

**The American Family at the Crossroads
of the "Gothic" Tradition and Modern Drama Revolution**

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The American family has proven to be a fertile ground for the twentieth century dramatic practice. After either the reading of or an attendance to a modern American play one would ask rhetorically, "What definite facts those American families have missed to include?" There is not anything, issues like love story, crime, incest,...every aspect is included in family. Fascination with the American family, as a very serious theme, lies behind it different reasons, and one of the many literary discussions connected to the issue is its striking relevance to the characteristics of the "gothic"¹ tradition.

The present paper seeks to provide answers for an interwoven set of questions like:

1. How does the "gothic" literary genre apply to modern American drama in terms of family relationships?
2. What specific characteristics make the cast of family members "gothic"?
3. How the modern man reflects the "gothic" character being either a fallen father or an alienated mother or a haunted violent son?

The questions above would help me depict the many ways through which outstanding American dramatists like Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Sam Shepard attempted to reorient modern drama using the "gothic" devices though it had been for long the serious hold of the novel. In this sense the study lends itself to a psychological examination of character types.

Recently, the focus of various literary as well as culturally discussions concerned with the twentieth-century family plays is on its portrait within the "gothic" tradition. Numerous studies have attempted to elucidate the term "gothic" using psychology or sociology. In works by Michael Gamer, Anne Williams and Maggie Kilgour the phrase "psychology of gothic" has been coined.

As a sociological tenet, "gothic" in modern drama sheds light on many myths related to the American family. The view of the home as a "*place of peace*" (Ellis: 219), ruled by the father as provider and protector raises one of the very shadowy issues. The modern image of the father is very often linked to his prominent responsibility for the wrongdoings which is culturally contradictory to his intended role. He is actually the scoundrel whose crimes lead to the family's demise. In this sense, the same process of cultural disconnection is evoked by Theresa Goddu in her work *Gothic America* where she describes the misconception of the blight slavery in the land of freedom as a "*cultural contradiction*" (30). Therefore, the patriarchal figure whose moral decline precipitates his social and physical decline, is a recurrent literary device that reflects one of the many aspects of the cultural contradictions that shake the grounding of the American culture.

Then, the father's direct links with the mother and the son are so pitiless that they become traumatized subjects. The alienated mother and the haunted son fully apply to the gothic model in the way they refuse of the past to stay buried². Much of what is examined for the pair (alienated mother/ haunted son) is confined to psychology. The former suffers her husband's demeaning behaviour through an emotional and psychological decline, so lack of affection toward their children and the outright hostility toward the husband removes her picture from the real scope of a mother.

The haunted, violent son is the third identifiable character; a direct and inevitable product of the fallen father and the alienated mother. His birth into gothic circumstances awkwardly his destiny making his life full of doubt and despair. His only resolution to cope with the dangerous world is the inevitable instinctual violence.

In this sense those characters lend themselves to a state of psychological trauma, as well as with the defence mechanism of repression whereby the traumatic memory is "buried". Being involved in a so traumatic situation, the victims are internally conflicted as they attempt to vocalize their traumatic memories and to bury them³. As far as the remaining gothic devices are concerned, one would ask "how would ghosts and 'uncanny' moments be included in the literary making of those families?" The dramatists conceive them as results of the characters' unsuccessful attempts at repression.

Henceforth, the use of gothic devices out of their originally historical parameters of world literature has enabled the modern playwrights portray the today-family as a dysfunctional social unit whose members are hopelessly alienated, cynical and perpetually suffering from psychic and emotional failures. Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams are important precursors of "gothic" family plays and whose influences have very strong echoes in the late Twentieth-century drama as well as the twenty-first⁴. The cast of characters in either E. O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, or T. Williams' *Streetcar Named Desire* and *Suddenly Last Summer*; actually applies to the identifiable types and their delineating psychological characteristics above. By situating those character types into specific gothic devices the playwrights display their awareness of the relevance of uncanny moments, incest, ghosts, a family curse and dramatic excess to the becoming of the family today. In other words, the literary achievement is mainly about the shift

of the American family from its images of harmony, security and values keeper to those of terror, degradation and disillusion.

For Eugene O'Neill, his own family had facilitated the task for him since it provided real-life models for the gothic character types. James O'Neill, Eugene's father, is best portrayed through Ephraim Cabot in *Desire Under the Elms* or James Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Besides, the mother Ella O'Neill, whose slavery to morphine addiction is the clearest manifestation of her hateful attitude to her husband, and his older brother Jamie very often served as models respectively for the alienated mother and the haunted son.

However, Tennessee Williams's contribution to the making of gothic American families does not drive itself from autobiographical data. Unlike E. O'Neill's Tyrones and Mannons, T. Williams's portraits are not traditional nuclear families but rather fragmented suggesting deeper and emotional psychic disconnections. Through his emphasis on social factors such as urbanization and its effects on familial ties T. Williams's images tend to reflect the noise, pollution and crimes surrounding those portraits.

In modern drama, gothic evolved in many several ways. Perhaps the most significant evolution is the one referring to the gothic into the domestic sphere, namely into the home of the American nuclear family. Family farms, small-town venues or urban ghettos are the substitutes for the isolated castles and dark, boundless forests. Closer to man the sources of traditional gothic terror and suspense have become much more intensely personal. The gothic terror is located domestically in the form of dark familial secrets which refuse to lie dormant.

The dramatists' use of the Gothic seems to have followed the same process as that of the Renaissance. That literary tradition

has enabled playwrights provide us with one of the most mysterious drama without demanding resolution, it has even quenched our thirst for the supernatural and the surreal. On the theoretical aspect of literature, the use of gothic devices has cleaned the literary mind from the view that novels are the only and primary vehicles of gothic literature through the bright demonstration that drama is especially pregnant with possibilities to not only exploit lives of persons but to explore them as well. The very nature of the gothic devices in creating emotional and psychological reactions in the reader, would best handle their fully meanings through spectacle. Therefore, the scenery makers tend to accompany their audiences in one of the most exceptional journey at understanding the social, emotional and psychological upheavals that would shake the American life in its whole.

Notes:

1. The term "Gothic" itself is somewhat problematic since it has been primarily applied to a literary genre; a historical literary period between Late eighteenth-century and Early nineteenth-century Britain. Being expansive the term is also connected to various literary device and motifs.
2. I am using the term "buried" in the psychological sense than in the literal sense. So, psychologically speaking it refers to "Repression" as a mechanism to hide, keep back and control pleasurable wishes such as the sexual desire, which is in its turn related to the mechanism of "foreclosure" that involves the memories not being repressed properly. For the present study my focus is solely on the former device.
3. In Judith Herman's work *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), psychological trauma involves "the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud" (1). Furthermore, she states that "people who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy." (1)
4. The influence of E. O'Neill's and T. Williams' "Gothic" family plays is best surfacing in the plays of Sam Sheppard from his earliest work