miller uses the term to suggest a personal longing which must be turned into a social, rather than familial, reality.

The story of Willy Loman is so well known that it hardly needs retelling. Willy is a salesman who can no longer sell, 60 years old and on the verge of collapse. His older son Biff, once a high school athletic star and Willy's favorite, has returned home penniless once again and promises to try to become the "magnificent success" that Willy dreamed was his destiny. His younger son Happy holds an insignificant company position, compensating for his mundane job by womanizing. Wife Linda stands by her man, probably unaware of Willy's infidelities on the road. Biff, however, has literally caught Willy in the act when, failing high school math, he goes to Boston to seek his father's help.

Willy becomes increasingly immersed in his memories, which are played out on stage, not flashbacks as such but scenes from the past that exist simultaneously with Willy's presence. The past is present, and Willy is haunted by the contrast between what he remembers as a happy time with the emptiness of his current world. He loses his job at the same time that Biff realizes that his pipe dream of instant success in the business realm is an illusion. Unable to survive his failure, Willy kills himself to provide insurance money, primarily for Biff.

On many levels, Willy is a victim of capitalism. The planned obsolescence of the many things the Lomans are paying off—the refrigerator, the car—and the way in which Willy is discarded (like the rind of a fruit, he cries when learning he is fired) by his boss when he is no longer effective indict the economic system in which he has such faith. He

is also a victim of the culture's sterility: his home, once far from the city, is now crowded by high-rise apartments; his boss's "business is business" coldness contrasts with Willy's creative instincts as a carpenter and gardener. And most pervasively, he is victimized by the success ethic. He risks everything to make it to the top. When he cannot do so, Biff must. But Miller also makes clear that Willy is at fault, accepting the false values of the success ethic too completely, although he hardly understands the competitive world in which he lives. He believes that success lies in being well liked, yet his brother Ben, portrayed as a rich man whom we meet only in memory scenes, says, "Never fight fair with a stranger. You'll never get out of the jungle that way." Failing to see that Ben is cruel and rapacious, Willy idolizes his older brother.

Biff's story is juxtaposed against Willy's, and Biff has been infected by his father's values, learning from his father that it is okay to steal and to lie. Ben's appearances throughout this play not only serve as reminders of Willy's delusions but reinforce the validity of Biff's eventual rejection of his father's dream. By the end of the play, Biff can claim, "I know who I am." Biff has learned to be himself by repudiating his father's success ethic.

Despite his faults, Willy is a sympathetic character, for his needs are much greater than his errors. The audience may, like Biff, reject Willy's ethics, but the play commands that we care deeply about Willy. Here, by uniting a condemnation of the society that destroys Willy with Biff's struggle to leave his family, Miller has brought together the story of an individual escaping the family and an exploration of the larger question of making the world a home. By giving us the full measure of Willy's pain, while linking

Biff's maturity to a rejection of both family and false society, Miller puts the struggle with the family at the service of social responsibility, defined as the self-knowledge that eludes Willy.

Like O'Neill and Miller, Tennessee Williams in *The Glass Menagerie* tests the psychological limits of individual existence. But whereas O'Neill traps his characters within the family and Miller provides a resolution of sorts with Biff's escape, Williams allows Tom Wingfield, the play's narrator and protagonist, to escape only to be haunted by memories. Tom is a would-be writer, caught between a domineering mother and stultifying warehouse job.

Menagerie, Tom tells us at the outset, is a memory play, and Williams uses many theatrical techniques—music, lighting, the poetic nature of Tom's narration, to reveal his inner self. What he remembers centers around two lines of action: The first is his desire to escape from his family just as his father, "a telephone man who fell in love with long distance," had done before him. The second concerns his mother, Amanda, and her attempts to establish some kind of life for Tom's crippled sister, Laura. When Laura is too shy to complete her business school courses and withdraws from the world by tending to her collection of glass figurines, Amanda pins her hopes on getting the girl married. Under pressure, Tom brings home a gentleman caller, an acquaintance from work, but Amanda's hopes are crushed when the young man turns out to be engaged.

The effect of this slight plot derives in part from the contrast between these two plot lines: Amanda's attempt to find a family and Tom's desire to escape from it.

Amanda's yearning for family is underscored when she indulges in memories of her youth

as a southern debutante in Mississippi, where on one incredible Sunday she had 17 gentleman callers. When she slips into her past, its portrayal becomes almost a parody of the traditions of the antebellum South and its family of security. But Amanda is not without a paradoxical dignity. On the practical side, she has raised two children in a St. Louis tenement during the Depression, and her refusal to succumb totally to her nostalgia, even as she indulges in it, makes the audience susceptible to her longing.

But she is smothering her son, constantly telling him what to do: how to eat, how to sleep, how to get ahead. And her standards represent to him the conventionality of family responsibility, just as his absent father represents romantic escape from it. The Wingfields are only a ghost of the family as security, but even this repels Tom. However, he loves his sister. His painful sensitivity to Laura's vulnerability both arouses his affection and drives him from her. But, as his final speech makes clear, he cannot escape her. He is haunted by the necessity to leave her and guilt over doing so. "Oh, Laura, Laura," he says, "I tried to leave you behind, but I am more faithful than I intended to be." Unlike Miller, Williams poses no resolution to the conflicting claims of personal freedom and family security, but by engaging his audience's sympathy to both sides, he refreshes its response to the dilemma of family life.

Like Williams, Lorraine Hansberry wrote of a family marginalized by economic circumstances but also by race. The Youngers are an African American family crowded together in a Chicago tenement apartment much too small for their modest needs. They have, as one member puts it, acute ghetto-itis. The family held together by Mama, a strong matriarch. She works to maintain the dreams of her deceased parents, who were

slaves, and her dead husband, whose life insurance policy provides the possibility of change in their lives. Son Walter wants the money to purchase a liquor store with two of his friends; Mama want to invest in a house and finds one she can afford in a working-class suburban white neighborhood—a dangerous choice in the late 1950s when the play was first produced. The resistant neighbors offer to buy back the house at a profit, and Walter comes close to accepting the bribe. He first sends the neighborhood representative packing, but when he loses his father's life insurance money by foolishly trusting one of his supposed partners with all the money—against Mama's express directions to set some aside for the house and his sister's medical school education—he nearly humiliates himself and his family by taking the money.

Yet we understand Walter's need for independence. From Mama's first entrance, her potential for tyranny is clear. Her dominance, however, is a balance of forces. Her severity with her daughter Beneatha's flippant remarks on religion is as much an indication of the daughter's immaturity as the mother's overbearing nature. Mother Lena has earned the right to her beliefs by living them. Beneatha has no reason to challenge them except as an act of youthful rebellion. Similarly, Walter's plan to make something of himself involves obtaining a liquor store license by graft. Not only are Walter's plans morally suspect to Lena, but they are outside the family's competence. Walter and Beneatha talk about being grown-up, but if Mama dominates them, it is in part because their actions are immature, ill-considered. They demand freedom, but Hansberry measures the legitimacy of that demand as well as Mama's overwhelming strength.

A Raisin in the Sun, then, portrays a conflict between security and freedom, but Hansberry works toward a new formulation of this dilemma, exploring its creative possibilities along with its destructive side. Dramatically, this potential is embodied in the rather simple ability of the characters to learn from each other, to change in reaction to claims made on them which they initially resist. When Mama and Walter are deadlocked, with Walter's pregnant wife planning an illegal abortion for a child for which there seems to be no room or financial support, the situation of claim and counterclaim is similar to the dramas already discussed. Several resolutions would have been possible. If no break or resolution occurs, we would have echoes of the love/hate destructiveness of the Tyrones. If the emphasis were to be on Mama with her powerful expectations of her son, we would get something of a replay of Willy Loman. If Walter were to break free but wound his psyche in the process, we would be reminded of Tom Wingfield. But the value of *Raisin* is Hansberry's attempt to work out a somewhat different pattern that recognizes both claims but sees their interaction as a matter of continuing possibility rather than a rigid dilemma. Both Mama and Walter are capable of change. The family does not represent a fixed psychological set but a potential for tuning agitation to interaction. One could argue that the potential for change in Mama and Walter is handled too simply—Walter has a sudden moment of realization just before selling out his family's dignity for money—but, weaving a rich strand of humor through her story, she does recognize that the tension between freedom and security in the family might be humanizing. At the end, Walter and his sister leave the stage quarreling as usual, but Mama and Walter's wife are on stage chuckling at them, which serve to insulate the audience from the siblings' habitual anger.

The curtain falls on an optimistic note, despite the certain dangers the family faces in their new and hostile neighborhood.

Other plays I have used in my course include Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Marsha Norman's *Night, Mother*. Albee's play features one of American drama's most famous couple at war: George—an undistinguished professor—and Martha, his wife. Although Martha, contemptuous of George's failure, dominates him, she privately yearns for a stronger man. They have created an imaginary child for their barren marriage, and each uses this son as a way to assault each other verbally. In the plays discussed up to this point, secrets play a vital role. In fact, in most family drama, secrets complicate the tensions. But in *Virginia Woolf*, it is the audience, not the family, from whom the secret—that the son is non-existent—is kept. George and Martha have no secrets between them, and they use their knowledge of each other to strike the other's most vulnerable spots. The play spans a long Saturday night during which the couple taunt their guests, a younger faculty member and his child-like wife. Finally, as the night ends, George declares the son dead. With the illusion destroyed, the couple finds that after a long night of playing vicious games with each other and the young couple, they can share something: the confession of their sterility. Having lasted through Saturday night, they are alone together at the beginning of Sunday to face each other in a tone not exactly hopeful but suggesting that hope might be possible.

Night, Mother explores a relationship between a dependent mother and her daughter, culminating in the offstage suicide of the daughter Jesse. Although Jesse's motives seem blurred, it becomes apparent that she views suicide as the one way she can

separate herself from her mother; this play, thus, explores the problem of female selfhood for both mother and daughter. I have also used, among other plays, Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*, August Wilson's *Fences*, Alfred Uhry's *Last Night at Ballyhoo*, Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*, Wendy Wasserstein's *The Sisters Rosensweig*, and Neil Simon's *Broadway Bound*. In each of the families portrayed by these dramatists, the tensions of the family between security and freedom are played out again and again, taking us over the same questions in search of answers. What is finally true about this world of the family, what those who people it represent, is a preoccupation with the family that continues even in attempts to escape from it. We seem never more committed to the family than when we reenact its destruction.

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