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Making the World a Home: The Family Portrait in Drama

Jean Anne Waterstradt

We are blessed to live in a culture that seeks to uphold, strengthen, and ennoble man's oldest institution—the family. From its very beginning the LDS Church has embraced the ideal of the moral, harmonious, loving home. During the past two decades, when the assault on the family has grown so vicious and on occasion so successful that at times its survival has seemed imperiled, the Church has voiced its belief in the family in increasingly encouraging, persuasive, forceful tones. Indeed, President David O. McKay's assertion that "No other success in life can compensate for failure in the home"¹ has come to carry for concerned Church members an almost-scriptural authority. Recently President Spencer W. Kimball has pronounced the family "our chief source of physical, emotional, and moral strength."²

In this context of Mormonism's overriding commitment to the family, I wish to explore with you the treatment of the family in literature. Whether their medium is poetry, prose fiction, or drama, the greatest artists among the storytellers in Western tradition organize their most significant and cogent statements around the family. Because my special interest in literature lies in drama, I wish to look at the treatment of the family therein. We may use the term "family" in two meaningful senses: that of the family of our immediate experience and that of the family of mankind sharing a common heritage of similar emotional experience.

Family relationships have provided the structure for dramatists from ancient Greece to modern America. The reason is simple, but fundamental: the family is the microcosm; within its bounds are fostered all basic human relationships. Every strength and goodness and

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¹David O. McKay, *Conference Report of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, April 1964, p.

²Spencer W. Kimball, *The Ensign* 9 (January 1979):79.

also every weakness and evil of which human beings are capable originate within the family and from there develop and spread to determine the shape and quality of man's larger society. Within the family circle, a child encounters two formative forces—the nurturing care of the mother and the authoritarian demands of the father. As he grows older and strives to establish his independence, the child has the choice of two possible resolutions to his struggle for psychological and emotional maturity: a dominant identification with one of these primary forces in the family or an achievement of harmony—balance—through a synthesis.

If we share Arthur Miller's view of drama as "being [as] total [an] art as the race has invented,"³ then we believe that what we see in drama has a power over us unparalleled by any other art. Thus, those tender, those brutal, those loving, those savage, those sustaining, those destructive experiences we live through in that all-transcending group we call family are least ambiguous and most enlightening when they are patterned by a great playwright. And if in drama the families we meet are less than ideal, less than perfect, they are all the more understandable to us fallible members of real families. Through their flaws, their errors, their moral failures we begin to perceive the ideal. And if they sometimes rise to moral heights, they show us what we are capable of doing and becoming.

Miller asserts that

all plays we call great, let alone those we call serious, are ultimately involved with some aspect of a single problem. It is this: How may a man make of the outside world a home? How and in what ways must he struggle, what must he strive to change and overcome within himself and outside himself if he is to find the safety, the surroundings of love, the ease of soul, the sense of identity and honor which, evidently, all men have connected in their memories with the idea of family?⁴

I should like now to consider three plays disparate in style and technique, yet unmistakably bound together by structures predicated on family relationships, on moral issues that emanate from those relationships, and on the suggestion of that fine balance—that harmony—between the demands of the mind and the heart which is mandatory to growth and success of the family. The three dramas I will examine are Sophocles' *Antigone*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and Miller's *Death of a Salesman*—as they explore moral ineptitude, moral

³Arthur Miller, "The Family in Modern Drama," *Modern Drama: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Travis Borgan and William I. Oliver (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 232.

⁴Ibid., pp. 222-23.

uncertainty, moral collapse as well as moral commitment, moral insight, moral action, all within the context of the family; as they deal with Miller's ultimate question, "How may a man make of the outside world a home?"

ANTIGONE

There are two families to ponder in *Antigone*:⁵ one crippled and almost obliterated from the beginning of the drama and the other maimed and decimated at the conclusion. The first family referred to is, of course, that of Oedipus and Jocasta, his mother-wife, and their two sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, and two daughters, Antigone and Ismene. At the beginning of the play only the two sisters are alive. The second family consists of Creon, Jocasta's brother; Eurydice, his queen; and Haimon, their son; another son has died. Thus, at the beginning of the play, this family is nearly intact, but at the conclusion only Creon lives. We will owe our closest attention to the triad consisting of Creon, Antigone, and Haimon.

The central conflict occurs, as is common in drama, between members of two generations, between Antigone and her uncle, Creon, now King of Thebes since Antigone's two brothers have died at each other's hands. Antigone and Creon collide as a result of the way each views the deeds of Polyneices. Because Polyneices has led an army against his home city in an attempt to take the throne from Eteocles, Creon, in his first official act as king, forbids the burial of Polyneices, at the same time giving Eteocles full honor with a soldier's funeral. Antigone sees Polyneices not as a traitor, but as a brother, and consequently chooses to defy the law. She boldly asserts that her crime in burying her brother is "holy." However, Ismene laments:

We are only women,
 We cannot fight with men . . .
 The law is strong, we must give in to the law
 In this thing . . .
 I am helpless: I must yield
 To those in authority. And I think it is dangerous
 business
 To be always meddling.

[Fitts-Fitzgerald, *Prologue*, p. 461]

⁵Three translations of Sophocles' *Antigone* were used: Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald, trans., *The Antigone of Sophocles* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1939), reprinted in Dudley Fitts, ed., *Greek Plays in Modern Translation* (New York: Dial Press, 1947); H. D. F. Kitto, trans., *Sophocles: Three Tragedies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962); and E. H. Plumptre, trans., *The Tragedies of Sophocles* (London: Isbister and Company, [1865]).

Ismene has thus acknowledged that she holds the demands of authority superior to the demands of love.

"We—all of us—have a role anteceding all others," Arthur Miller declares; "we are first sons, daughters, sisters, brothers. . . . The concepts of Father, Mother, and so on were received by us unawares before the time we were conscious of ourselves as selves."⁶ Enveloped in tragedy, Antigone, motherless and fatherless, is then, as we first see her, a sister, loving both brothers and acting in behalf of one whom the state has denounced. She moves in accordance with what she calls "the immortal unrecorded laws of God" (Fitts-Fitzgerald, scene 2, p. 473). But in her protective and holy concern for her dead brother, she becomes also a mother. She is right, of course, when she defies Creon's edict in order to obey what she identifies as the law of heaven. In Emily Dickinson's language, she upholds the "divine majority" of the soul. She recognizes the claims of the family to the exclusion of any others.

However, Creon is also right in his insistence that the laws of society must be upheld; initially, therefore, he recognizes only the claims of the state. "Anarchy, anarchy!" he cries. "Show me a greater evil!/ This is why cities tumble and the great houses rain down,/ This is what scatters armies!" He is right when he asserts that "good lives are made so by discipline." And he is right when he questions rhetorically, "If I permit my own family to rebel,/ How shall I earn the world's obedience?" (Fitts-Fitzgerald, scene 3, pp. 480, 479). Kitto notes that Creon "has tradition and experience on his side" and that "his maxims are sensible." He emphasizes that Creon "has his own honesty, his own justification, and his own sense of responsibility."⁷

As king, as uncle, as father, Creon is naturally the chief figure of authority in the play. In his *Dictionary of Symbols*, J. E. Cirlot notes that the father "stands for the force of tradition. [He] represents the world of moral commandments and prohibitions restraining the forces of the instincts and subversion."⁸ As he deals with Antigone, steadfastly refusing the claims she represents—the nurturing instinct, love, the heart—Creon fully exercises that force Cirlot identifies. And he continues to exercise that force when his son calls upon him to moderate his stand, to recognize that there are claims as urgent as those he makes on behalf of the state.

⁶Miller, "The Family in Modern Drama," p. 229.

⁷H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1954), p. 134.

⁸J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 2nd ed., trans. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1962), p. 98.

Haimon first greets his father with all the deference due him as parent and monarch: "I am your son, father. You are my guide./ You make things clear for me, and I obey you." He tells his father, "I cannot say—/ I hope that I shall never want to say!—that you/ Have reasoned badly," but he informs Creon that he has heard "muttering and whispering in the dark about this girl" and that "They say no woman has ever, so unreasonably,/ Died so shameful a death for a generous act" (Fitts-Fitzgerald, scene 3, pp. 479, 480).

Haimon then pleads for a balanced judgment:

I beg you, do not be unchangeable:
Do not believe that you alone can be right.
The man who thinks that,
The man who maintains that only he has the power
To reason correctly, the gift to speak, the soul—
A man like that, when you know him, turns out empty.
It is not reason never to yield to reason!

[Fitts-Fitzgerald, scene 3, p. 481]

Haimon is arguing that "The heart has its reasons that reason does not know."⁹ He continues his appeal with the famous image of the trees:

See how the trees that grow beside a torrent
Preserve their branches, if they bend; the others,
Those that resist are torn out, root and branch.

[Kitto, lines 699–701]

The only response Haimon draws from his father is an anger bordering on madness. Creon subsequently strengthens his determination to continue the exercise of his authority. When he once more confronts Antigone, she reaffirms her obligation to Polyneices and observes:

What I did, the wise will all approve.
For had I lost a son, or lost a husband,
Never would I have ventured such an act
Against the city's will. And wherefore so?
My husband dead, I might have found another;
Another son from him, if I had lost
A son. But since my mother and my father
Have both gone to the grave, there can be none
Henceforth that I can ever call my brother.

⁹Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 227.

It was for this I paid you such an honour,
 Dear Polyneices, and in Creon's eyes
 Thus wantonly and gravely have offended.

[Kitto, lines 878-89]

Understanding of a unique and tender family tie, not stubbornness or arrogance, motivates Antigone to reject her uncle's demands and to go willingly to death.

It is Teiresias, the blind seer, who first causes Creon really to consider what his decision against Antigone means. He warns the king, "Know then, thou walk'st on fortune's razor-edge" (Plumptre, line 996) and prophesies, "Not many hours will pass before your house/ Rings loud with lamentation" (Kitto, lines 1042-43). Then Creon's followers remind the king, "no single prophecy that [Teiresias]/ Has made to Thebes has gone without fulfilment" (Kitto, lines 1058-59). It is thus his followers who make Creon understand that ruin lies just beyond his unyielding stand, that his prohibitory powers might be destructive of the common good, that authority, the state, may not always be right. When Creon requests, "Advise me; I will listen" (Kitto, line 1064), he has at last acknowledged that the force which Antigone represents must be reckoned with, that its claims are genuine. Creon yields and gives orders to set Antigone free from the tomb in which she has been imprisoned alive.

Creon has readily understood the meaning and uses of authority, but his comprehension of the strength of that other force—love, the nurturing instinct—comes too late. When he finally understands that balance is essential, that authoritarian demands are not the only claims legitimately made upon the family unit and the individuals constituting it, indeed are not the only claims legitimately made upon the larger society beyond the family, it is too late to save Antigone, who has insisted that love has prior rights, or Haimon, who has preached balance to his father, or Eurydice, who cannot cope with the tragedy of the death of her second son. When Creon finally understands the principle of balance, the ideal of synthesis, when he finally learns that certain individual rights must be preserved, that they cannot be sacrificed to the group no matter how large or powerful it may be, an appalling cost has been exacted from members of the two families.

Contemplating the destruction he has wrought, Creon declares that "My own blind heart has brought me/ From darkness to final darkness" (Fitts-Fitzgerald, *Exodos*, p. 497). In this powerful mixed metaphor he confesses that a failure of love on his part has destroyed his family and his happiness. His reason has led him to support the

prohibitions that are the prerogatives of authority to the total exclusion of the demands of the heart. Perhaps he could not listen to Antigone, for she was as single-minded as he, but he could have heeded his son, who understood both positions, who in his approach to the terrible difficulty that beset his family had achieved a synthesis, a balance, lacking in the two people whom he most loved. But when Haimon could not reach his father, he forsook his moderate stand to sacrifice his life for love.

Antigone is correctly viewed as a political drama with a central struggle focused on the rights of the individual as they may conflict with justifiable claims of the state, but, of course, the play ultimately passes beyond political statement. We are far removed from the Greece that existed five centuries before Christ, from the golden age of a remarkable civilization, from the world of Sophocles. But what Sophocles shows and teaches us through the agony of Antigone, Creon, and Haimon is timeless and eternal, and the lesson is grounded in family. Every individual, unless he is truly rootless, experiences in his own context the same conflict that the Theban uncle and his niece undergo.

KING LEAR

Shakespeare's almost intolerably tragic masterpiece, *King Lear*,¹⁰ is, like *Antigone*, organized around two families that become inextricably entwined as the drama unfolds. As in *Antigone*, the families are incomplete, neither having a mother. In the royal family the King of Britain is father to three daughters; in the noble family Gloucester is father to two sons.

In the opening scene we observe Lear in action as both king and father. "Know that we have divided/ In three our kingdom," he announces. "And 'tis our fast intent/ To shake all cares and business from our age,/ Conferring them on younger strengths while we/ Unburdened crawl toward death" (1.1.38-42). He continues, "We have this hour a constant will to publish/ Our daughters' several dowers, that future strife/ May be prevented now" (1.1.44-46). Finally he queries, "Tell me, my daughters,/ Since now we will divest us both of rule,/ Interest of territory, cares of state,/ Which of you shall we say doth love us most?/ That we our largest bounty may extend/ Where nature doth with merit challenge" (1.1.49-54). The

¹⁰William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1952). References are to act, scene, and line.

key word, the fatal word, in this speech is *divided*. And the question that Lear poses to his three daughters emphasizes and promotes the idea of division. In dividing his kingdom, he inevitably divides his family. These two divisions eventually lead to a figurative division of the universe.

Although Lear's plan does have some kind of reason behind it—his avowed desire to prevent “future strife,” for example—it is not based on either true understanding or real love. In bidding for declarations of his daughters' affection, he sets up a contest among them, wherein he encourages extravagant, inflated, fawning statements of emotion as the women compete for their share of the country whose burden he no longer wishes to assume. Goneril claims she loves him “more than words can wield the matter,/ Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty” (1.1.56–57). Regan professes herself “an enemy to all other joys/ Which the most precious square of sense possesses,/ And find I am alone felicitate/ In your dear Highness' love” (1.1.75–78).

When Cordelia breaks the pattern by refusing to flatter her father, saying only that she loves him “according to my bond, nor more nor less” (1.1.95), Lear is at first incredulous. After all, he has offered her “a third more opulent than [her] sisters” (1.1.88). What he fails to comprehend, what it takes him prolonged anguish finally to know is the nature of real love. He does not understand that love is not a commodity. It is not measurable; it cannot be bought and sold. Brooks and Heilman call Lear's attitude “the spirit of calculation.”¹¹ Lear does not know that true love, especially true parental love, is unconditional. His banishment of Cordelia does rest on a kind of reason, on a kind of authority, but it occurs mainly because he understands neither himself nor his children. He knows really nothing of consequence of the parent-child bond. His rejection of his youngest daughter for what he views as her failure in filial duty and gratitude may also be perceived as setting a precedent for Goneril and Regan: it shows them how to reject a parent, how to make him an outcast, how to deprive him of the sense of home. When Goneril and Regan come to power, Brooks and Heilman observe, Lear's “spirit of calculation” comes to power with them.¹² The lack of balance in Lear's approach to his family, then, unsettles, divides, and finally destroys his world. Ultimately, balance is achieved in the

¹¹Cleanth Brooks and Robert Heilman, *Understanding Drama* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1957), p. 654.

¹²Ibid.

drama, but the restoration comes too late for Lear and his daughters. Not one member of the family lives to experience for long the harmony, the concord, that is the result of the restored balance.

While Lear is unwittingly loosing the forces that will eventually trap and destroy him, Gloucester is duped by his "natural" son, Edmund, into dividing his family too. With almost ludicrous ease Edmund deceives his father and his half-brother, Edgar, and disrupts their world. Gloucester's tragedy, like Lear's, begins with his rejection of a child, who, Edmund says, has a "nature so far from doing harms/ That he suspects none" and who is characterized by "foolish honesty" (1.2.196-97). With the loyal, loving Edgar an outcast because of Edmund's treachery and Gloucester's gullibility, Gloucester's world is wildly disordered. Seeing conflict and division all around him, he seeks an explanation. He can only conclude that the fault lies in "these late eclipses in the sun and moon" (1.2.112). Like Lear, Gloucester is at this point morally, symbolically blind to his own folly. He has not actively promoted division in his world, but he has easily acceded to it as he is manipulated by his scheming son.

As soon as Lear divides his kingdom and disinherits Cordelia, he is doomed. As soon as Gloucester allows his family to be divided, he is doomed. But as both men move toward their doom, they begin a purgative process that not only cleanses but also teaches, teaches the necessity of concord between intellect and heart, the necessity of balance between authority and love.

The division Lear forces on his family includes a reversal of the roles of parent and child. The Fool early points out that the king has made "thy daughters thy mother" (1.4.188). He sees what Lear does not: that arbitrary abdication of the parental role will lead to both personal and family disaster. Once an individual becomes a parent, his life is forever altered. Nothing can change the fact or erase the relationship. Lear has tired of his responsibilities as king and as father; he wishes to rid himself of the double load. However, he is not weary of his kingly or fatherly privileges and seeks to retain them without carrying the responsibilities that give him the right to those privileges.

Lear thus begins his tragedy by rejecting the duties of both fatherhood and kingship; he has never really understood those duties anyway. In fact, he has never been questioned or defied until Cordelia speaks her truth to him. Without Cordelia, on whom he had "thought to set [his] rest" (1.1.125), he leaves his own home to live with Goneril, but the behavior of his men causes Goneril to complain, with considerable justification. They create such havoc that

they make her “graced palace” seem “more like a tavern or a brothel,” she says (1.4.266–67). When she dismisses fifty of his followers, when she further narrows—divides—his already narrowed world, continuing the process that Lear himself initiated, he denounces and curses her and further divides what is left of his family. He has one other daughter to turn to, Regan, but she says she will reduce his retinue to twenty-five. She also humiliates him by directing him to apologize to her sister. His pride and blindness force him to turn away from Regan back to Goneril because he still holds a quantitative concept of love; since her allowance of fifty men is double Regan’s, he reasons that she must, therefore, love him twice as much as Regan does. Finally the two sisters suggest that the king needs no followers at all; the end result of all this division is zero. Lear’s world is now in ruins, directly traceable to his division of his family, to his failure to understand and practice the principle of balance, to apprehend the meaning of love.

While the children in *Antigone* probably stand blameless, while they attempt to instruct Creon so that both basic forces in the family, love and authority, might be preserved, the children in Lear’s family stand culpable. From one point of view even the saintly Cordelia could be held accountable for part of the family tragedy. The elder daughters are guilty of an especially ugly, degrading filial ingratitude. They see in their aged father only a man who has “ever but slenderly known himself” (1.1.296–97), only a man from whom they can seize wealth and power. Upon his protest that “I gave you all,” Regan responds, “And in good time you gave it” (2.4.253). His cry “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is/ To have a thankless child!” (1.4.310–11) reflects the torment in Lear’s microcosm. His call on the heath for the violent storm to “Crack nature’s molds, all germens spill at once/ That make ingrateful man!” (3.2.8–9) enlarges the torment to include the cosmos. Lear wishes for the destruction of the seeds of life of all mankind. The wish comes from impending madness, madness engendered not just by his own failures but also by the failure of his daughters to cherish, to cultivate the nurturing instinct, to exercise the principle of balance. Goneril and Regan have exploited their father’s intemperance, his lack of self-knowledge, his failure to understand love. Their eventual goal is to end his life.

What of Cordelia? At the beginning of the tragedy she could halt the disruption but does not. By “mending her speech” (1.1.96), she could forestall Lear’s division of his family and let him “unburdened crawl toward death” (1.1.42). But she refuses, perhaps partly

because she is young and she herself has a lesson to learn and partly because she must be the instrument of Lear's change, his redemption, the means by which he is propelled to his moment of truth—when at last he understands what love “pure and undefiled” is, when finally he comes, however briefly, to that requisite balance, that synthesis, that concord of apparently opposing demands.

The relationships in Lear's family are complicated to a point beyond those in Creon's both because of the nature of the double story and the presence of sons-in-law. Goneril and Regan claim originally to love their father “all,” despite the fact that they are both married, a fact that Cordelia pointedly comments on when she says to Lear:

Why have my sisters husbands if they say
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall
carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all.

[1.1.101-06]

Cordelia's observation is sensible. It suggests early that we must be especially alert to the two elder sisters; we must immediately question their sincerity both as daughters and as wives. However, since Cordelia speaks of measurement—“half my love . . . , half my care and duty” [1.1.104]—the observation also associates her with one of her father's flaws—his quantitative view of human affection.

Just as Goneril and Regan break filial ties and abandon filial responsibilities, so do they ignore their marital bonds. Goneril, wed to the seemingly diffident, eminently decent Albany, and Regan, married to the brutal Cornwall, are both attracted to Edmund. They vie for his love just as aggressively as they strip their father of his dignity. Because Cornwall is fatally wounded in his attack upon the helpless Gloucester, Regan has the freedom of widowhood in her pursuit of Edmund. But Goneril, more determined, more hardened, more original in her evil than Regan, poisons her sister and thus temporarily gains the advantage.

As Goneril and Regan deal with Lear, then with their husbands, and finally with Edmund, the contrast between their original vows of love to their father and their deeds, between their intent and Cordelia's, enlarges in wordless fashion behind the lines of the play until it emerges directly when Cordelia returns to the story. Summoned by the devoted Kent, Cordelia assumes the care of her abused parent

and offers "all my outward worth" to whoever can restore Lear's "bereaved sense" (4.4.9-10). The outcast child dedicates herself to her father's care. In the most obvious Biblical echo in the drama, she declares, "O dear Father,/ It is thy business that I go about" (4.4.23-24). When Lear has slept the healing sleep, when he awakens to believe first that Cordelia is "a soul in bliss" and he is "bound/ Upon a wheel of fire that mine own tears/ Do scald like molten lead" (4.7.46-48), and then to realize that he is alive and that Cordelia is with him, he has almost recovered; he has almost learned what he has never known before despite his many years. However, there remains one more step to take before the recovery, the learning, is complete. Upon recognizing Cordelia, Lear says to her, "If you have poison for me, I will drink it./ I know you do not love me, for your sisters/ Have, as I do remember, done me wrong./ You have some cause, they have not" (4.7.72-74). Lear has not yet fully comprehended the nature of true love; he is still thinking in conditional terms; his "spirit of calculation" is not quite dead. Cordelia's breathtakingly simple, poignant, loving reply, "No cause, no cause" (4.7.75), teaches Lear his final lesson. With the reply the ultimate contrast of Cordelia with her sisters is also achieved; the ultimate example of filial obligation and affection is expressed. Furthermore, Shakespeare here contrasts the Cordelia who has suffered rejection and exile, the mature Cordelia, with the Cordelia who could or would say only, "I love.../ According to my bond, nor more nor less" (1.1.94-95), when at the beginning of the tragedy her father ordered her to declare her feelings for him. It seems clear that Cordelia, like Lear, has grown in understanding, that Cordelia, like Lear, has approached a balance formerly neglected because its need was not understood.

Like Cordelia, the maligned and persecuted Edgar also rescues a faltering, lost parent, one who had turned on him as Lear turned on his youngest child. But before Edgar assumes responsibility for the wretched, blinded Gloucester, he plays a small role in the care of the wandering king. In his attempts to "make of the outside world a home," Lear finds his way, in the storm, to Edgar's, Poor Tom's, hovel on the heath. Significantly, he does not enter it, but before the hovel he encounters Gloucester's disguised son and, observing Edgar's "utter destitution,"¹³ descends into total madness with the observation that Edgar's condition could have been caused only by the

¹³Harrison, ed., *Shakespeare*, p. 1163.

cruel treatment of daughters. At Kent's invitation, Edgar joins Lear and his followers but does not leave with them when they depart for Dover.

Edgar is thus close by when his father in both physical and emotional agony is thrust out of his own home to "smell his way to Dover" (3.7.93-94). His blinding, says Theodore Spencer, "is the physical equivalent to the madness of Lear."¹⁴ Just as Cordelia appears during the depths of Lear's madness to assume responsibility for his recovery, Edgar now assumes responsibility for his father's well-being during the depths of Gloucester's despair and his determination to commit suicide. Edgar tricks his father, who had earlier been tricked by the faithless Edmund, but Edgar's deception saves Gloucester's life. Instead of jumping from the cliffs at Dover, Gloucester is tricked into jumping from a small mound and then into believing that he has been miraculously preserved despite his leap from great heights. Through this deception Edgar, who has not yet revealed his identity to his father, helps Gloucester find the strength to endure. "Henceforth I'll bear/ Affliction till it do cry out itself/ 'Enough, enough,' and die" (4.6.75-77), he vows. By enduring, he helps atone for unfeeling, unfatherly remarks he has made early in Act I about the circumstances of Edmund's birth, for his cruelty to Edgar, for the division he has allowed to develop in his family because of his lack of understanding, his lack of insight. The wronged child has once more led a parent to moral understanding. A kind of balance is, therefore, reached, but enjoyed only briefly because Gloucester soon faces death. When Edgar at last reveals himself to his father, Gloucester's "flawed heart" "burst[s]/ smilingly" (5.3.196, 199).

It is still necessary for Edgar and Edmund to face each other, and in their confrontation Edgar is triumphant. The wronged son, the wronged brother, the outcast, defeats the agent of all his woes. Furthermore, Edgar's conquest of Edmund helps restore balance in Britain, for the treacherous Edmund has commanded the British troops against France and is in reality in control of the state. With his defeat by Edgar come a confession and a kind of penitence, but not in time to save Cordelia and, consequently, Lear. Peace is restored in the state, under Edgar and Albany; the division is mended; but that unit, Lear's family, wherein the discord and division began, has experienced only briefly a restoration of harmony, a feeling of balance,

¹⁴"Shakespeare and the Nature of Man," in *King Lear: Text, Sources, and Criticism*, ed. G. B. Harrison and Robert McDonnell (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1962), p. 138.

before it is forever shattered. However, in Lear's simple "Pray you, undo this button" (5.3.309) with its echo of Cordelia's compassion, we hear a renewal of the voice of tenderness and an awareness of the possibility of release and spiritual communication.

Peopled though it is with nobility and royalty and set in a far-away era and unfamiliar circumstances, *King Lear* is yet a contemporary consideration of basic familial situations and problems. Totally relevant to modern times is its almost microscopic examination of the obligations of parents and children to each other, of the disasters concomitant with neglect or abandonment or perversion of these obligations, of the necessity of moderation and balance in one's approach to family difficulties, of the real meaning of authority and love within the bounds of the family.

DEATH OF A SALESMAN

Like the preceding plays in this discussion, Arthur Miller's twentieth-century tragedy *Death of a Salesman*¹⁵ concerns itself with two families. A third family rests in shadowy outline in the protagonist's memory. Once more the problems of division in the family and the father who does not know himself lie at the heart of the drama. Additionally, false values capable of perverting and destroying family structure underline the other troubles the play examines.

When *Death of a Salesman* was first produced some thirty years ago, its influence so permeated the United States that one man hitchhiked from California to Miller's home in Connecticut because he felt that Miller had written his story, that this new play so clearly reflected his own problems and misery, Miller must surely have a profound understanding of him personally.

Why does *Death of a Salesman* affect many readers and viewers in such a peculiarly personal way? It is about a husband and wife beset with financial problems, about an aging man who loses his job, about two sons who disappoint their parents, about a world seemingly indifferent to the difficulties of an everyday family. The larger outline is painfully recognizable to all of us—we all know a Willy Loman, or we may even be partly Willy Loman ourselves.

We first meet Willy in the last troubled days of his life when age has slowed his body and bewilderment at his disastrous business trips and disintegrating family has clouded his mind. As Miller

¹⁵Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, ed. Gerald Weales (New York: The Viking Press, 1967).

works back and forth between present and past, we gradually understand Willy's agitation, his fear, his growing psychosis.

The Loman family comprises Willy; Linda, his wife; and Biff and Happy, their sons. Because Miller uses the expressionistic technique of fluid time, the flashback, the probing of Willy's memory, we see the Loman family that was, in addition to the one that is. Through the appearances of his older brother, Ben, and the questions he puts to Ben about their earlier life, particularly about their father, we glimpse the family into which Willy was born. A third family in the play consists of laconic neighbor Charley, who may be Linda's brother (Miller implies this relationship but does not make it clear), and Bernard, his son.

Willy's entire life has centered on his sons, particularly on the elder one, Biff. As Willy's mind recedes into the past, we see Biff as a young athletic hero, the glory of his high school team, the envy of his contemporaries, the idol of impressionable young girls. We also see the sons', particularly Biff's, dedication to Willy, their hero-worship of their father. Happy is primarily a tag-along, a younger brother living in the shade of an older brother whom he can never hope to equal, let alone surpass.

Willy's goal for his sons is that they be "well liked." If one is popular, according to Willy, he will never lack for anything. He himself, he says, is a successful salesman because he is well liked. When he arrives at a business with his wares, all he finds necessary is to announce that Willy Loman is here, and he is allowed to see the buyer immediately. Being well liked, according to the Loman philosophy, is the only secret of success. Honesty, ability, training, and hard work have nothing to do with success; only that nebulous quality of personality that causes the automatic smile and happy greeting from the unthinking really matters.

Charley, who runs a successful business, is liked, but not well liked, Willy says. Bernard, Charley's son, is liked, but not well liked, Biff and Happy solemnly declare. Thus, neither Charley nor Bernard can hope to be anyone of genuine consequence in the early Loman world. However, Bernard is useful to Willy's family because he is an excellent student who can feed answers to Biff during school examinations.

Willy's emphasis on being well liked, his belief in the validity of high-school reputation as a foundation for adult life, is supported by a conveniently flexible moral code. When without permission Biff brings home a football from the locker room at school, Willy not only fails to reprimand him but comments that the coach would

probably be pleased, would indeed be inclined to congratulate Biff on his "initiative." He further encourages petty thievery by directing his sons to go next door to the construction site of an apartment house for enough sand so that they can rebuild the front stoop of their home. He also boasts, "You should've seen the lumber they brought home last week. At least a dozen six-by-tens worth all kinds of money. . . . I gave them hell, understand. But I got a couple of fearless characters there" (p. 50).

Where is Linda, their mother, when their father in effect directs Biff and Happy in their dishonesty? Where is she when Biff cheats on tests? Where is she when parents complain that Biff is too rough with their daughters? Always she stands with Willy as a loyal, loving wife, with words of warm approval or encouragement. Her protests about her sons' behavior seem mild or else are overridden by Willy's domineering personality.

However, in the older family, the family that is, when Willy is ailing and desperate, she speaks plainly and forcefully to her sons:

I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person. [P. 56]

It is a moving plea, replete with pity and understanding and love.

Linda reveals to Biff and Happy her discovery of the rubber pipe near the gas water heater in the basement and her unwillingness to destroy it or face Willy with it because doing so would insult him. She is fighting for Willy's sanity, for his life, with both maternal and wifely strength. It is clearly Linda alone who now holds the decaying family structure together.

In the younger Loman family, however, Linda's influence is minor. Willy appears to be in complete control. Her chief role is to praise and agree, not to make moral judgments or moral challenges. The label "queen of bromides" is perhaps too harsh for Linda, but those who lavishly praise her devotion, who see her as a tragic figure, or who judge her to be the quintessential wife and mother are not altogether discerning.

The Loman family of earlier days is a united, supportive group, true enough, but it is guided by false values espoused by its chief figure of authority, the father, and unchecked by any potent or sustained effort by the mother. There is no balance in the family: the

main force, Willy, is unprincipled, or at least misguided, and he is uninfluenced by the only person in a position to help. Linda loves and nurtures, it is true, but her care is tendered to a group that seems to have been on the wrong road all its life.

A significant figure in Willy's excursions into the past is his elder brother, Ben. Willy was always second to Ben, just as Happy is second to Biff. But Ben is Willy's key to his childhood and to the material success Willy longs for. Willy's memories of his father are vague and few. All he recalls is a man "with a big beard" and "some kind of high music" (p. 48). Ben tells him their father played a flute. As he questions Ben about the past, he expresses his need to know who he is. "Dad left when I was such a baby," he laments, "and I never had a chance to talk to him and I still feel—kind of temporary about myself" (p. 51). Ben has the answers, Willy believes.

Ben is also a model for the kind of success Willy yearns for—incomparable wealth. Ben's account of his good fortune, however, is mystically vague, befitting the fact that we meet him only in Willy's memory: "When I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And . . . I was rich" (p. 48). How and why did Ben succeed when Willy has not? The chilling scene in which, after he trips Biff, he holds the point of his umbrella over the boy's eye and advises him, "Never fight fair with a stranger" (p. 49), suggests very clearly how he has attained his success. He is a dangerously ruthless man. Still Willy seeks his advice on rearing his sons. Ben responds only, "You're being first-rate with your boys. Outstanding, manly chaps!" (p. 52). Brother Ben is scarcely a pattern for guiding the lives of a family. Yet Willy, blinded by Ben's success and piqued by envy, believes in him to the end. It is Ben, reappearing in Willy's deranged mind, who finally approves Willy's plan to commit suicide.

The Loman family that was, that re-emerges in Willy's dreams, provides most of the explanation necessary for us to understand the Loman family that is. After many years of separation—division—the four Lomans, the present family, have reassembled under the family roof. Biff, the wanderer, and Happy, the vulgar womanizer, are home. Their mother is now living in intense fear. Willy's boss, Howard Wagner, the son of the man who first hired Willy as a salesman, has taken away Willy's salary and put him on commission and then has dismissed him, exhibiting the same kind of ruthlessness that has made Ben successful. With his failure preying on his mind, Willy makes repeated attempts to kill himself.

When Biff arrives home, there is a surge of hope, which soon

ebbs. The joy of reunion recedes quickly. For a few years after high school Biff had worked in New York, but the restrictions of the business world galled him. Now thirty-four, he has no roots. He drifts from job to job, back and forth across the country. "I've always made a point of not wasting my life," he reflects, "and every-time I come back here I know that all I've done is to waste my life" (pp. 22-23). Happy works steadily, but his chief concerns are automobiles and women. He boasts of seducing the fiancées of his friends. Occasionally he makes a financial gesture to his stricken parents, but his main goal is personal pleasure. Here, then, is the reality of the grown-up Loman brothers; Biff, the golden boy, and Happy, the tag-along, have grown into morally shabby adults. Biff, for whom his father had perhaps unreasonably great expectations, is a supreme disappointment.

What happened in addition to what we have already noted? In a crucial memory sequence Willy relives an episode in Boston. Biff, needing his father's help because of difficulties about high school graduation, has followed Willy, who is absent from home on a selling trip, and finds him with a woman in a hotel room. Willy's defense that the woman means nothing to him, that he was lonely, rings true and sad, but it does nothing to placate or comfort young Biff.

The dishonesty that characterized their early family life—the stealing and cheating and infidelity—has proved the undoing of the mature family. Biff wanders because he cannot hold a job. "I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody!" (p. 31) he tells his father. During the three months he had no address, he was in jail in Kansas City for stealing a suit. He confesses, "I stole myself out of every good job since high school." Not too surprisingly, he also states, "We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house!" (p. 131).

At which kind of work could Willy and his sons have excelled? "We don't belong in this nuthouse of a city!" Biff says. "We should be mixing cement on some open plain, or—or carpenters" (p. 61). Willy has loved to plant and watch the growth of the family garden. He uses his hands skillfully; he can repair and create with his hands. He might have been happy as a farmer or a carpenter, but he has spent his life pursuing wrong dreams and teaching his sons to do the same.

What has happened to Charley and the grown-up Bernard? Charley well understands the disaster Willy's life has become, for Willy keeps borrowing from him and pretends to Linda, who knows

the truth but says nothing, that the money is his salary. Charley repeatedly offers Willy a job, but Willy repeatedly refuses, out of stubbornness and pride and jealousy. Charley, unfailingly charitable, is always there when Willy needs him. It is easy to understand why Miller calls Charley "the most decent man in *Death of a Salesman*."¹⁶ Willy finally tells him, "You're the only friend I got. Isn't that a remarkable thing?" (p. 98). The hard-working Bernard is now a successful lawyer about to argue a case before the Supreme Court. Willy marvels, "And he didn't even mention it!" Charley's reply sums up the difference between his son and the Loman brothers: "He don't have to—he's gonna do it" (p. 95).

Even with collapse imminent, Willy still cannot let go of his old dreams. When Biff suggests that perhaps Bill Oliver will finance his and Happy's latest scheme because he once worked for Oliver and Oliver admired him, or so his memory lets him believe, Willy grabs the suggestion, enlarges on it, and causes his sons to enlarge on it (although Biff finally pulls back) in the same grandiose manner that characterized the earlier family days. Willy has learned nothing.

As he once more prepares to leave home, Biff tries to make his father understand what his elder son has learned. Biff now knows who he is. "I'm nobody," he cries; "I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you!" Willy resists with his entire soul, "I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman" (p. 132). Who is right? Both are. The kind of self-knowledge Biff has earned is rare and valuable; but the self-respect Willy fights to hang onto is also essential. The most important fact that emerges in this final confrontation between father and son is that they love each other; despite old scars, despite fresh wounds, they still love each other. And it is really the knowledge that Biff loves him which leads Willy to suicide so that in death he can help his son through his insurance.

Although Arthur Miller claims that "Willy Loman is filled with a joy, however broken-hearted, as he approaches his end,"¹⁷ many of us might find the play profoundly depressing, not uplifting. In at least partial support of Miller's view, John Gassner speaks of "some magnificence of spirit" in Willy Loman. Gassner points out:

Willy fights for his family all his life, carries on a difficult struggle for sales long after he has ceased to be welcome in the market place, and holds on to an impossible dream for his son. If in nothing else, moreover, he is tragically impassioned as a father. . . . Willy may be called a suburban King Lear, with sons instead of daughters breaking his heart.

¹⁶Arthur Miller, "Introduction to *Collected Plays*," in *Death of a Salesman*, ed. Gerald Weales, p. 170.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 167.

Although obviously devoid of the splendor of Shakespeare's old man, limited as Willy is by a small mind and by unelevated language, he is not conceived in merely pathetic terms. . . .

Gassner concludes:

He dies as a father, not as a salesman. This transfiguration of a man who would otherwise have to be dismissed as a cheat and dolt endows him with some of the magnitude we expect to find in tragedy.¹⁸

In *Antigone* and *King Lear* we can easily identify examples of moral goals, moral decisions, and moral action. In *Death of a Salesman* the task is complicated. The Loman family seems to offer mostly negative examples. The father, the chief authority figure, never understands, as Creon and Lear finally do. The mother, the other major formative force, allows, if she does not condone, the questionable values by which the family lives and develops. She loves wholeheartedly, but whatever her influence, it emerges too late. A "wronged" son does try to bring his father to moral awareness, but only after he has reached moral depths himself. The ideal of balance in the lives of family members and in family government and structure exists only in silent contrast with the reality of the despair and failure of the Lomans. How should we view this family besides as a negative example? Compassionately. Their troubles are too easily recognizable for us to scoff at; their plight is too familiar for us to feel superior to them.

CONCLUSION

Why look at only tragedies in a consideration of the family in drama? Where are the happy, successful families? Why not consider the bright side of human relationships? Tolstoi's famous opening sentence in *Anna Karenina* provides part of the answer to those questions: "All happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Applied to drama, this observation means, of course, that we may learn more from tragedy than from comedy because tragedy offers a greater variety of experience. Additionally, tragedy inevitably makes a more memorable, more powerful examination of human difficulties. Even if it is true that the main appeal of tragedy is to the heart and the main appeal of comedy is to the intellect, it is still tragedy that makes us think, that

¹⁸John Gassner and Bernard F. Dukore, *A Treasury of the Theatre*, 2 vols., 4th ed. (New York: Simon Schuster, 1970), 2:1107.

causes us to contemplate, that teaches us the most. John Donne's dictum that "Affliction is a treasure"¹⁹ dramatizes metaphorically one of the basic values of the tragic experience.

The tragic dramas—all centered on family—we have looked at briefly have shown us the power of the family over the individual, the distress and destruction the family can wreak, but also the promise inherent in the family, even when that promise is present in the play only through indirection or merely in a triumphant moment near the close.

"How may a man make of the outside world a home?" Drama shows us that the individual finds his way in the outside world and his place there according to the preparation his family has given him. The family determines his emotional, his psychological success in that world. If authority and love reach a balance in the family, if the individual is able to achieve a synthesis of those forces that control him within the family, if the family recognizes the need to preserve the values and rights of the individual within the group, if the family rejects false values, then a man may have the kind of beginnings that will allow him to live knowledgeably, perhaps at times even joyfully, in the world beyond his mother and father's home, in the outside world of Miller's question.

¹⁹John Donne, "Meditation XVII."