

Tracy Letts' August: Osage County as a Paradigm of Bad Parenting

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Received: 02/04/2022	Abstract <i>One's character is shaped by the family he/she has and the way he/she is raised up. Bad parents affect their children tragically, and the later consequences, the parents are the ones who pay for being bad ones. Tracy Letts explores the dark side of family life in his domestic play August: Osage County (2007), one of the most well-known contemporary plays of American theatre in the twenty-first century. The playwright presents the Westons as an embodiment of the image of family disconnected relationships due to bad parenting. Violet is a model of a bad mother who plays a prominent role in destroying her family. The impact of bad parenting is revealed in the circle of the formerly abused children who turned to be abusers of their children or the search for love and care in the others as an alternative to the parent image. This paper examines the reasons for being bad parents concerning Violet in particular and the psychological effects of her aggressive behavior and insufficient care for her three daughters. The importance of the study lies in demonstrating the shape of the characters of the daughters in facing the challenges of life.</i>
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1. INTRODUCTION

Aside from the genetic bond, parenting is raising and supporting the physical, social, psychological, intellectual, and financial development of a child from infancy to adulthood (Mahapatra & Batul, 2016). Thus, parenthood is a bond with multiple layers concerning the child and the parents. In this process of human development, parents have a direct and consequential influence on their children for the process of socialization and success in life. Children turn out well due to good parentage, and the opposite happens because of lousy parenthood (Kretchmar-Hendricks, 2017). Moreover, providing a harmonious family life and nurturing homes positively influences the later attitude adopted by children – adults; at the same time, terrible marital relationships impact children – adults in forming negative attitudes (Mahapatra & Batul, 2016).

Tracy Letts presents one of the darkest familial issues among the western family members in *August: Osage County*, which premiered at the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago in 2007 and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 2008. The play was inspired by a personal incident when Letts was ten years old, his grandfather committed suicide, and consequently, his grandmother began drug addiction (Fahy, 2020, 53).

2. Bad Parenting in August: Osage County

a- The Weston's Spouses

The audience is introduced in the prologue to Beverly and Violet Weston, husband and wife, who share their marital and parental life shockingly because Beverly is an alcohol addict while Violet is a pill-popping addict. Beverly a professor of literature and poet, explains in the opening scene to Johnna, a Cheyenne Native American woman, the situation of his house as he hires her to cook and clean for them. "My wife takes pills, and I drink. That's the bargain we have stuck...one of the bargains, just one paragraph of our marriage contract...cruel covenant. She takes pills, and I drink" (Letts, 2009, p.11). Accordingly, their marital relationship has been reduced to coexistence only where each one of them deals alone with his/her problems. Instead of facing their difficulties together, Beverly and Violet prefer isolation. Thus, the gap of connection is widened more and more as their daughters have to share in paying for the failure of their parents' marital relationship.

It seems that Beverly has lost his interest in many things without giving a particular reason, except his addict to alcohol. He has written only one successful book and seized writing anymore. His role as a father is shadowy, as if family for him is one of the interests in which he is no more interested (Fifer, 2013, p.189). Beverly sets the atmosphere of the play in the opening scene by quoting from T.S Eliot's 'The Hollow Men' as it does not only refer to his shadowy role as a father, it depicts the hollowness of the whole Weston family (Kochman, 2011, p.27). The quoted line from the poem: "Life is very long" (Letts, 2009, p.10) successfully foreshows his later action of committing suicide.

When Beverly has disappeared, the family members come to reunite with Violet before everyone knows about his tragic death. The union of the family members is supposed to spread the atmosphere of family's love and warmth, yet it presents their isolation and loneliness. Gabriela Glavan (2015) refers to the crowded stage in the play in which "the density of characters is reflected in the intensity of mutual evisceration" (p.118) as it mirrors the mother's relationship with her daughters. The structure and the atmosphere of the house symbolically depicts the familial relationships among the Weston. Their family house lacks "structural care

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since 1972” (Letts, 2009, p.9). The window shades are drawn and tapped shut in, which the sun's light is not allowed to enter.

Moreover, it is very hot inside the house because the air conditions are not working, and the heat is suffocating, driving anyone to run away. The unhealthy environment of the house reflects the unhealthy atmosphere provided by the parents to their daughters. Also, it depicts the dark and depressing matters of the Westons, such as suicide, alcohol abuse, pill-popping, divorce, and incest. Violet's pills taking causes her to have an oversensitivity to light which Violet solves by taping all the windows shut. Metaphysically the darkness in act one refers to the secrets revealed in act three, in which the windows are cleaned, tapes are removed, and the light is allowed to be in again.

Beverly and Violet, instead of facing each other, prefer silence. Beverly's suicide is due to his loneliness and isolation, failing to face his wife and problems, and lack of support and interest. Being unable to confront her husband about his betrayal of her sister and not forgive him turns Violet into aggressive, full of anger, screaming most of the time, and has a very sharp tongue which her tongue cancer is symbolic of it. Their choice of not confronting each other about his betrayal has led to disconnectedness. It has been a selfish decision because it has ruined the family. Their silence and her transformed hostile nature are reflected upon their daughters, who have to pay for it, resulting in an unhealthy homely environment where each of the daughters wants to escape it. The parental home environment determines the possibility of separation desire from home to escape into a marriage or a relationship. Pleasant environment in which parents have a good relationship causes close bonds among family members. Children – adults are less desirable to rush into marital or co-habitational relationships to get rid of a negative family environment (Thornton, 1991, p.873).

b- The Westons' Daughters

Children's poor outcome is almost linked to negative or bad parenting. Parents who have low levels of love and warmth result in behavioural problems in their children who feel insecure and lack emotional warmth. Thus, insecurity might cause depression and failure in making right decisions due to the lack of parental support (Knof, 2015; Hazhar et al., 2021). The three Weston daughters are unhappy and unable to take the right decisions, they just want to be away from their cold home. Barbara's marriage is a failure one. It seems that the elder daughter has been influenced by her parents' marriage as she repeats the same story. Just like her parents, Barbara's marriage lacks intimacy, and the spouses are about to divorce because of Bill's infidelity to her. However, Barbara and Bill try not to show that they lack an intimacy

connection when they come back after Beverly's disappearance. Yet, her mother knows about Barbara's marriage because she has had the same experience. Violet describes the relationship with her husband: "just him and me, here in this house, in the dark, left to ourselves, abandoned, wasted lifetimes" (Letts, 2009, p.100).

Barbara has failed as a wife and a mother. Jean, Barbara's daughter, does not show any care or feelings towards her grandfather's funeral. Jean cares more about missing a shown on TV than confronting her mother for the loss of her father, Barbara realizing that as she asks Jean: "Let me make sure I've got this: when you threw a fit about going to the store with your father...and you were so very distraught over the start of grandpa's funeral. Was this your concern? Getting back here in time to watch the Phantom of the Fucking Opera?" (Letts, 2009, p.53). Jean prefers to watch TV than having family communication, she is unavailable for her mother who needs her to pass this difficult time. Jean does not show any feelings toward her parent's continuous quarrel and their decision to divorce. Jean becomes self-centered because of her parents' bad marriage. Separateness leads to loneliness, and consequently to the tendency of self-centeredness. While the whole family gathers in the living room, Jean is upstairs drinking marijuana, Johnna notices her, and she is worried about the idea that a girl in her teens is left alone doing what she likes. Barbara and Bill do not know about their daughter's habit of smoking marijuana. Even her habits in food are not noticed and valued as Jean declares that she cannot eat this dinner because she is a vegetarian, and cares more about the fear of the animal when it is about to be butchered. However, she is not taken seriously as all members of the family start laughing at the idea of not eating meat. Letts presents the bad relationship between Jean and her parents as another example of how failure marital relationship affects badly the children. Parents tend to be occupied in their worlds of problems and loneliness ignoring and neglecting their children who remote themselves from the unhealthy homely environment.

Barbara's bad relationship with her daughter reflects her influence by her mother Violet who has had the same experience as a cycle from grandmother to her daughter to her granddaughter. Violet admits that she had inherited this aggressive nature from her mother who never treated her in a good way, Violet says: "My momma was a nasty, mean old lady. I suppose that's where I get it from" (Letts, 2009, p. 80), however, Karen assures her that she is not, she is their mother whom they love. Violet's remarks to Ivy, the second daughter, reveal her harsh and bad treatment of her daughter; "Young shoulders are slumped and your hair's all straight and don't wear makeup. You look like a lesbian. You're a pretty enough girl, you could get a decent man if you spruced up" (Letts, 2009, p.23). Violet tries to justify her hostile nature

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by referring to her mother treatment of her. She mentions a childhood memory which has affected her for a long time when her mother brought her dirty old pair of boots as a Christmas gift instead of shiny new one which Violet wished to have. The bad way of treating one's children reveals the force of repressed suffering, an evil circle in which the former victim turns to be the victimizer, the abused becomes the abuser. (Glavan, 2015, p.119).

Violet's and Beverly's bad parenting have influenced the three daughters. It is obvious that Beverly has loved his daughters, yet he is responsible of providing unhealthy homely environment to them, his philosophy of keeping issues as they are without discussing them with his wife to be solved has affected the atmosphere of home which has not been home for them. Violet has made a decision of not talking to him, a matter which has influenced her badly to be later on reflected in her relationship with her daughters. Elizabeth Fifer (2013) mentions that August: Osage County "reinforces the dilemma of parents who failed to raise successful and independent children" (p.184). Karen, the youngest daughter, a woman in her forty, lives independently in Florida and comes to her family home because of the news of her father's being disappeared, later to attend his funeral. She does not come alone, she comes with her new fiancé, Steve, a businessman in his fifties. It seems that Karen has chosen a sad difficult time for her family to introduce her new date to them a matter which shows her disinterest in the cares of her own family. However, Karen is a woman who feels lost spending her life searching for love and care outside her home because she has not found these feelings inside. Thus, she has many unsuccessful relationships with different men that have never been serious relationships. When she and everyone in the house know about Steve's attempts to seduce and flirt with her teenage niece, Jean, Karen is not shocked. Ironically, Karen tries to justify his behavior and never blames him. She is desperate and is not ready to break her engagement to him, though it is evident that they are not going to succeed together. He is not a man to be trusted, yet Karen chooses to leave her home in the end with him.

Ivy, the second daughter, is the only daughter who has lived these years among her parents to take care of them. She has never married. Just like all the members of the Weston family, Ivy suffers the loss of connectedness, despair, and emptiness. Her refuge is found in her cousin Little Charles, towards him she has strange feelings based on understanding. He is the only one who knows about Ivy's cervical cancer. She plans to travel with him to New York to live there away from their families. Near the end, Violet reveals the truth that Little Charles is her daughter's half-brother from her sister Mattie Fae. Ivy is full of anger and despair about this knowledge, later she tells Violet and her sisters that she is determined to fulfill her plan of running away with Little Charles as if she has known nothing, she blames her mother for

revealing the reality of Little Charles. Ivy decides to go on as if nothing happens. Another relationship is doomed to be a failure as it is based on incest.

c- The Symbolic Unhomely Environment

Letts reinforce the unhomely environment which the daughters lack in the form of meals and food. One of the elements of having healthy environment provided by parents to their children is cooking and having meals together around the same table. The playwright shows the Weston's family inability or unwillingness to cook as an indicator of bad parenthood (Fahy, 2020, p.53). Beverly hires Johnna to cook for the family, her cooking provides stability and intimacy which the Westons miss. The family are connected together again around the dinner table for Beverly's funeral which has been prepared by Johnna. The Westons praise her cooking as their repeated compliments reveal the fact that shared meals and good food have been lacked in the family. The failure of cooking and gathering around one meal reflects the absence of nurturing and community in their home (Fahy, 2020, pp.62-65). Letts draws the attention that the intimate atmosphere is offered by a stranger in the form of Johnna, and not one of the parents. However, Violet breaks the intimate moments at the dinner time by having a harsh quarrel with Barbara. Moreover, the idea that intimacy is provided by a stranger clarifies the daughters' pursuit of warmth and love outside their home, it is supposed to be provided by strangers. When Barbara comes home, she is welcomed by Johnna: "Welcome home" (Letts, 2009, p.28), a sentence was supposed to be said by Violet instead. The parents' failure in nurturing their daughters in the appropriate way is given back when the three daughters refuse to take care of their mother. In the end Violet is left alone suffering the losses of her life: "And then you're gone, and Beverly, and then you're gone, and then you're gone, and then you're gone" (Letts, 2009, p.101). The tragic end of leaving the mother alone with the housekeeper is intended to shed light on the damage of the family as the mother has to suffer because of her action in neglecting her daughters and not performing her proper role as a mother.

3. CONCLUSION

Bad parenting does not only refer to the physical and emotional abuse done by the parents to their children, but it is also the lack of responsibility and the inability to provide love, and warmth to their children. Consequently, their children-adults grow up having fragile personalities, lack of the needs of security and love drive them to look for these needs outside their homely environment. The Westons, Beverly and Violet, have drawn themselves in the dilemma of Beverly's infidelity and neglected their daughters. Their daughters grow up to be

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failures in their relationship whether in marriage, family formation, and engagement. Letts presents the unhomely environment of the Weston parents offered to their daughters, the Weston daughters are neglected like the structure of their house. Ironically, they are united again the dinner of their father's funeral, love and warmth are provided by strangers, not by the parents.

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