

## Absent Presence of Fathers in the Selected Works of Tennessee Williams and Anne Tyler

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### Abstract

The paper offers insight into the psychological state of children without father figures in their lives. Society often acknowledges the role of mother in the upbringing of a child but fails to give the due importance to the masculine parent, who happens to play a great role in the nourishment of a child's personality. This paper, therefore, aims to bring forth this misconception and aims at highlighting the role of a father in shaping the personality of the offspring, in special reference to the works of Tennessee Williams and Anne Tyler.

**Keywords:** Children; Father; Psychological state; Upbringing.

A psychological state that detrimentally affects the development of a child as a consequence of separation from male parent is termed as 'Father Hunger'. Throwing more light on the notion, James M. Herzog in the article "On Father Hunger: The Father's Role in the Modulation of Aggressive Drive and Fantasy" has described it in the following words: "Children without fathers experience father hunger, an affective state of considerable tenacity and force. Father hunger appears to be a critical motivational variable in matters as diverse as caretaking, sexual orientation, moral development, and achievement level." Furthermore, it is reckoned that children who confront such problem feel that "they lack something that they vitally need.... The ambivalence, hurt, and hatred...seem to maximize for the child the felt absence of a masculine parent." The society grants more credence to the love of mother in the growth of the child. In situation which triggers separation of parents, due to some or the other reason, like divorce, custody of the offspring is seamlessly granted to the mother, without realizing the significance of the role of a father in the rearing of the child. Undoubtedly, mother is the key figure in the life of the child but the role of the father cannot be overlooked. The following lines by Erlkoning illustrate the essence of father in the life of the child:

"Who is riding so late through dark and wind?  
It is the father with his child.  
He has the boy snug in his arms

He holds him safely; he keeps him warm" (Herzog "Sleep Disturbance").

The above lines, beautifully, demonstrate the intimacy shared by the child with the father, who functions as a safety net in the life of the offspring. He grants him with an identity and a sense of fulfillment.

Contradictory to the assumption of the society, the role of the father is not restricted to providing the child with bread and butter for survival. It is broad enough to envelop emotional watering that vouchsafes a sense of worth to explore the world with confidence. Tennessee Williams' *Glass Menagerie* and Anne Tyler's *Average Waves in Unprotected Water* grant an exploration into the same conception.

The desertion of Mr. Wingfield is loathsome for Amanda, the single mother taking utmost care of her children. Her good intentions let the reader view her as not only a fighter but as a dreamer as well. Stimulated by motherly emotions, she wishes her son to become more responsible and tread on the path to a good career. However, she is pricked by Tom's bad habits, particularly, attending movies almost every night. Moreover, he was a little romantic at heart; he loved poetry, but this was of complete detestation for Amanda. Even though Tom was a lover of literature but he was a realist; he viewed things as they were, much in opposition to the temperament of his mother.

No doubt, Amanda desires the best for her children and her intentions are purely dipped in motherly worries, but such attitude of hers gets on the nerves of Tom. He gets infuriated and vexed attributable to her 'over-concern'. She does not let him drive into the world of delusion. This pisses him off and instigates ripples of pain, more than he could endure. He, unconsciously, begins to miss his father so as to save him from such occurrence. At the same time, he holds a beleaguered image of him, for he was the sole reason of all the mishap in the lives of Wingfields.

Mr. Wingfield is the absent father in Williams' *Glass Menagerie*, but has a prominent role in the play. His resolution to abandon the family triggers eternal repercussions on the clan. The setting of the play indicates the significance granted to his character in the plot, every minuscule act advocates the 'absent' presence in the ménage. This is evident in the following lines, "a blown-up photograph of the father hangs on the wall of the living room" (William). It is the unavailability of Mr. Wingfield that moulds the facade of the family in adverse ways. Be it his children, Tom and Laura, or be it his better half, Amanda, they carry the burden of surviving through a long course of life and its responsibilities on their slender

shoulders and suffer the pain and uncertainty that come along with the loss of the strong male-lead of the family.

Tom Wingfield, the son of Mr. Wingfield, bears eternal effects of his desertion. His heart-wracking detail of the message contained in the postcard by his father, as merely having two words, "Hello- Goodbye!" (Williams), strikes the reader about the probable loss which the absence the father figure brings and the apathy that dissolves in the life of the child. It is strenuous for Tom to resolve the emotional turmoil he undergoes, to grapple with the feeling of being left to survive and care for the clan at the same time. He could not come to grips with the bitter and absolute truth concerning his father's abandonment. Oftentimes, he is impinged with the notion of escapism from the clan. This comes to him as a legacy from his father. No doubt, he detests him, but cannot help to be like him. He cannot forge to think the unforgettable decision that was once taken by his father. His description of the photograph and the postcard exemplifies the depth of emotion annexed to them. The feeling of dejection and glumness hovers over his heart and soul. Of course, he bears the obnoxious feeling towards Mr. Wingfield. But even then the father becomes a stimulant that stirs Tom to depart from the family. Tom once mentions to Jim that, "I'm like my father. The bastard son of a bastard!" (Williams). Even though, he realizes the fact that his father was of no good in life and was a mere escapist, he could not rescue himself from charting out the same path that he once walked on. Mr. Wingfield becomes his role-model even though he hated him 'dearly'. This happens, perhaps, partly because of Amanda's failure to understand his choices and interests. Tom loved poetry. His dreams and freedom, like any other person, were of great significance for him. The presence of his mother, more appropriately, her domineering demeanor, tormented his soul rather than being of any comfort to him.

Nonetheless, Tom Wingfield suffers the most. The reason for his agony lies in "the absence of a mature father-child connection [which] creates a void in the soul, a residual "father-hunger"" (Schaller 27). He was instigated to move away from Amanda and Laura, attributable to the make-believe world woven with the strings of pipe dreams. The son endeavors hard to let Amanda come to grips with the fact that he cannot gel with such macrocosm, full of fantasy and falsity. Tom tries to showcase that there exists certain dissimilitude between his conceived notions and that of his caregiver. Amanda refuses to acknowledge this; she doesn't appreciate the things that Tom likes to involve in, with much zest. Tom believes that "man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, and a fighter" (Williams). These are the traits that have semblance with that of Mr. Wingfield's attributes, but Amanda did not view them as respectable. Tom was very much introspective of the qualities which

he possessed and had a strong parallel with that of his father. Not only this, he knew that Amanda refused to see them as something decent. This lets in feelings of suffocation within him, which prompt him to take a quick decision of getting away from the stifling environment. The realization that the facade that he is into, is playing a destructive role over his creative skills and ability to sensitize, infuses repulsion from the same. The awareness daunted him to move away. He realized the implications of his act, but what he could not realize was the stronger drive that instigated him to take such a firm step forward. This happens to be the unsettled hurt associated with the father. It is confirmed that, "often the need is hidden, like a deep river of water flowing under the surface. The hunger may be out of sight but it is never gone. After more time, the deepest water break through to the surface. The hunger, longing, and disappointments begin to come forth" (Schaller 45).

Father Hunger could be well discerned in the character of Tom's sister, Laura Wingfield, an extremely reserved child to an overbearing mother. The larger-than-life photograph of Mr. Wingfield has, indeed, a larger-than-life impact on his daughter's existence. She is unable to cope up with her slightly crippled leg, which she reckons as a neon-sign, pointing out at her imperfection. In her conversation with Jim, she points, "I had that brace on my leg - it clumped so loud... To me it sounded like - thunder" (Williams). The father's absence in her situation appears to be a source of profound misery that propels an unbeknownst expedition that sought to restore the presence of Mr. Wingfield. This quest plays havoc in the life of Laura, who is painfully shy and highly conscious of her infirmity. This impels her to step back from an entrance into the social world and adopting a world of recluse. This characteristic enforces her to withdraw from the typing institute "after only a few day's attendance" (Williams). The daughter has deeply nursed the inferiority complex owing to her little defect. It has become a central mark of her personality. Perhaps, if she would have the support of her father, his assurances and his presence would have provided some sort of grounding in her life. She would not have been so unsure of her true self.

In resemblance to Tennessee Williams' characters of *Glass Menagerie*, Anne Tyler's *Average Waves in Unprotected Waters* grants a poignant expression of father hunger. The short-story documents the suffering of the child, Arnold, a nine-year old boy, who is developmentally disabled. It also throws light on the torment endured by his mother, Bet Blevins, as a consequence of the same. Bet single-handedly raises her son after being left to sail through the 'average waves in unprotected water' by the husband, Avery Belvins, weeks after the child was diagnosed with abnormality. "Avery said it [the child] gave him chills. And after the doctor talked to them Avery wouldn't have

anything to do with Arnold anymore - just walked in wide circles around the crib, looking stunned and sick. A few weeks later, he left" (Donley and Buckley). The story is primarily narrated through the lens of Bet and not Arnold, who unconsciously craves for 'father water'.

A dive deep into the tale lets the reader discern the 'uneasiness' that becomes the hallmark of the character Arnold Blevins, "a knobby child with great glassy eyes" . . . his face was elderly - pinched, strained, tired - though it should have looked as unused as his jeans. He hardly ever changed his expressions" (Donley and Buckley). The child reflects mental defectiveness on the surface and a deep thirst for father figure in his life. He is being taken care of by Bet, who time and again indulges in contemplative thoughts of her life in the past, in connection with her husband and her maiden life. This hardly left much room for her to cater to the needs of the child. Evidently, this deteriorated the condition of the child all the more, for his existence was devoid of emotional support.

The reader is informed through the text that the boy is prone to frequent fits of rage and violent tantrums. This is due to his mental state owing not only to his retardation but also a dire yearning for healing through love and care, which the caregivers fail to gauge. It is difficult to raise such child, for he could not be engaged in any activity for long and soon becomes ungovernable. It was strange to notice him when he looked at familiar things with a tinge of unfamiliarity. New things seemed to "have no meaning for him" (Donley and Buckley).

On the surface, it appears that Arnold forms no attachment and hardly gives any importance to anyone who loves him. This inference may find its grounds in the instance of Mrs. Puckett, who used to baby-sit for him, yet could not get the due reciprocal love from him. However, a plunge into the deep waters of the psyche of the boy suggests that he was quite sensitive. It was probably that he somehow grasped that he was taken away from his dwelling and his cold response to Mrs. Puckett was more as a result of his despair over the same. The boy had profound emotions for old things and used to form firm attachments. This is witnessed in the act where it is revealed that Arnold loved his little red duffel coat, which he had outgrown. His mother had brought new jacket for him "but Arnold didn't like it, he always wanted his old one" (Donley and Buckley). No doubt, it appears that the child has a sort of emotional imbalance, partly because of his vulnerability, but this grows into a major problem due to the absence of a strong relationship with the father. Research posits that the "child's primary relationship with his/her father can affect all of your child's relationships from birth to death, including those with friends, lovers, and spouses. Those early patterns of interaction with father are the very patterns that will be projected forward

into all relationships forever more. It affects not only your child's intrinsic idea of who he/she is as he/she relates to others, but also, the range of what your child considers acceptable and loving. (Wagenhals). Clearly, it is witnessed that Arnold has weak emotional spine and his reactions are not appropriate. His reflexes come pretty late. Yet, he senses the loss of attachment figure. This is well discerned when Bet leaves him in the ward and goes down the corridor. "As the nurse was unlocking the doors for her, she heard a single terrible scream, but the nurse only patted her shoulder and pushed her gently on through" (Donley and Buckley).

Clearly, thus, "fathers are central to the emotional well-being of their children. . ." (Gross). Be it in Tennessee Williams' *Glass Menagerie* or be it in Anne Tyler's *Average Waves on Unprotected Waters*, the absence of father from the life of the offspring takes a heavy toll on their psyche. It becomes quite strenuous to cope up with the wild blows of life and come to terms with the hard realities of existence. This is true not only in case of developmentally disabled child like Arnold but also is equally true for Laura, who is physically disabled, and Tom, who appears normal *prima facie*, but deep down the spine faces grave emotional turbulence.

When an attempt is made to establish comparison between the two works, it is witnessed that both are remarkable in their own ways. Anne Tyler through '*Average Waves in Unprotected Waters*' has taken up quite a serious tone from the beginning of the short-story itself, letting the reader know that there is something suspicious with Arnold. "As soon as it got light, Bet woke him and dressed him, and then she walked him over to the table and tried to make him eat cereal. He wouldn't though. He could tell something was up. She pressed the edge of the spoon against his lips till she heard it click on his teeth, but he just looked off at a corner of the ceiling" (Donley and Buckley). In not more than five pages, she has put forth her dexterity to present a striking piece of composition that transports the reader into a world of Bet and Arnold, full of pain and struggle. Primarily, it is by means of the setting. Bet's falling abode bears the "feeling of too many lives layered over other lives, like the layers of brownish wallpaper" (Donley and Buckley), a hallmark of her stifling and lonely life. Furthermore, the journey through train provides a glimpse into their lives down the memory lane of being left by Avery. The physical description of Arnold numbs the reader of the mental strain impacting his health, right from the time he was born. "Through the blond prickles of his hair, cut short for practical reasons, she could see his skull bones moving as he chewed. He was so thin-skinned. Almost transparent; sometimes she imagined she could see blood traveling in his veins" (Donley and Buckley). Further, it is unveiled that, Bet "watched his eyelashes slowly drooping- two colorless, fringed crescents, heavier and

heavier, every now and then flying up as he tried to flight off sleep. He had never slept well, not ever, not even as a baby. Even before they'd noticed anything wrong...his jittery, jerky catnaps, his tiny hands clutching tight and springing open" (Donley and Buckley). Finally, the setting of the hospital takes place which is white and sterile, smell of disinfectant, typical to hospitals, "a smell Bet hated, pine-oil disinfectant, but Arnold didn't seem to notice. You never knew; sometimes smell could just put you in a state" (Donley and Buckley). Each setting reinforces of what suffering they have been through in their lives, because of being left alone by Avery.

Tennessee Williams, on the other hand, through his drama has poignantly demonstrated the empty lives of Laura, Tom and Amanda. In contrast to the genre of short-story which is quite condensed in structure, a play has a better volume to provide a peep into the lives of its characters and that is what Williams' play does. It has a wider scope, which he explores quite well. The very title of the work, '*The Glass Menagerie*', is symbolic as it lets us acquaint with the fragile world of Williams' characters. No doubt, the title of Tyler's short-story is also suitable enough to describe the lives of Bet and Arnold; '*Average Waves on Unprotected Waters*', well depicts the harsh lives of its ordinary characters. '*The Glass Menagerie*' also uses the symbols like 'the glass unicorn' as a strong reflection of unusual character of Laura and her life, which would never be the same after her dreams and aspirations are blown apart after revelation of Jim's engagement. The symbol of 'Blue roses' also well suits Laura, who is in worse condition than that of her brother, Tom. At least Tom has found refuge in various forms of arts, but Laura has no such escape. She is a mere puppet who tries to cope up with the hopes and aspirations of her mother, Amanda, who though desires good for her children but in the process does no good to them, and suffocates their real self instead.

To sum up, deep inside Arnold, Laura and Tom, the reader can see through that the deprivation of a father figure has injected acute abnormality in each of them, which prompts them to retreat into the world of seclusion in their own strange ways.

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