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Dysfunctional Marriages in American Drama

A recurrent motif throughout twentieth century American Drama is the dysfunctional American family. Within the family unit itself, husbands and wives specifically are frequently presented as being particularly alienated from each other, both physically and emotionally. This alienation is caused by a variety of factors, both internal and external, and almost invariably has a profound impact on the other characters in each play.

In several of the plays we read this semester, the alienation between husband and wife is either caused by or results in adultery. A perfect example is Troy and Rose Maxson's relationship in *Fences*. At the beginning of the play, their relationship is easygoing and natural. Although Rose nags Troy a little bit, she seems good-natured and indulgent of Troy. This all changes, however, when Troy tells Rose he has had an extra-marital affair with Alberta, a woman who makes him feel good "all the way down to the bottom of [his] shoes" (1526). He seeks this relationship outside his marriage because he doesn't feel compelled to take care of and provide for Alberta like he does Rose. He has worn himself out by giving to Rose and Cory, his son, for eighteen years. Rose is not able to understand this, however, because she feels like she has given to Troy "everything [she] had" (1527). She ultimately allows him back into their house, but only so that she can take care of Troy and Alberta's child after Alberta dies. She makes it clear, however, that she does it only for the child, and that Troy will from

then on be a "womanless man" (1529). Thus, Troy's emotional alienation from Rose is the cause of his adulterous relationship, which creates further estrangement.

There are also several instances in which an incestuous relationship creates division in the family. In *Buried Child*, the disaffection between Halie and Dodge is caused primarily by Dodge's awareness that the child was the offspring of Halie and Tilden, Dodge's son. Additionally, Dodge observes Halie's philandering with Father Dewis. The alienation between Dodge and Halie is so severe that the opening scene of the play shows them separated even physically: Dodge sits in a darkened room lit only by a flickering television set while Halie yells at him from offstage. The isolation is most striking when Dodge is about to betray the family's secret. Halie tells him, "Dodge, if you tell this thing - if you tell this, you'll be dead to me. You'll be just as good as dead." Dodge's matter of fact response is "That won't be such a big change, Halie" (1318). Similarly, the incestuous relationship between Abbie and Eben in *Desire* causes a rift in Abbie's marriage to Ephraim Cabot. Even before he finds out about the affair, Ephraim can feel something "pokin' round the corners" (960) of the farm and has an indistinct impression that something is very wrong. When he finds out about Abbie's relationship with Eben, he curses them both and says they should "be both hung on the same limb an' left thar t' swing in the breeze an' rot" (961).

Another common cause of marital isolation in American Drama is inability to satisfy or be satisfied either emotionally or sexually. For example, Walter Younger in *Raisin* feels like he is not respected by his family. He feels tied to a family of women that cannot appreciate his emotional need to be respected and supported. He feels like no one pays any attention, and in one scene cries out in desperation, "WILL SOMEBODY PLEASE LISTEN TO ME TODAY!"

(1231). Ruth, his wife, despite her deep love for him, feels the isolation too. Speaking of their former relationship, she says that they "lost it" and she does not know how to regain it. Similarly, the alienation between Maggie and Brick in *Cat* is caused by a lack of fulfillment, but sexually rather than emotionally. Brick is unable to have a sexual relationship with Maggie. He views her "without interest" (1065) and at times, is even "contemptuous" of her (1067). Despite Maggie's pleading, he says that he cannot stand her. It is implied throughout the play that the cause of Brick's disinterest is the secret homosexual relationship he had with his now-dead friend Skipper. This makes him sexually and emotionally unavailable to Maggie, despite her attractiveness and her obvious sexual desire for him.

Another influence on the marital relationship as depicted in American Drama is caused by one character's overemphasis on pursuit of certain aspects of the "American Dream." For example, Willy Loman's lifelong pursuit in *Salesman* has been to be successful financially and to be "well-liked" so he "will never want" (1132). He seeks the approval of his family and his colleagues. He also puts such an influence on material things that he encourages his children to pursue them at all cost, even if it means stealing or cheating. His desire for success is so strong that Willy is unable to face reality: he continually flashes back to the better days of the past and even holds imaginary conversations in his head. In *Raisin*, Walter Younger dreams of a time when he will have an office, a shiny new car, and long days full of "conferences and secretaries getting things wrong the way they do" (1243). He places such an emphasis on financial success that he squanders all the family's money, including the money that was earmarked for his sister's medical training. Ruth even talks about the dreams they used to share: "the way [they] were going to live . . . the kind of house" they were going to have

(1237). With the disintegration of these financial dreams, she has observed their relationship "starting to slip away" (1237). Maggie's pursuit of another aspect of the "American Dream" highlights her incompatibility with Brick in *Cat*: she wants to have a child just to gain respect from Brick's family and to secure an inheritance after Big Daddy dies. She stoops to bribing Brick to have sex with her just so she can get pregnant.

Many of the dysfunctional marital relationships in American Drama focus on the emasculation of the husband figure. In *Desire*, Ephraim Cabot is a laughingstock for the entire town because he falsely believes he has fathered Abbie and Eben's child. Abbie admits that Ephraim cannot satisfy her sexually at his age when she explains that she married him just to get the farm: "What if I did need a hum? What else'd I marry an old man like him fur?" (946). In *Zoo*, Jerry mocks Peter because of Peter's perfectly artificial and commonplace life, with his wife, children, and pets. Similarly, Albee's *American Dream* highlights an alienation between Mommy and Daddy, partially due to Daddy's "operation," which we interpret as a sign of Daddy's emasculation. In *Raisin*, the Younger family shows a lack of respect for Walter. They view Mama as the matriarch, the head of the family. Walter has little responsibility to the family other than financial. He seeks to assert his manhood by starting a business that will eventually bring the wealth and respect he desires. This desire to prove his manhood motivates him to foolishly invest the family's money in the liquor store business. Unlike some of the other plays in which the central male figure is emasculated, Walter ultimately retakes his abdicated position of authority in the household when he makes the unexpected decision to take the house at Clybourne Park. Thus, *Raisin* alone leaves some hope

of a happier ending (notwithstanding the trials the family will face in an all-white neighborhood).

Many of the individuals who are portrayed in unhappy marriages in American Drama had parents whose marriages were also dysfunctional. These plays as a group support the idea that patterns of dysfunctional families recur in each new generation. In *Cat*, Brick's parents have an unhappy marriage. Big Daddy admits to Brick that he "never even liked" Big Mama (1087) and that she "makes [him] sick" (1088). Big Daddy continually makes jokes at Mama's expense and views her with "chronic annoyance" (1080). He resents her because he feels that for years, she has "been gradually taking over" (1083) and has made him unsure as to who is the boss. Ephraim Cabot in *Desire* married Eben's mother just to keep his farm: "Her folks was contestin' [him] at law over [his] deeds t' the farm" (950). Eben watched his father work his mother to death and feels his mother haunting him for the rest of his life. In *Mother*, Jessie could tell even as a small child that her parents were unhappy. When her mother admits that she never loved her father, Jessie merely remarks "I didn't think so" (1470). She could tell that her parents were not fulfilled in their relationship. In *Buried Child*, Dodge and Halie's children and grandchildren observe their dysfunctional relationship and, whether intentionally or not, repeat the same pattern in their own relationships. At the end of the play, Vince inherits the family legacy and rejects Shelly to keep it. In each of the foregoing situations, the character whose parents were unhappy went on to have unhappy, dysfunctional relationships themselves.

Each of these plays highlights the difficulty of maintaining a happy marriage in the face of the internal and external conflicts that became increasingly common in twentieth century America and reflects the prevailing social trend toward dysfunctional families.