CHAPTER - III

THE EXISTENTIAL FAMILY

Philosopher William Spanos' recognition of the pervasive influence of an existential perspective upon twentieth century life encompasses its employment in philosophy, religion, and the arts:

*Since Nietzsche, philosophy, religion, and the arts, (especially on the European continent, but increasingly in England and America) have reflected in one way or another the existential crisis of unaccommodated man. Whether atheistic or theistic, the philosophy and art of the twentieth century constitutes largely an encounter with nothingness and the effort to transcend the threat that it poses to man's existence as man. Thus what was the attitude of an occasional outsider is now that of a generation.*

Spanos' observation emphasizing the translation of a specific philosophical perspective into concrete expression in the arts is complimented by social theorists who jointly identify the presence of such a catalyst shaping the design and function of the American family. Ruth Nanda Anshen, Arthur Swift, Wallace Denton, Charles Hobart, Richard Klemer, and Winifred Warnat each develop a systematic analysis of the American family which paraphrases in many respects Spanos' observations. Their observations are expressed in sociological terms employing the specific jargon of that discipline. The existential tenants, spiritual growth based upon fellowship and authentic values in deference to artificial ones are discussed in terms of their primary importance in the life of the family.

Because the explicit references to existentialism have been neglected, the symbiotic relationship between the philosophical perspective and sociological theory has not been rigorously explored. Subsequently, plays by American dramatists employing the collective, an existential philosophical world view and a familial subject have not been examined in terms of their capacity to translate these abstractions into dramatic form. An examination of the sociological literature illuminating the existential function of the modern American family provides a correlation of these two phenomenons, the family an existentialism. This
reciprocal relationship can be identified in *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* not only in terms of theme and plot development, but in the manner these views are manipulated dramatically, in the shape they assume on stage.

The American family has provided a foundation, a cultural back-drop, from which American playwrights have borrowed the distinctive ingredients of dramatic conflict. Used not only as a repository for value systems, or as the barometer of social etiquette, or social taboos, the American family with its matrix of intense familial relationships and the conflicts derived from those complex grouping has supplied the subject matter for some of this country's most noteworthy plays. George S. Kaufman's and Moss Hart's *You Can't Take It With You*, William Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life*, Thornton wilder's *Our Town*, Paul Zindel's *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the Moon Marigolds*, Eugene O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, and Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, all family dramas, have become almost synonymous with the American theatre.

Mary Beth Dakoske in her dissertation entitled "Archetypal Images of the Family in Selected Modern Plays," isolates five major sets of the myths operative in the family. These beliefs are derived from the accumulated history of the family as an institution and from the related tales of historical events. According to Dakoske they have been absorbed into ritual and utilized in modern drama as the subjects for such plays as O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey*, and Miller's *Death of a Salesman*:

In the plays selected for this study, five archetypal images of family life appear. These are the homecoming motif, the search for origins, the nocturnal journey, the relationship between past, present, and future, and finally the family's connection with society.

Dakoske does not imply that these universal functions generated in a family environment and translated by modern playwrights into theme and plot, exist as the sole thematic mainstreams in twentieth century drama. She presents a comprehensive study
identifying these pursuits as predominant in modern dramas distinguished by their familial subjects.

Similarly, Roy Alvin Watson in his study entitled "The Archetype Of The Family In The Drama Of Tennessee Williams," follows this same approach in his investigation of Williams' plays. He identifies similar plot motifs as standard thematic catalysts which emanate from a family environment. And again, Watson like Dakoske, presents the myths derived from family conflicts as the primary dramatic element in Williams' plays. These universal pursuits connecting the social fabric with an individual existence are identified as the primary factor determining the plays' theme and form:

Finally, the study concludes that the family archetype ceased to be the primary thematic concern of the plays after 1958, and that the lack of the success of the more recent plays may be attributed to William's having exhausted that vein.

Watson's observations, stressing the importance of the family motifs in determining the success of William's efforts as a playwright, emphasize this same perception of American dramatic literature as primarily domestic drama. Countless scholars have pursued this same avenue, identifying the family as the primary constituent determining the dramatic style of modern playwrights employing this phenomenon as subject. Tom Scanlan in his book Family, Drama, and American Dreams, reiterates this same critical view, isolating the family subject as the primary progenitor of American dramatic form. In characterizing O'Neill's dramatic style Scanlan states:

In the first phase of his career, O'Neill set out to discover what the forces at work were in family life. The patterns he established recur throughout his career. The prophecy of family harmony had failed.

Scanlan follows this same approach in evaluating the plays of Arthur Miller. He makes a broad generalization of Miller's work in which he assumes that Miller's plays all conform to the same dramatic intent and the same dramatic style. He identifies the family-subject with its thematic overtones as the principal ingredient responsible for distinguishing
Miller's plays. In so doing, Scanlan presents an ambiguous conception of dramatic form defined almost exclusively in terms of realistic or nonrealistic production modes. Such a generalization, emphasizing the family as a recurrent subject or theme in American dramatic literature, does not illuminate how this subject has been presented, nor how these familial themes have been manipulated to present a distinctive vision of reality:

*Miller did not abandon the realistic family drama, but the extremes to which O'Neill had taken it were incompatible with what Miller had to say. He attempted to turn the connections and energies of the family situation outward, to show a clash between the private loyalties of the household and the public responsibilities of living in society.*

Such sweeping statements purporting a uniformity of intent and style throughout a playwright's career, fails to provide an explanation of such blatantly divergent plays as Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* and his *After the Fall*. It is this propensity by scholars of modern drama to equate the family and the subject matter it generates with dramatic form, that distorts the character of American dramatic literature. Indeed, in such studies dramatic form remains an ambiguous entity occasionally alluded to in terms of theme and its development in plot and action. This equation of theme in a literary context, with dramatic form, ignores the nature of dramatic literature, its transposition to the stage, to a theatre environment cognizant of the influence each production constituent exerts upon the play. Such analyses present a myopic examination of the dramaturgy which cannot be limited to a strictly literary interpretation. To do so ignores the playwrights' admonitions, their specifications of set design, lighting design, costuming design, sound design, even casting preferences as these items interact with thematic elements to present a composite, comprehensive view of the play's emergence from its prenatal period on the written page to its birth on the stage.

Studies like Dakoske's, Watson's, and Scanlan's also limit dramatic form to a series of related events determined by the family subject. Dramatic form is a far more comprehensive concept. It is more than the mere sum total of events. It is a presentation in concrete form of
the vision of reality the play generates. This vision takes into consideration not only the elements of theme, plot, dramatic action, character, dialogue, and symbol, but the manner in which these constituents of dramatic form are manipulated. Such a consideration of dramatic form taking into account the theatre environment in which the play is to be produced, denies the validity of such sweeping generalizations. It contradicts Scanlan's statement, "The reality of everyday family experience stands behind William's plays, and the effect of many of them depends on an audience saturated in realistic domestic drama."6

To deny the family has shaped the scope of American drama would be to deny its existence in O'Neill's A Day's Journey, Miller's Death of a Salesman, or Williams' Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. Such an assertion denies reason. However, an exhaustive study of these American family plays supports a view of a large section of American dramaturgy which combines the family as subject and environment, with a distinctive method of presentation. In so doing, all of the components of the literary script: subject, theme, dramatic action, characterization, dialogue, and symbol are welded so perfectly with the production constituents of set design, lighting design, costuming, sound, and a vision of reality projected on stage, that each play presents in concrete dramatic form an externalization of individual consciousness. This overt emphasis upon consciousness is developed into an ontological-familial perspective. Each play manipulates these several dramatic constituents in a similar fashion so that existential considerations of individual consciousness, the individual's capacity to create his own existence, the generation of authentic values in deference to a conformist society's pressure to accept superficial values, the quality of human relationships and their capacity to incite spiritual growth, and the conscious individual's affirmation of life; all become unified in the one from each play adopts. The dramatic form that each play develops is a concrete presentation of meaning derived through form. The plays then, exist not only as the sum total of the familial motifs identified by Dakoske, Watson, and Scanlan.
The manner in which these motifs and presented, the plays' dramatic form, distinguish them as a unique American dramatic genre.

Ruth Nanda Anshen in her article "The Family in Transition," appearing in The Family: Its Function and Destiny, connects the primary purpose of the modern American family with its nurturing of the individual psyche and the subsequent capacity of that psyche to recognize its own existence, to feel and to manifest love:

*The concept of family pervades all civilization, all human life--and the human family itself becomes manifest as the immediate substantiality of the mind, receiving its specific and definitive characterization through love. And it is through such love that the mind becomes conscious of its own intrinsic unity and power. The possession of the self-awareness--consciousness of one's individuality--within this untidy as the essence of oneself results in the recognition that one exists in the family on as an isolated independent person, but rather as a member of the microcosmic pattern of the dynamic world community.*

Anshen compares this primary function of the family not only with its capacity to develop the individual's awareness of self, she also relates that function to the individual's development of relationships capable of enhancing spiritual growth. The family according to Anshen, it intimately connected with consciousness and with the conscious individual's spiritual quest:

*The family thus becomes the very content of love wherein man can act and imitate a love which suffers from none of his limitations. He can aspire to be loved in such a manner that the last reserve of the self is broken so that he can utterly belong to the eternal love of God, of absolute truth, conveyed through the unity of family life. And, finally, he can receive the fruit of grace in which faith compliments his ignorance without pretending to possess its certainties as knowledge; and in which normality in the light of the potentialities of man's spirit mitigates his pride without destroying his hope.*

This same view is expressed by existential theorist Martin Buber in his Book I and Thou. Buber relates consciousness and fellowship, expressing the power of human relationships in the following way:
Some men take a keen interest in certain objects and in other men and actually think more about them than they think of themselves. They do not so much say I or think I as they do I.⁹

Buber associates this type of human bonding with any individual's potential for spiritual growth. "Extended, the lines of relationships intersect in the eternal You."⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, another prominent existential philosopher and playwright, organizes this same perception of man's potential for spiritual growth based upon the development and nurturing of human relationships. In his Being and Nothingness, he compares the insight derived from these close ties and the establishment of a new range of behavior consistent with a sensitized conscience:

Thus the other has not only revealed to me what I was; he has established me in a new type of being which can support new qualifications. This being was not in me potentially before the appearance of the other, for it could not have found any place in the For-itself.¹¹

Arthur Swift in his article examining the religious functions of the family proceeds even further in this view of the modern family as an instigator of individual consciousness, and as a source for spiritual growth. In "Religious Values", which appears in Anshen's book, he declares that a primary function of the family is its role in spiritual instruction:

The dynamics of family religion must someday be measured in terms of its effects upon friendship, both within the family and outside of it, both at work and at play; upon love and marriage; upon social status and stability; upon law and morals; and upon resiliency and courage in times of crisis... No case study of a family could be complete which overlooked religious values hidden and overt, which failed to take account of the ways in which choices and goals and self-appraisals had been influenced by the factor of religion.¹²

Swift defines religion not as a formal institution composed of prescribed doctrines, but as a collective means of dealing with everyday life. This view which emphasizes the individual's self-awareness and his or her own capacity to determine and develop an individual existence complements a similar view expressed by existential philosopher Martin Buber. In Buber's text I And Thou, existentialism and family concerns are described in terms
of their relatedness, as both become synonymous in a spiritual quest. Similarly, Swift defines the family's religious function in the following way:

Folk religion, or family religion, is concerned with birth and marriage and death; with planting and harvesting, hunting and fishing; with eating and sleeping and waking; with friend-ship and enmity; with illness and health. Religion studies in these terms ceases to be entirely a matter of creeds and hierarchies, of institutions and agencies, and reveals itself simply as man's belief in spiritual powers and his efforts to deal with them so as to have their help and not their hindrance in all business of life.¹³

Wallace Denton develops a lengthy analysis of yet another aspect of sociological theory, the family's role in the development of value systems. In What's Happening to Our Families? He elaborates upon the kinship group's formation of codes of behavior. Denton views the inculcation of these values not only as a primary function of the family, but also as a means of preparing the individual to meet those social expectations which will affect his or her self-image. In Denton's view, the family's development and implementation of dehumanizing value systems is a primary cause of the isolation felt by each member of the family group. This isolation, caused by the family's reduction of each member to the role and function the group has created, and the family's continual sponsorship of inauthentic values based upon a success quotient, expands until it envelops the individual family member. According to Denton, this type of coercion results in a psychic separation, a total sense of alienation. As Denton states:

The success philosophy of many Americans contributes to their isolation. From the time a child is small, the parents begin to inculcate the idea that they have high expectations of him.¹⁴

Denton relates this pressure exerted by the family to the group's desire to socialize its members by preparing them to meet those behavioral norms that each individual has conformed to:

In addition to meeting affection needs, the family is also the primary cultural agent. This refers to what is also called "socialization," or the process whereby a person learns to behave according to the patterns of society.¹⁵
Existential theorist Soren Kierkegaard questioned the validity of these mass values, criticizing the impersonal, dehumanizing capacity of any group as it denies the individual his or her right to exercise freedom of choice in determining an individual existence. This choice, as expressed by Kierkegaard, must include the individual recognition and selection of moral imperatives in relation to an individual being in the world:

_Hence, where there is a multitude, a crowd, or where decisive significance is attached to the fact that there is a multitude, there it is sure that no one is working, living, striving for the highest aim, but only for one or another earthly aim; since to work for the eternal decisive aim is possible only where there is one, and to be this one which all can be is to let God be the helper--the 'crowd' is the untruth._

This unique combination of the family as a promoter of social value systems, and the dichotomy created by that function when the legitimacy of these values comes into question, emerges as a prominent component in each family play named in this study. For example, James Tyrone's penury in _A Long Day's Journey_ fans the fleas of discord within the family. He chastises his sons for their lack of success. He berates Jamie for spending his acting salary on booze and prostitutes. Tyrone's verbal attacks on his sons reconnected to the older man's life denying material preoccupations, his measures to save on the household utility bills. He turns out the lights on life, burning only one light which is not capable of supplying adequate illumination. In a related vein, Mary accuses James of ruining her health by sending for a cheap, incompetent physician while she was pregnant with Edmund. And, Jamie accuses his father of sending Edmund to a shoddy public sanitarium instead of a quality facility to save on the hospital bill. This continuing debate over the elder Tyrone's love affair with money is pitted against each member of the family's most profound individual emotional needs. Tyrone's tight-fisted value system keeps his from his family, just as it kept him from realizing his own potential as a great dramatic actor.

_**TYRONE**_

_Mechanically_
I don’t know. Mine, I guess, No, it’s yours.

Edmund plays a card. His father takes it, Then about to play from his hand, he again forgets the game.

Yes, may be life overdid the lesson for me, and made the dollar worth too much, and the time came when that mistake ruined my career as a fine actor.

Sadly
I’ve never admitted this to anyone before, lad, but tonight I’m so heartsick I feel at the end of everything, and what’s the use of fake pride and pretense.

That god-damned play I bought for a song and made such a great success in -- a great money success-- it ruined me with its promise of an easy fortune. I didn’t want to do anything else, and by the time I woke up to the fact I’d become a slave to the damned thing and did try other plays, it was too late.

They had identified me with that one part, and didn’t want me in anything else. They were right too. I’d lost the great talent I once had through years of easy repetition, never learning a new part, never really working hard. Thirty-five to forty thousand dollars net profit a season like snapping your fingers: It was too great a temptation.17

Edmund listens sympathetically to his father's lamentations, his self-professed failures, and his addiction to the dollar while recognizing Tyrone's inability to change his ways:

TYRONE

Gets heavily, and a bit waveringly to his feet and gropes uncertainly for the lights--his mind going back to its line of thought
No, I don't know what the hell it was I wanted to buy.
He clicks out one bulb
On my solemn oath, Edmund, I'd gladly face not having an acre of land to call my own, nor a penny in the bank--
He clicks out another bulb
I'd be willing to have no home but the poorhouse in my old age if I could look back now on having been the fine artist I might have been.
He turns out the third bold, so only the reading lamp is on, and sits down again heavily. Edmund suddenly cannot hold back a burst of strained, ironical laughter. Tyrone is hurt.18
Charles Hobart in his article "Commitment, Value Conflict, and the Future of the American Family," explains this essential function of the family as a value inculcator, as well as providing an explanation of the conflict this role produces:

One linkage between values and the family lies in the fact that the original unit of human community and the universal humanizing unit of all societies is the family. It is in the family that many of the most important values, bases for choice, are learned. The family not only transmits values; it is predicated on, and in fact symbolizes some of the distinctively 'human' values: tenderness, love, concern, loyalty.

Man's capacity for consistent and responsible action depends on his being able to orient himself and to act on the basis of commitment to values; thus a certain level of value consistency is important. But a prominent feature of American society today is a pervasive value conflict. The family depends upon and symbolizes 'inefficient values' of being, knowing, caring, loving, unconditionally committing oneself. These values are incompatible with the urban industrial values of production, achievement, exchange, quantification, efficiency, success. Simultaneous unlimited commitment to people--in love and concern--and to achievement, success, prosperity, is impossible.\(^{19}\)

Sociologist Richard Klemer acknowledges this contradiction, the family's role in instilling values while the family as a unit is at odds in determining the legitimacy of these values. In his *Marriage and Family Relationships*, he explains the disparity between the material and spiritual needs of the family:

Given modern society, with its enormous emphasis on the accumulation of material things, with its conspicuous consumption, with its keeping up with the Joneses, and with its mass-media-stimulated appetites, and given the urban society's increased potential for marrying a mater who has a value system different from one's own, it is almost inevitable there will be trouble in many marriages.\(^{20}\)

In *The Family in Post-Industrial America*, Winifred Warnat develops an analysis of the family's role as value inculcator. She labels in familial unit "the Household School", and categorized four basic disciplines which compose the curriculum. She identifies: "role selection", "personality acquisition", "value formation", and "behavioral patterning,"\(^{21}\) as
integral components of the school. These items, which include an identification of self, the
development of relationships and the establishment of behaviors consistent with the values
codified by the family, correlate with existential perceptions of consciousness, relationships
and their capacity to generate spiritual growth and the development of authentic values.

Wallace Denton in his *What's Happening to Our Families?* provides a precise link
between the sociological orientation foundation of the family group and its basic functions,
with an existential perspective. Denton's direct reference to Martin Buber's *I and Thou* leaves
little doubt that the American family is inextricably connected with this mode of existence
that emphasizes consciousness, man's sense of alienation in an impersonal world, and his
need for human contact capable of enhancing his own sense of being in the world:

*If isolation is an expression of the lack of meaningful relationships, then
escape from this lonely existence would seem to lie in the direction of
relatedness. Only as a person is able to take courage in hand and dares to
relate to another person in an I-Thou relationship can the two span the
dividing barriers between them.*

It is this unique union of family and existentialism that provides the primary
ingredient shaping the thematic development, as well as providing the optimum means of
presentation for these themes in O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, Miller's *Death of
a Salesman*, and Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. By establishing what functions the modern
American family manifests, it is possible to elaborate upon these actions as they have been
utilized in family dramas authored by O'Neill, Miller, and Williams. This type of specific
reference to the family avoids a general reference found in the critical literature which limits
the family's influence upon American dramatic form to a predominantly thematic input. As a
number of sociological articles demonstrate, the functions of the modern American family are
inextricably connected with an existential philosophical base concerned with individual
consciousness and with spiritual growth. It is this connection between the family and
existentialism that provides the primary ingredient shaping the thematic development, as well
as providing the optimum means of presentation for these themes in O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, and Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. By establishing the function the modern American family manifests, it is possible to elaborate upon these actions as they have been utilized in family dramas authored by O'Neill, Miller, and Williams. This type of specific reference to the family avoids a generalized reference found in the critical literature which limits the family's influence upon American dramatic form to a predominantly thematic input. As a number of sociological articles demonstrate, the functions of the modern American family are inextricably connected with an existential philosophical base concerned with individual consciousness and spiritual growth. This connection between the modern American family and existentialism provides a valuable critical tool which can be employed in examining the dramatic form developed by Eugene O'Neill is his *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, and Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

**NOTES**

5. Ibid., p. 127.
6. Ibid., p. 158.
8. Ibid., p. 19.
10. Ibid., p. 19.


18. Ibid., p. 151


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