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„The Absent Father in Modern American Drama“

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## 1. Introduction

THELMA. Family is just an accident, Jessie. It's nothing personal, hon. They don't mean to get on your nerves. They don't even mean to be your family, they just are (Norman 19).

While desperately trying to talk her daughter Jessie out of committing suicide, Thelma Cates from *'night, Mother* by Marsha Norman unknowingly sums up the kind of family that we meet in many modern American plays. The mere fact that she refers to family as “an accident” illustrates the disastrous influence that dysfunctional families have on children's lives. The strong focus on family is not a new development, because family was already at the center of the Greek tragedy (Hayes 138). However, starting with Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, American playwrights have started showing the catastrophic events that usually go on behind closed doors within American families, in order to deconstruct the American Dream (Saadik 41).

Besides the frequent deconstruction of this traditional American ideal, there are several other reasons for the recurring absence of the father as the head of the nuclear family, for example, there are sociological reasons for the decreasing presence of fathers in American families, which are consequently mirrored in American plays. Modern psychology even points out that an absent father can be replaced, suggesting that the “essential-father”-hypothesis is no longer true (Pleck 48). The reasons for the absent fathers can also be found in the individual autobiographies of the playwrights that are discussed in this thesis. Also, on a meta level, the frequent absence of the father has a strong symbolical significance. Paul Rosefeldt, for example, argues that the father stands for God, who went missing in modern society (2).

A glance at the six plays that are analyzed in this thesis already shows that all of the abandoned children in the plays suffer from severe psychological consequences of their fathers' absence. Consequently, they follow certain patterns to come closer to their fathers. Despite his absence, the father still exerts a lot of power on the remaining members of the family. First, he challenges the mother to either replace him herself or find an appropriate substitute for him. Second, the children are facing the challenge to develop into mature human beings without a traditional father figure as a role model in their lives. It will become obvious in the analysis of the individual plays that many of the children fail terribly in doing so.

Some of the most popular American plays of the 20<sup>th</sup> century deal with the abandoned sons' struggles to find their fathers. Famously, Tom Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* is used by his mother as a replacement for the father as a breadwinner, while the father himself has abandoned the family, because he fell in love with "long distance" (Williams 19). I have taken a new approach to compare Williams' play with *Bordertown Café*, which is a more recent play by the Canadian playwright Kelly Rebar, because it has a similar initial situation to *The Glass Menagerie*. In addition, *True West* by Sam Shepard, who has been criticized for entirely focusing on the male experience in his dramatic work, is compared to *Topdog/Underdog* by Suzan-Lori Parks. Both plays deal with abandoned pairs of brothers. Finally, the afore-quoted *'night, Mother* by Marsha Norman is compared to *Crimes of the Heart* by Beth Henley. Both plays deal with abandoned daughters. Those two plays will also be crucial in the final comparison of the thesis, as it will be investigated what differences there are between abandoned sons and abandoned daughters.

The plays range within a time span of almost 60 years; *The Glass Menagerie* premiered in 1944 and *Topdog/Underdog* premiered in 2001. Therefore, it is interesting to take changes in American society into account and see whether those changes are reflected in the plays. Of course, one cannot generalize about those social changes by just analyzing six plays. However, some radical changes in the role of the father might still become obvious. Weales suggests that Sam Shepard's plays can be seen as a "dramatic response to his feeling of a battered and broken society" (41). Due to the fact that the family is the smallest social unit in society, this brokenness and dysfunctionality is certainly mirrored in more plays than just Sam Shepard's *True West*.

The dysfunctionality in the families that are analyzed in this thesis often reaches a climax through physical violence between family members. This illustrates that there is no escape from the family because the members are tied together forever. This entrapment of the family that only the omnipotent father is capable of escaping is accurately summed up by Austin and Lee, the two main characters of *True West*. It is in fact strikingly similar to what Thelma Cates said at the beginning of this thesis:

AUSTIN. You're my brother.

LEE. That don't mean a thing. You go down to the L.A. Police Department there and ask them what kinda' people kill each other the most. What do you think they'd say? (Shepard 23).

## **2. Fathers and children**

### **2.1 Fathers and sons**

According to Lamb, Sigmund Freud was the first psychologist who recognized the significance of childhood experiences on an individual's later life. He therefore placed the emphasis of his work on parent-child relationships. However, Lamb states that most of the work Freud did in that area has since been discredited (1). It was not until after the second world war that developmental study started to develop further. These new studies rejected some of Freud's ideas, but at the same time they agreed with him on the importance of parent-child relationships. Neo-analysts played a role in developing the attachment theory that keeps influencing developmental psychology even today (Lamb 1).

Many years after Freud's findings, Vogt and Sirridge dealt with father-son relationships in our society. They see the physical and mental absence of fathers as one of the most pressing problems of men in modern society. Due to the high divorce rates in Western societies, it is common that boys grow up in single-parent households. Because of this, mothers often take care of their sons and fail to provide them with a male role model. However, the problem cannot only be traced back to separated parents; a father can be present in a physical way but still fail to fulfill his role as a self-confident and open-minded role model for his son. Exhausting jobs and lifestyles often prevent them from taking part in their children's lives (Vogt and Sirridge 13f).

Due to the fact that men have been struggling with their role as caring fathers for generations, grown-up men do not know how to behave as fathers and continue the vicious circle of being absent fathers themselves. For example, men who grew up in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s often never had a real father figure themselves because their fathers were either at war or trying to deal with their experiences during the war and could not be there physically or mentally for their children (Vogt and Sirridge 17).

Traditionally, a father was expected to pass on his knowledge to his sons and thereby generate a connection to them. Modern society prevents this for many reasons: first, the jobs most fathers have nowadays cannot easily be explained to their children. Vogt and Sirridge mention the example of a stockbroker in this context. It is not easy to explain this kind of job to a curious son and therefore the son is not going to imitate his father's job while playing with his friends or ask detailed questions about the nature of his father's work. Second, there is a

physical distance between the place where the father works and the place where he lives with his family. Therefore, a son cannot just drop by at his father's workplace to find out more about his job (Vogt and Sirridge 20f).

Burgess, however, traces the alienating problem of spatial distance between father and son much further back in time. According to her, men have been kept from spending time with their baby children since the medieval ages. The reason for this is not that men were uninterested in their children, but rather they feared that they would not want to go to work to earn money for their families anymore if they got used to seeing their children all the time. As a result, fathers became emotionally and physically separated from their children and thereby also alienated themselves from them (Burgess 29). Burgess suspects that this was a very conscious tactic by the people in power to get men to do physically demanding and dangerous work and to train them for possible wars in the future without worrying about their families at home.

Nowadays, it is not only the distance between the place where they live and the place where they work, but also the distance between generations that makes it hard for sons to connect to their fathers. According to Vogt and Sirridge, it would be of great value for the masculinity of the sons to see their fathers behave as sons with their own fathers (22). Vogt and Sirridge as well as Macha stress the importance of the father as a crucial role model for his son (Macha 28):

Der Vater, jener Kerl, dessen Menschlichkeit noch intakt ist und der sich tatsächlich im Hause aufhält und seinem Sohn Aufmerksamkeit schenkt, ist die absolut beste Chance, die ein Junge hat, in sich selbst gefestigt und mit sich selbst im reinen aufzuwachsen. Die körperliche Präsenz des Vaters ist eine große Macht (Vogt and Sirridge 22).

While growing up with his father by his side, a boy goes through several phases. According to Vogt and Sirridge, every man dreams of becoming a hero: the first hero in every boy's life is his father. On one hand, he admires him for his way of life, his feelings and especially for his masculine body. On the other hand, his father poses a challenge to the boy because he takes away some of his freedom by showing him his boundaries. Growing up can be a fight between the father and the son about each other's territory (Vogt and Sirridge 52f).

With the beginning of puberty, the years of unreflected admiration for the father normally come to an end. The son starts to see his father as an impostor, because he realizes that his father is far from being omnipotent. Therefore, many male adolescents start to openly point



out all the mistakes their fathers have made in their lives. By doing so, they show that their father is a normal human being and not a hero. Vogt and Sirridge point out that, as a next step, the boy gradually tries to take the father's power away. An important detail in this aspect is the constant comparison of his father with other men, such as male teachers, and the evaluation of the qualities of these men (Vogt and Sirridge 54).

In every father-son relationship, there is a point in which the son triumphs over his father in a physical, financial or an intellectual way. In this situation, Vogt and Sirridge stress the importance of the father's reconsideration of his own boundaries. It is likely that the father is seized by fear of his son's superiority and that he is afraid of the loss of power to his son. At the same time, he probably remembers the same situation with his own father back when he was a teenager and about to become a man. Eventually, the father will overcome his fear and look at his son with pride (Vogt and Sirridge 60f).

Vogt and Sirridge stress the importance of these two phases in the lives of father and son. First, the admiration of the father, and next, the deconstruction of his status as a hero. Without these phases, a healthy father-son relationship is not attainable. By learning to see the father as an ordinary human being, the son also learns to accept himself as a human being who makes mistakes (Vogt and Sirridge 62).

## **2.2 Fathers and daughters**

While there has been a lot of research on mothers and their relationships with their daughters and a great amount of studies about fathers and sons, there is a lack of research on father-daughter relationships, even though these relationships are just as important (Sharpe 1). According to Sharpe, the only way in which the relationship between father and daughter has recently received attention in science is in relation to incest and child abuse. A reason for this focus might be that "sexuality overlays this subject with an uneasiness that is generally missing from mother-daughter relationships" (Sharpe 2). Another reason for the lack of a different focus in studies on the father-daughter relationship might be that in Western society the mother is often seen as the more essential parent, whereas the father has minor importance. What is more, "[f]or a woman, the mother-daughter relationship represents continuity and 'sameness' while the father-daughter relationship represents a sense of 'otherness', and this is one of several factors that further complicate the father-daughter relationship" (Sharpe 2).

Linda Leonard, a psychotherapist, treats women who have troubled relationships with their fathers. According to her, the relationship a woman has with her father has an immense influence on her later life. In her book *The Wounded Woman: Healing the Father-Daughter Relationship*, she mentions a woman whose father was an alcoholic. As a result, this woman suffers from a mistrust in men, feelings of guilt and shame, and a general lack of trust in people. Other women, whose fathers raised them in an extremely authoritarian way, often suffer from a lack of appreciation of the feminine sides within themselves as well as a lack of emotional support and love. Leonard mentions numerous other problematic father-daughter relationships: there are fathers who wanted to have a son instead of a daughter and who therefore expect the daughter to achieve what they themselves failed to achieve in their lives, or fathers who love their daughters too much and who therefore make it impossible for them to grow up and become a mature woman. Leonard also mentions daughters whose fathers died early and who suffer from it in their later lives: “Frauen, deren Väter früh starben, tragen eine Wunde des Verlusts und der Verlassenheit.“ (Leonard 18).

Because of her experience as a psychotherapist, however, Leonard advises against putting the blame of a difficult father-daughter relationship entirely on the father. She emphasizes the fact that it is not only the daughters who have been wounded, but the fathers also had been wounded and therefore failed to fulfill their roles as caring fathers. According to Leonard, a daughter can only overcome the consequences of a problematic relationship with her father if she does not see herself merely as a passive victim (18f).

Macha sees the father as a role model that is as important for his son as he is for his daughter: „[...] Für die Tochter gibt er Hinweise darauf, was Frau-sein vom Mann aus beinhalten kann. Sie kann sich mit seinem Bild von Weiblichkeit auseinandersetzen“ (Macha 28).

### **2.3 Fathers in American society**

When more and more fathers started working outside the realms of their families and began earning money during the era of industrialisation, their absence was first accepted and praised by society. A new ideal arose: a good father came home at the end of a long day of work to be welcomed home by his anxiously waiting children. During World War I and II, absent fathers were still present in the minds and the thoughts of their families back home (Burgess 36). However, after the wars, the notion of the absent fathers was revised because the reasons for their absence changed. “War nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg vorwiegend der Tod die Ursache der Vaterabwesenheit, so folgte eine Periode berufsbedingter Vaterabwesenheit und eine mit

zunehmender Steigerung der Scheidungsrate und des damit einhergehenden Väterverlustes“ (Fthenakis 327). The absence of the father has a negative connotation today and, in combination with the increasing extramarital birth rates, it has become a symbol of the moral decline of society for many people (Burgess 36).

Wakefield sees the new developments of 20<sup>th</sup> century America as the major problem of the modern father. According to Wakefield, “American fathers fail at these traditionally inscribed roles of paternal masculinity because of the effects of capitalism and the consumer culture of American society”(24). The question that arises from Wakefield’s approach is: what constitutes a good father in 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalist society? Does a good father necessarily have to work hard in order to provide his family with a high standard of living or are there other character traits that could substitute for his wage? According to Wakefield, the traditional roles of a father are to “be faithful to one’s wife, to provide for and to protect one’s family” (43). Wakefield blames society as a whole that fathers fail to fulfill these roles. As a consequence, men not only get estranged from their families, but also from their masculinity (43). Wakefield later comes to the conclusion that fathers and children fail to see the human being in each other by instead applying “economic and monetary standards to judge him rather than more ‘humane’ standards” (43).

Burgess tries to find the reason for the struggles of modern fathers with their roles by analyzing the roles fathers have played since the beginning of modern civilization. She comes to an interesting conclusion: in modern society the role of fathers is a minor one, while mothers fulfill the caring role for her children. For centuries, the authoritarian father played the most important role in political and moral debates about families (Burgess 10). According to Burgess, the father’s authority and the mother’s caring instincts were seen as given by nature. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the father was by far the most dominant parent while the mother stayed in the background. By analyzing the roles of parents throughout the ages, Burgess found out that the features that are traditionally attributed to fathers are very narrow; character traits such as empathy and intimacy were never attributed to fathers, but always to mothers (25).

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the role of the father has changed from the authoritarian patriarch to that of a less important family member. His role was reduced to being the provider of the family. By spending more and more time away from his home, he was alienated from his family. Burgess’ ideas tie in with Wakefield’s aforementioned critique of capitalist society,

when she says that due to growing materialistic demands the expectations attributed to fathers were continuously raised. “Bald reichte es für einen Vater nicht mehr aus, der Ernährer der Familie zu sein, er mußte ein *guter* Ernährer sein.” (Burgess 30) In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this new role of the father became widely accepted. Mothers as well as other persons such as (female) teachers took over the duties and responsibilities that were once attributed to the father and that once made him bond with his children (Burgess 31). Chores that used to be done by both parents were now done by the mothers; children were educated and brought up without their father’s help (Burgess 32).

The role of the father changed further: during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a good father was expected to come home from work and spend the evening with his children. “Die Väter wurden ermutigt, aus den Pendlerzügen direkt ins Kinderzimmer zu eilen.” (Burgess 33) Burgess sees this as an attempt to give some authority back to the father, however, it did not quite work (Burgess 33). In contrast, Macha sees the role of the father in these days in a slightly more positive way. She states that the ideal of the father who comes home from work to have fun with his children was very Western and that it also involved a stronger inclusion of the father in his family’s everyday lives (16). Today, the role of the father as a friend who plays with the children has become distorted. In commercials and the media, fathers are often presented as children themselves who must be taken care of by their wives – or even their own children (Burgess 33). Again, Macha has a more optimistic perspective on the role of the father today. According to her, there is a new awareness of the importance of fathers. Furthermore, there is a renaissance of an ideal of a father from the past because the father is regaining importance in the process of bringing up his children (24).

Burgess evaluates the situation differently. She senses a serious image problem of fathers today. However, she does not see the fault entirely with the fathers, but in a broader context: “In der jüngsten Vergangenheit wurden die Väter – und das ist eine neue Entwicklung – zunehmend unsichtbar” (Burgess 39). By that, she means that the role of the father in modern society has been further downgraded by the media; for example, in TV-commercials, fathers are not necessarily part of the families that are aired anymore. In addition, we are confronted with varying ideals of fathers in the media. Burgess criticizes that while the mother is presented as an individual character who can do what she wants, fathers are presented in a stereotypical way. They are either heroes or people who have to fulfill the classic male tasks of earning money, working and protecting their family (Burgess 42).

Lamb states that throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, research focused on the father's function as a breadwinner or on involving the father in the family life. Today, however, "researchers, theorists, and practitioners no longer cling to the simplistic belief that fathers ideally fill a one-dimensional and universal role in their families and in their children's eyes" (Lamb 3). By this, he means that fathers play many different roles instead of just one. For example, they can serve as "companions, care providers, spouses, protectors, models, moral guides, teachers, and bread-winners, whose relative importance varies across historical epochs and subcultural groups" (Lamb 3). According to Lamb, the importance of the father in the development of the child can only be evaluated when all these different roles are taken into account (3).

#### **2.4 Consequences of absent fathers**

Due to high divorce rates, there is an increasing number of children that are raised without the presence of their fathers. According to Amato and Dorius, this is the reason why research about absent fathers and the consequences of their absence for children has developed (Amato and Dorius 186). Lamb lists three fields of research in the context of the role of fathers in child development. First, there are correlational studies that focus on finding parallels between character traits of the parents and their children. Second, there are studies about the effects of fathers who are involved in their children's lives. Third, there are studies about absent fathers and divorce. The question they all try to answer is: "Which aspects of child development are influenced most, at what ages, under which circumstances, and why?" (Lamb 4). By doing research on families that lack a father, researchers want to learn more about the role a father plays when he is present. According to Fthenakis, most studies that deal with absent fathers focus on cognitive development, moral development, the development of gender-specific behavior in boys and girls and the psycho-social development of children (327).

Early studies between the 1970s and the 1990s in this field of research had very similar outcomes. All of these studies suggested that "children – especially boys – growing up without fathers seemed to have 'problems' in the areas of sex role and gender – identity development, school performance, psychosocial adjustment, and perhaps in the control of aggression" (Lamb 4). Aigner refers to a study that was conducted in 1988 by the Laboratory of Human Development at the Harvard University that showed that boys without a father tend to identify themselves with their mothers in their early childhood, which causes trouble once they have to adapt to a more masculine environment in their later lives (155).

An increasing number of children are born to unmarried couples that live together. According to Amato and Dorius, these relationships are more unstable than marriages. Therefore, it would be rewarding to do more research on the effects that break-ups of unmarried couples have on children. Amato and Dorius also express their research interest in the field of racial and ethnic differences between the effects that breakups have on children (191f).

As far as absent fathers and the effects of their absence on their children are concerned, Aigner differentiates between children that are born into a single-parent household and children that witness the separation of their parents. In most cases, children who are present when their father leaves the family or when he dies have to cope with his sudden absence. Whether or not there is an adequate surrogate for the father, for example a brother, also makes a difference to the child. Another factor that influences the coping of the child with the absence of the father is how the mother handles his absence and whether she is on good or bad terms with the father (Aigner 154). The reason for the father's absence and whether it is accepted by the family members or not can also determine if the split-up of the parents has a strong or a weak effect on children (Rauchfleisch 165).

Lamb notes that it is important to be aware of the fact that just because parents are divorced does not automatically imply that the fathers are emotionally and physically absent; the father could still spend a lot of time with his son. In addition, he claims that just because there are differences between children whose fathers are present and children whose fathers are absent does not explain *why* those differences exist. Furthermore, just because a father is absent does not mean that his children are going to face problems in their lives, and just because a father is present does not prevent them from having those problems (Lamb 6).

It is important to note that a high percentage of absent fathers are absent because they got divorced from the mothers of their children. Therefore, the circumstances that led to the divorce must be taken into account when looking at the psychological situation of the child. Most children witness extreme hostility between the parents before the divorce, which might also have an influence on their development. Amato and Dorius stress that a divorce is not only stressful for the parents, but also for their children. According to them, witnessing a divorce can lead to problems in the children's later lives. Due to the absence of the father after the divorce, the mother is often left alone with important decisions. Tress, however, states that under certain circumstances a child can develop best if the father is absent and if the child grows up with only his or her mother. In the context of an unhappy marriage, Tress mentions

the positive effects that a divorce can have on a child. By this he means that a single parent family can be a peaceful alternative to a constantly fighting married couple (142).

Lamb, however, lists the negative consequences a split-up of the parents can have. Single mothers often face economic problems which lead to further emotional stress for the mother. These factors might also influence the child (Lamb 6f). “In sum, the evidence suggests that paternal non-residence [...] may be harmful not because a sex role model is absent, but because many paternal roles – economic, social, emotional – are inadequately filled in these families” (Lamb 7). In this context, Aigner also stresses social class as a determining factor on the effects that divorce has on children (154). By that, he means that it is more likely that a child can cope with his or her parents’ divorce if the family is a member of a higher social class. Amato and Dorius emphasize the importance of close contact between the father and his children after the split-up of the parents: “Studies consistently show that positive involvement on the part of non-resident fathers is associated with fewer emotional and behavioral problems and better school adjustment among children” (177).

If the father does not get involved, children of divorced parents tend to have emotional, behavioral, social, health and academic problems to a larger degree than children of married couples. In general, these children also receive a lower level of education, have more problems in relationships in their later lives and get divorced more often than children of married couples. However, Amato and Dorius point out that children can react very differently to the divorce of their parents. Some children recover quickly and adjust to the new situation, while others suffer from the problems mentioned above. It is therefore of interest to focus on the factors that are responsible for the differences in children’s reactions to divorce (Amato and Dorius 185).

Pleck rejects the “essential father hypothesis” that states that fathers make an “essential, unique, and, more specifically, uniquely male contribution to child development” (47). First, Pleck claims that none of the research outcomes in the context of the “essential father hypothesis” proved that the father’s contribution to child development is distinct from the mother’s contribution. Pleck suggests that the father’s contributions can be substituted by the mother’s. Second, he states that investigations that tried to link the father’s influence on the child’s development to his masculinity did not prove that the second parent’s gender had any influence on the child’s development. By that he means that whether children grow up with heterosexual or lesbian parents does not make a difference in their development: “Thus,

current evidence does not support the notion that fathers' influence on child development is a uniquely masculine one" (48).

Pleck suggests that an "important father hypothesis" would be more adequate:

Good fathering makes an *important* contribution to development. The response [...] to this material has been "so, you are saying that fathers make no difference whatsoever," but there is a middle ground between fathers' being absolutely essential and their being completely irrelevant (48).

Good fathering can be seen as one factor of good development, but if a father is missing, it does not necessarily mean that children will have problems in their development.

Researchers initially attributed the lack of a male sex role model for boys to identify with as an effect of the absence of fathers. However, "the validity of this interpretation is weakened by the fact that many boys without co-resident fathers seem to develop quite normally so far as sex role development and achievement are concerned" (Lamb 6). Therefore, Lamb suggests that there must be other effects that absent fathers have on their children. Fthenakis states that the results of some studies that were done on effects of an absent father on the gender-roles of his children differ to a great extent. While there are studies, for example by Biller (1968) that suggest that the absence of a father influences the development of a masculine gender-role for boys, there are other studies that prove that boys without a father imitate men that are not necessarily part of the family and therefore undergo the same development as boys who have a father (Fthenakis 349).

The effects absent fathers have on the development of a gender-role for their daughters are just as discordant. Fthenakis refers to studies which proved that a father's absence in general does not influence daughters as much as it influences sons and that it does not prevent them from developing a female gender identity. However, he also lists studies that showed that the father's absence influences a girl in the development of her gender identity as much as it influences a boy. Brown, for example, found out that the absence of a father leads to conflicts of his children with their gender (Fthenakis 352).

The findings that are presented in this chapter are not to be taken as a full account of the high number of studies that have been done in the context of absent fathers. The consequences of an absent father differ slightly between the different researchers. In summary, there is no evidence that suggests children that grow up in single parent households are necessarily going to have problems in their later lives. According to Rauchfleisch, it is most important for



children to have a primary attachment figure in their lives. This attachment figure, however, has to accept that the child is going to search for a substitute for the missing parent outside of the family. In this context, Tress adds that the absent father remains present in the child's thoughts, which leads to the child looking for somebody that resembles his or her idealized father. A crucial problem in the context of an absent father is, however, the fact that mothers often make the mistake of replacing their missing partners with their sons and thereby giving them a role that is not naturally assigned to them (Rauchfleisch 117).

### **3. The American family**

#### **3.1 The American family in American drama**

Thaddeus Wakefield states that the American family is the central subject of American Drama. He argues that by analyzing American plays from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example plays by Lillian Hellmann, Eugene O'Neill or Tennessee Williams, one can draw conclusions about society itself. According to him, "American drama has mirrored peculiarly American social, political and historical issues" (Wakefield 1f). This mirroring of reality explains why a rising number of scholars have recently focused on the analysis of drama in a social context. Therefore, the question, why the American family and especially its dysfunctionality is a dominant theme in American drama, arises.

Kallenberg-Schröder sees this dominance of the family even as a defining characteristic of the genre of modern American drama; in many plays, the family is at the centre of the plot. In the course of the play, changes occur that affect the whole family and that dramatically influence the lives of all family members (9). By that, playwrights want to draw the attention of the audience to society as a whole. "Die Autoren wollen offenbar [...] durch die Darstellung der seelischen Verfassung ihrer Protagonisten im Kampf mit dem Leben, auf der Bühne ein kritisches Bild der modernen Gesellschaft zeichnen" (Kallenberg-Schröder 9). Kallenberg-Schröder takes the role of playwrights one step further when she emphasizes their role as critical members of society who make the audience aware of nuisances: "Die Autoren sind das kritische Sprachrohr, das die Zerstörung und den Verfall der Familie in unserer Zeit anprangert und sich somit mit der Entlarvung eines zentralen Teils des American Dream befaßt" (2).

Esslin also tries to find explanations for the dominance of the family in American drama. Traditionally, "all effective, deeply felt dramatic writing must inevitably start from human

situations, and human situations, equally inevitably are to a large extent family situations” (37). Wakefield, too, sees the American family as a central element of 20<sup>th</sup> century American drama. According to him, the family has been used by playwrights in order to investigate the “American experience” (1). He sees the changes of society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to a capitalistic consumer culture reflected in American drama because this development not only forever altered society as a whole, but also the relationships between family members. “In twentieth century American society, family members do not value each other through intrinsic standards, but rather are objectified and commodified by economic standards” (Wakefield 2).

Esslin sums up common themes connected with the family in American plays:

The parents suffering bitter disappointment at their children turning out differently from what they had expected; or conversely the sons’ – and daughters’ – cruel disenchantment with their parents when they revealed themselves to be less wonderful than they had made their children believe; the parents’ inability to let go of their children; the children’s difficulties in freeing themselves of that bond; or the tragedy of lack of communication between parents and children with the younger generation realizing that they had never really talked to their parents (35f).

Even plays that deal with issues such as the Vietnam war end up involving these family themes. However, Esslin claims that good playwrights manage to take the audience one step further and put the family in a broader context. Thereby, playwrights give the audience the opportunity to achieve a deeper understanding of society, culture and themselves (37). The importance of plays that succeed in these aspects cannot be overestimated; they “[...] can be seen as being on the same plane as the major philosophical or religious statements we possess” (Esslin 37).

However, as Esslin puts it, there are not many playwrights that are able to fulfill these ideals. He refers to many modern American plays as “diaper dramas” – a term that was coined by a the critic Benedict Nightingale of *The New York Times* in the 1980s (Nightingale, Esslin 38f). Esslin uses the term “diaper drama” for many modern American plays because he thinks that the relationships between the characters cannot be seen as those of adults but rather as immature and infantile relationships. According to Esslin, one reason for the representation of human relationships in this simplified way on stage could be that, traditionally, American theatre has had a different function than that of European theatre. In Europe, theatre has been seen as an important part of culture and has therefore been expected to challenge its audience. In America, its main purpose was to entertain. Due to the Puritan heritage in America, theatre

had historically been seen as sinful and was therefore reduced to entertainment so it would not tempt its audience to raise questions about society (Esslin 38f). Therefore, instead of giving the audience something to think about after seeing the play, many American playwrights still prefer to evoke emotions by achieving a high level of identification between the audience and the characters on stage, which is the reason why “diaper dramas” seem to be so popular on American stages. “The family situations of ‘diaper drama’ are certain to find an immediate identificational response with the vast majority of spectators” (Esslin 40).

Morris Freedman also stresses the entertaining purpose of American drama and states that it cannot only be seen as an art because it is also “subject to the combination of demands and standards that characterize entertainment and business” (1). Unlike Esslin, he sees the importance of entertainment in every form of art and not only in American theatre. For example, even Shakespeare’s plays had to compete with other forms of entertainment. Therefore, this combination of art and entertainment cannot be seen as a new development. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the competition with other forms of public entertainment became more intense and American drama suddenly had to compete “with opera, concerts, ballet, vaudeville, the movies, minstrel shows, radio, television, baseball, football, tennis, and, when it ventured out of urban centers, with rodeos and country fairs” (Freedman 1). In this context, Esslin emphasizes the influence of TV on drama and states that both soap operas and modern American drama deal with the same family situations and that theatre only deals with it “on a slightly higher level”(Esslin 40).

According to Esslin, there are very few playwrights who succeed in writing “drama, which translates the abstract into concrete human terms and allows the playwright to establish a veritable experimental laboratory of political and sociological issues” (43). Among the more recent ones is Sam Shepard, who will be discussed later and who manages to put the characters in a broader social context in his play *True West* (Esslin 45).

### **3.1.1 The absent father in modern American drama**

In his book *The Absent Father in Modern Drama*, Paul Rosefeldt introduces a strong hypothesis about the recurring themes of dysfunctional families and absent fathers in modern drama. According to him, “one major thread of the analysis of modern drama holds that modern drama is a reaction to a sense of profound loss, brought about by the death of God” (1). By that, he means that modern playwrights have to deal with this sudden absence of God that also brings about a new world order, as it moves away from a God-centered, hierarchical

understanding of the universe. However, according to Rosefeldt, these attempts of playwrights to deal with a new order are futile and “all that is left is unaccommodated man living in a scrapyard of meaningless memorabilia” (1). Still, in their plays, dramatists keep searching for God as a “nebulous missing savior figure” (2).

Rosefeldt sees the absence of God and the futile search for him emphasized on stage by the frequent absence of father figures, “for the father image symbolizes creation and the origin of meaning and in patriarchal cultures is subsumed into the Transcendental Father or God” (2). Therefore, the focus on the loss that is showed on stage with the absence of the father and the way his absence influences the characters on stage is a rewarding way of analyzing modern drama.

When dealing with absent figures, such as the father or God, it is crucial to understand the ways in which absent characters in drama work. Rosefeldt offers a basic definition for absent characters: “Essentially, the absent character is a character who never appears in the plot and, therefore, is never on stage, for his appearance would automatically give him unmediated presence” (3). Absent characters either exist in the past, in the future, or in between the scenes that take place on stage (Rosefeldt 3). It is important to bear in mind that the absent character is only presented in the discourse of the characters on stage or by iconic markers, for example, photographs or personal belongings (Rosefeldt 3). Everything the audience finds out about this character is from the point of view of another character and therefore “[...] such a character cannot explain his or her actions nor can the absent character contradict the representation that others construct” (Rosefeldt 3). According to Manfred Pfister, while even non-speaking figures are part of the *dramatis personae*, absent characters are not. Pfister also points out that there is a sharp difference between the *dramatis personae* and these absent characters, because characters that are actually on stage not only present themselves verbally, but also in other ways, for example, by their appearance and their manner of speaking (165). Pfister acknowledges the importance of absent characters for the plots of many plays and Rosefeldt stresses their frequent symbolic significance (Pfister 165, Rosefeldt 4).

An absent character has to be mentioned or alluded to in the course of the play. If a character is not mentioned throughout the play at all, he or she might still have some significance for the characters on stage. However, such a character would not “just be absent, but missing”

(Rosefeldt 4) and these missing characters are a different subject matter. Therefore, they will not be investigated in this thesis.

The absence of a character “implies residual presence and has repercussions the playwright wants elevated to consciousness” (Rosefeldt 4). On the one hand, the absent character can be seen as “a liminal figure, halfway between being missing and present, life and death, past and present, the ‘what was’ and the ‘never will be’, a presence that is always being deferred” (Rosefeldt 4). On the other hand, the absent character also forcefully moves towards the present and he or she does so “through a series of simulations: metonymic substitutions, iconic representations, psychological displacements, or uncanny doubles” (Rosefeldt 5). By metonymic substitutions, Rosefeldt is referring to objects that become representations of the absent father. For example, the gun in the play *’night, Mother* by Marsha Norman that will be investigated later on. Pictures and personal belongings can become iconic representations of the absent character, while the term “uncanny doubles” implies that “the character may be reconstituted by doubles” (Rosefeldt 5). All these simulations help to bring the absent father into the presence of the play.

Rosefeldt states that most plays that deal with absent fathers have a common pattern:

He has died or abandoned his children or is away from home at a crucial point in the drama. He is a mysterious figure, connected to the family, yet outside the family, a representative of the values of his culture, yet a transgressor of those values. His absence shows the diminishing or displacement of fatherhood itself. The name of the father which inscribes the family in a line of descent is often unspoken or displaced. The mother/wife is either missing (not mentioned at all) or ineffectual. She is often a version of the ‘crazy’ mother or the Terrible Mother who ignores, persecutes or betrays her children (10).

Due to the absence of their father, “his children are failures, alienated from themselves and the world that surrounds them. They live in a wasteland, a world of mourning and melancholia” (Rosefeldt 10). Sons and daughters are equally concerned with the quest of finding their father while frequently idealizing him. There are different ways in which the children deal with the lack of their father: some children try to become like their father and they “follow in his path, or recreate a part of his life” (Rosefeldt 10). Moreover, fatherless children in drama often try to escape the world they live in because it is a depressing world. Instead, they attempt to live in their father’s world because they idealize the world of their fathers (Rosefeldt 10). The problem with this search is that the father’s world is connected

with death and therefore “the search for the father is often a self-destructive one” (Rosefeldt 10). There are hardly ever happy endings in plays that deal with absent fathers. “Harmonious union with the father is not possible, for the father which exists at the point of origin is forever absent in these dramas” (Rosefeldt 10).

Despite his absence, the father is the driving force in many plays. “He presents the origin of the drama, initiates the quest, spawns imitators or doubles who trace his path, and becomes the ultimate goal of the quest” (Rosefeldt 11). To sum it up, the absent father takes the action forward and his absence creates a sense of loss and mourning which dominates the overall atmosphere of the play.

### **3.1.2 The significance of the American Dream for American drama**

The American Dream shapes the idea of the American family and plays an important role in most of the plays that will be discussed later in this thesis. First of all, the American Dream is deeply rooted in the American mind (Baier 1). Baier suggests that the family and its close ties are part of the American Dream (23). Kallenberg-Schröder, too, considers the American family central to the American Dream (2). Therefore, the investigation of the American Dream in drama is rewarding; if the classic American family does not function anymore in drama as well as in real life, it might hint at the fact that the American Dream itself is an outdated ideal.

Before the representation of the American Dream on American stages can be analyzed, it is important to take a brief look at the origins and the most important characteristics of the often-quoted term. The term “American Dream” was first used by the historian James Truslow Adams in 1931, right in the middle of the Great Depression, in his study *The Epic of America*. The term was immediately picked up by novelists, poets, historians, sociologists and philosophers as well as by the advertising industry and by politicians (Freese 92). The exact definitions of the concept of the American Dream vary to a great extent between different scholars. Freese’s enumeration of the most important elements of the dream, however, gives a good overview of the American Dream. According to him, the most important components of the American Dream are:

the belief in progress, [...] the belief in the general attainability of success, [...]  
the belief in manifest destiny, [...] the idea of the continual challenge of

respective frontiers, the belief in the American form of government of the people, by the people and for the people as the sole guarantor of liberty and equality, and [...] the conviction expressed in the notion of the melting pot and its historical mutations from cultural pluralism to multi-ethnicity (106).

However, he notes that other scholars might put their focus on different aspects, such as the “cult of newness, the glorification of youth, the belief in unhampered mobility and the chances for ever new beginnings” (106).

Annette Saddik states that Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams were the first playwrights who started to question the concept of the American Dream in their dramatic work. She sees their recurring deconstructions of the dream as “early responses by American dramatists to the events that shaped the second half of the twentieth century” (41). As a consequence, “they began to examine the tension between the individual and the collective in that context, and explore issues of identity in terms of role playing and authenticity in American culture” (Saddik 41). Most of Williams’ plays from the 1940s and the 1950s criticize the superficiality of American capitalist society. In these plays, he shows how capitalism “at the expense of deeper emotional and artistic values destroyed the sensitive and the weak, discarding human complexity and creating social outsiders who struggled to survive” (Saddik 41). An interesting aspect in Williams’ dramatic work is the “awareness of the contradiction of capitalism’s role in both making possible and perverting the struggle for the American dream” (Saddik 41). Baier even sees the American Dream as a leitmotif in many of Williams’ plays and the idea behind the ideal is criticized and deconstructed (1f): “Williams macht das Scheitern aller Träume deutlich, indem er die persönlichen Hoffnungen der Figuren ins Leere laufen und unterschiedlichste Erfolgsrezepte gleichermaßen versagen läßt“ (2). By doing so, Williams wants to make the audience reflect on the value of the American Dream: “Dem Zuschauer wird klar, daß die Unwirksamkeit des American Dream und das Scheitern westlicher Normen ein Wertevakuum hinterlassen, dem er schutzlos ausgeliefert ist“ (2).

Like Paul Rosefeldt, whose hypotheses were discussed in the previous chapter, Arnold Aronson senses a feeling of loss and “existential despair” (Aronson 155) in modern plays. However, he argues that this sense of loss that was rather vague in plays of the 1950s and 1960s “and the concurrent demise of language as a tool for human contact and communication, had transformed over the subsequent decades into desire for human contact and communication and a search for meaning in an often hostile or uncaring world” (155).

The vague feeling of loss that was at the core of many modern plays transformed into a more concrete feeling, because this feeling was no longer unknown to American society.

[...] the American dream had been shattered in Vietnam [...] and in Watergate [...]; racism, which had briefly appeared solvable, re-emerged as a seemingly incurable cancer eating away at society; materialism, which had been an ever present factor in American society, though always masked beneath the surface of democratic ideals, emerged as a primary social force in the Reagan years; and the AIDS epidemic brought fears and prejudices to the forefront of society while decimating a portion of that society (Aronson 155).

While many scholars see the American family as the core of American drama even today, Aronson states that under these afore-mentioned circumstances, the American family in its traditional form “dissolved as a workable or relevant metaphor for the drama” (155). However, referring to Annette Saddik, one could state that the American family was already dysfunctional in many American plays even before Vietnam, Watergate and AIDS.

### **3.2 The American family in real life**

Just like the American family in American Drama, the traditional American family also underwent a radical change in American society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Desmond McCarthy puts it, “[t]here is little about social organization of the American family in the late twentieth century that appears to be self-evident” (1). By that, he means that the traditional nuclear family, consisting of two parents and their children, is losing importance and new forms of families are evolving. For Kallenberg-Schröder, too, the American family has been undergoing a radical change. According to her, American families were in the middle of their development from the “family of security” to a “family of freedom” and had not quite reached the latter at the time when her book was published in 1990 (9). Due to this radical change of family organization, there was a lot of dissatisfaction, fear, frustration and disappointment in American families. However, at the same time, Kallenberg-Schröder also emphasizes the hope for a positive, successful and harmonious life as a characteristic of the American family (9).

Unlike Kallenberg-Schröder, many other experts see this change in the structure of the American family in a predominantly negative way. According to McCarthy, this “accelerating loss in the last few decades of what we have idealized as a permanent and universal familial arrangement is a kind of ‘crisis’” (1). Both liberals and conservatives seem to agree about “a disquieting sense that something of immeasurable and perhaps irretrievable importance has



been lost” (McCarthy 10). This feeling ties in well with the sense of loss in modern drama that has been discussed earlier; this could indeed hint at the fact that modern American drama deals with a general sense of loss that is felt by society as a whole.

The notion of loss of the traditional family is rooted in the very American assumption that “families operate best in a self-reliant isolation from the state” (McCarthy 12). According to McCarthy, however, this notion is a myth because, especially in connection with issues such as child abuse and domestic violence, it is of great importance for society to get more involved in people’s private lives. Furthermore, McCarthy argues that the traditional family was never fully independent of society (14f). Adams stresses the role that the traditional nuclear family used to play for the socialization of children. Of course, socialization does not only happen within, but also outside of the family, however, “[i]t is in the the nuclear family that the individual acquires his cultural orientation, reinforced or contradicted by extra-familial influences” (Adams 349). Sirjamaki, too, emphasizes that the nuclear family is the ideal form of family. Interestingly, he stresses the importance of individuality for children in this context: “While they have great dependence upon the family, at the same time they want freedom from it so that as individuals they can engage in enterprises outside the home” (194). Furthermore, laws have been established that guarantee the right of the individual in the family. McCarthy mentions an observation in this context that is also going to be of importance for the analysis of the plays in this thesis: even children who are not raised in a nuclear family will grow up to see this traditional form as an ideal that needs to be achieved in order to succeed in life. “We are convinced that the traditional nuclear family is a ‘happy’ family; we suspect that deviations from or alternatives to this household arrangement are somewhat unfortunate, unhealthy and even unnatural” (McCarthy 1).

Even though many experts believe that the step away from the traditional family structure is bad, McCarthy also points out that there are positive aspects to the development. “Rather, we might see some of the recent trends [...] as a natural evolution away from a structure that was situated in and more suitable for an earlier historical period” (9). Even though John Sirjamaki’s book *The American Family in the twentieth century* was published almost fifty years ago, his ideas tie in with McCarthy’s. He stresses the importance of changes in family structures in a changing society. According to him, the family constantly adapts to changing living conditions, “thereby ensuring its continued utility and reliability to them” (Sirjamaki 192). From Sirjamaki’s point of view, one could therefore argue that the decline of nuclear

families was a necessary development in order to guarantee the survival of basic family structures in our society. Sirjamaki's argument provides a more optimistic view on current statistics. According to Popenoe, between the 1960s and the 1990s, the number of children that grew up without their fathers rose from 17 to 36 percent (3). The U.S. Census Bureau provides more recent statistics: the number of children that grew up in single parent households in the United States between 1980 and 2008 rose from six million in 1980 to more than ten million in 2008 (U.S. Census Bureau). The social changes that brought about these developments include, "greater access to civil divorce, birth control, and abortion, and wider acceptance of premarital sexual activity, both hetero- and homosexual unmarried couples, working women, and day care" (McCarthy 10).

Adams focuses on the importance of the nuclear family, which can be explained by the publication year of his book *The American Family. A Sociological Interpretation* in 1970. Although it is clearly outdated, some of his observations still seem to be valid. He links the nuclear family closely to the American economic system and its values because the family is the "basic consumer of the goods of the market" (349). Furthermore, Adams equalizes a "happy family" with a "consuming family" (349). This economic view of the family ties in with Thaddeus Wakefield's approach towards American families which was mentioned before and which can be seen as a critique of the capitalist American consumer culture. Adams states that economic developments, such as division and specialization of labor, also required a reduction of family members so that it was easier for the family to adapt to new situations (Adams 349).

Another important point to consider is that, as society's smallest unit, the family mirrors societal developments at a smaller scale. "Social change must begin at home; the family is a microcosm of society" (McCarthy 130). It is interesting how McCarthy seems to think that society influences the family, but at the same time the family as a microcosm of society influences society. Therefore, by analyzing the role that the family plays in American drama, one might be able to draw conclusions about society. *The American Family in the twentieth century* by John Sirjamaki was published in 1960 and, in contrast to its promising title, only deals with American families up until its publishing year. He too stresses the importance of families for society. For him, families "tend toward general uniformity in a society because they are conditioned to the same culture and their members have certain similar life experiences" (9).

As a side note it should be mentioned that, as a glance at the biographies of playwrights such as Tennessee Williams reveals, there can also be autobiographical and even political reasons for the focus of playwrights on the family and its deconstruction. For some of the playwrights, these aspects will be investigated in the overall conclusion at the end of this thesis.

## 4. Adolescent sons in search for their father

### 4.1 Tennessee Williams: *The Glass Menagerie*

#### 4.1.1 The absent father

*The Glass Menagerie* is considered Tennessee Williams's breakthrough play. "The production [...] in early 1945 suddenly lifted Tennessee Williams from poverty and obscurity to affluence and fame" (Falk 8). As mentioned previously, Tennessee Williams was among the first playwrights who started deconstructing the American Dream and its accompanying notion of the American family. Paul Rosefeldt explains the absent father in *The Glass Menagerie*, which was published in 1948, with a change in the role of the father after World War II:

[...] the pioneer image of the father who could rise to fame and fortune through self-determination was giving way to the image of the company man. However, the vanishing of the frontier adventurer as patriarch would not go unmourned. As absent father, he would rise up as a seductive illusion, a mythical and almost transcendent image in a world that had lost its faith in transcendence (39).

In *The Glass Menagerie*, the father represents the legendary American hero who, as a part of the American Dream, challenges the frontiers in his search for adventure (Freese 106). The nameless father is represented as a soldier from World War I in a picture on stage. His absence leaves his son struggling for a place in society, his daughter unable to cope with life and his wife glorifying the good old days without any of them ever moving on. According to Rosefeldt, Tom Wingfield lives "in a present world, which is a wasteland and a prison house, a world of constrictions and confinements filled with artificial objects that are corroding or turning into junk" (39).

Another reason for the absent father in Williams' work is his own father, who reportedly was an alcoholic and frequently bullied his family (Hayman 7f). Tennessee Williams hated his father, who used to call him "Miss Nancy", yet he felt deeply connected to his mother and his sister (Bock 6, Schäfer 103). Therefore, one could hypothesize that Williams got rid of the father in many of his plays because there was no way for him to free himself from the dominant father in his own life: "Bezeichnenderweise ist die Gestalt des Vaters [...] in *The Glass Menagerie* auf ein ironisch kommentiertes Wandfoto reduziert" (Schäfer 103). Tischler hypothesizes that Williams decided to leave out the father because he was not ready to portray a father in his play; furthermore, it allowed him "to simplify the story, and to intensify Amanda's demands, her paranoia, and to help explain Tom's guilt" (209). Bock argues that the central conflict with his father led to an ambivalence in Williams' plays: there is an

“admiration and longing for strong masculinity” (6), and at the same time “his best portrayals, his protagonists, are all women, whom he understood so well because of his own female identification” (6). A close connection to his own life is suggested by several autobiographical elements in *The Glass Menagerie*. For example, Williams used the memories of his family’s living situation in St. Louis for the Wingfield family’s apartment in the play (Hayman 9). Also, his mentally ill sister Rose inspired the character of Laura Wingfield (Bigsby, *Entering ‘The Glass Menagerie’* 36). According to Bock, Tennessee Williams only “escaped [his sister’s] fate through the therapeutic effect of writing” (6). The fact that the narrator Tom shares his first name with Tennessee Williams also suggests that the play is partly autobiographical (Bigsby, *Entering ‘The Glass Menagerie’* 37). According to Schäfer, the degree to which Williams’ plays are autobiographical in general, is unusual: “In seinem Werk hat Williams persönlichen Erfahrungen und Empfindungen in einem Ausmaß Ausdruck verliehen, das für die Gattung des Dramas mit seiner öffentlichen Hinwendung an ein breites Publikum erstaunlich ist” (105).

#### **4.1.2 The absent father as an omnipresent figure**

To begin with, *The Glass Menagerie* was defined by the playwright himself as a memory play. By “memory play”, he means that it cannot be seen as a purely realistic play, but rather as a transformation of reality (Williams 7). In the stage directions of the first act, Williams once again stresses the fact that “the scene is memory and therefore non-realistic” (15) because the play is based on the memory of the narrator and main character Tom Wingfield, whose family has been abandoned by his father. According to Bigsby, the term “memory play” implies much more: “For the fact is that this is not only a description of the play’s dramatic tactics, it is an accurate account of the strategy of characters who themselves distrust the real until it is transformed by imagination” (*Entering ‘The Glass Menagerie’* 33).

Even before the play starts, the extensive stage directions hint at the unhappy atmosphere on stage; Williams already predetermines the interpretation of the fire escape that can be seen on stage when he says that “all of these huge buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation” (14f). In addition, the fire escapes do not only function as exits during the play but they, paradoxically, also function as traps. For example, the only time Laura tries to leave the apartment, she slips on the fire escape and hurts herself. According to Bock, this illustrates that “the fire escape does not offer her any escape from the imprisonment in her own psychic condition” (8). Rosefeldt specifically mentions this

entrapment of fatherless children in their lives as a recurring themes in many plays that deal with absent fathers (39). According to Falk, the hero in Williams' plays is always entrapped: "He is usually 'trapped by circumstance' to live in an industrialized society or in a small-town hell where mediocrity and bigotry destroy any sign of originality and humanity" (92). The "dark, grim rear wall" of the apartment and the "dark, narrow alleys" (Williams 15) further illustrate Tom's entrapment. They can also be seen as hints at the living situation of the Wingfield family in particular and of people living in American cities at that time in general. Interestingly, the description of the family's living situation goes hand in hand with Paul Rosefeldt's depiction of fatherless children's living situations in American drama that was mentioned earlier. According to him, fatherless children often "live in a wasteland, a world of mourning and melancholia" (10). This mourning is definitely illustrated by the description of the Wingfield apartment. Moreover, the melancholic longing of the family is directed towards the picture of the absent father in their living room.

Before any of the characters say something in the play, the absent father is introduced by a detailed description of his photograph: "It is the face of a very handsome young man in a doughboy's First World War cap. He is gallantly smiling, ineluctably smiling, as if to say 'I will be smiling forever'" (Williams 16). The shiny photograph stands in a sharp contrast to the bleak atmosphere of the apartment. It becomes obvious at a later point of the play that the smiling, young father also stands in a sharp contrast to his wife Amanda Wingfield, who is an aging Southern belle. She desperately wants to remain young, but she stands for a world of outdated values. While the whole family is shattered by the absence of the father, he himself is forever young at the centre of their attention. Furthermore, the photograph makes him an omni-present figure.

This draws a parallel to Paul Rosefeldt's theory that has been elaborated earlier: modern drama can be seen as a reaction to the loss of God in the modern world and this absence is often emphasized by an absence of the father (2). This is exactly what happens in *The Glass Menagerie*: the grinning and ever-present father becomes a God-like figure who is always there but who at the same time cannot be asked for consolation. It is not the father who influences the fate of the whole family, it is rather his absence that drives the family into the tragic outcome of the play. Due to the photograph, the father is the first character the audience sees on stage, but at the same time he is never physically present.

In Tom Wingfield's opening speech, the father is introduced as a "fifth character who doesn't appear" (Williams 19). By giving him the status of a character in the play, Tom emphasizes his importance. He also gives the reasons why his father left: "He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distances" (Williams 19). By saying it in that witty way, Tom already gives a hint at his admiration of his father, even though he left 16 years ago and he only sent the family a postcard from Mexico without ever giving them an exact address (Williams 19). According to Paul Rosefeldt, the father in the play does not only journey South, but also Westwards just like the American ideal of the hero (41). However, in the play, the absent Mr. Wingfield embodies much more than the American hero. He not only represents the past, but he also represents an adventurous future (Rosefeldt 41). Like his wife Amanda, Mr. Wingfield originally came from the South and moved up North. Unlike Amanda, however, he managed to adapt to the new living conditions because "[h]e moved outside of the world of the agrarian aristocracy and became part of the fast-moving world of modern technology" (Rosefeldt 41). This modern technology that he became used to could have contributed to his decision to leave the family; other factors for his decision were certainly boredom with his life as well as the longing for adventure. Because Amanda failed to adapt to their new life, the couple became alienated from each other. As a consequence, one could argue that the play shows the incompatibility of old values and new technology, which leads to abandonment and loneliness.

Tom's admiration for his father, as well as the constant comparisons that his mother draws between the two men of her family, make him become more and more like his father: he drinks too much and comes home late at night. In scene four, his mother accuses him of hating the apartment and therefore trying to stay away from it as long as possible (Williams 54). While his father left them in search for adventure, Tom is denied any form of adventure in his everyday life at the warehouse. Therefore, he seeks adventure when he goes to the cinema late at night: "Adventure is something I don't have much of at work, so I go to the movies" (Williams 55). According to Rosefeldt, while Amanda can escape the depressing world she lives in by going back in memory to her youth, Tom has no escape from this world but the world of fantasy: "Like other sons of absent fathers, he becomes involved in mythmaking. And many of his myths come from the movies, for they open up to him the world of adventure" (42). Hedwig Bock also stresses the importance of Hollywood movies for Tom's attempts to escape reality (7). The admiration for his father, who is wearing a soldier's uniform on the picture in the living room, makes him idealize the idea of war and

consequentially equate World War II with adventure: “Hollywood characters are supposed to have all the adventures for everybody in America, while everybody in America sits in a dark room and watches them have them! Yes, until there’s a war. That’s when adventure becomes available to the masses!” (Williams 86f).

Using Thaddeus Wakefield’s Marxist approach, one could argue that Tom Wingfield’s monotonous job makes him become alienated from the product of his work and thereby alienated from himself. Therefore, “[h]e is little more than a means to an end, a profit for the owners; he is interchangeable with machines and easily discarded. The owners do not relate to him as full human being, and he has little opportunity to choose which talents he will pursue” (Wakefield 23). This lack of opportunities to pursue his artistic talents is emphasized by the fact that Tom hides in the washroom of his workplace in order to write poems, which is his secret talent; Jim refers to him as “Shakespeare”, because of this (Williams 95). Bigsby even considers Tom Wingfield “a poet in an unpoetic world” (*Entering ‘The Glass Menagerie’* 38). In the end, Tom loses his job, because he writes a poem on a shoebox. This again shows that there is no place in American capitalist society for the pursuit of one’s individual talents if they are not economically rewarding.

As the play progresses, the father becomes more and more present. When Tom talks about a magician’s trick with a coffin that he has seen earlier and asks “[b]ut who in hell ever got himself out of one without removing one nail?” (Williams 47), the photograph of his father suddenly lights up. This can be seen as an answer to his question. Just like a magician, his father got himself out of the commitment to his family without making his son openly question his status as a hero. According to Rosefeldt, “[t]he eternal smile of the fugitive father haunts his son and points out the path of escape” (41). When Amanda Wingfield has a fight with her son about how much he smokes, she looks at the photograph of her husband as if he was actually present and as if she was seeking advice from him (Williams 61).

As far as Tom Wingfield’s psychological condition is concerned, it becomes immediately obvious that he is stuck in a phase of pure admiration for his father, which should normally come to an end with the beginning of puberty, when the son starts to question the father’s status as a hero. Just like him, his whole family seems to be stuck because neither Tom, his sister or his mother openly condemn the father for leaving the family. He is not only present through the iconic marker of the picture on stage, but also in their conversations. Furthermore,



the need for a dominant male figure in the family is so strong that every male character in the play serves as a double for the father. Interestingly, however, Tom himself does not seem to have a replacement for his father as a male role model, which could be explained by his clinging mother, who will not let him go out and find a new role model but instead makes him take care of the family in lieu of the father. In the end, Tom does not see a way out of his miserable life other than abandoning his family, just like his father: "I'm like my father. The bastard son of a bastard!" (Williams 88). Calling himself a "bastard son" hints at his low self-esteem, a possible psychological consequence of being abandoned by his father at a young age. At the same time, it is interesting that he calls his father a "bastard", too, which emphasizes that Tom is torn between anger and admiration for his father. Furthermore, he clearly expresses his identification with his father when he calls himself and his father a "bastard", which already hints at the fact that he is going to choose to walk down his path at the end of the play.

Just like her brother, Laura, too, suffers from the psychological consequences of the abandonment by the father. Falk considers her "morbidly shy and overly delicate" (49). At the same time, Laura evokes sympathy and she even charms the audience because of "her timidity, her suffering from the friction between Tom and Amanda, and her retreat into a world of dreams" (49). When Jim analyzes Laura's personality, he diagnoses her with an inferiority complex (Williams 107). Even though, in general, Jim merely likes to aggrandize himself, it is true that Laura has psychological problems because of her physical disability. However, regardless of her physical handicap, her self-confidence might have developed quite differently if her father had not left her when she was only eight. Although both siblings have problems with their self-esteem, they cope with their problems in very different ways.

#### **4.1.3 Filling the void of the father**

According to Paul Rosefeldt, the family uses all their energy to bring the father back into presence. Thereby, they are trying to fill the gap he left. "The son's fixation on his everlasting smile, the daughter's eternal compulsion to play his records, and the mother's holding on to the relic of his bathrobe keep the whole family bound to the task of reestablishing the presence of the absent father" (41). Furthermore, in order to bring the father back into being, both male characters, Tom and Jim, are used as replacements for the absent father. Tom is required to take care of his family financially instead of his father. He goes to work and pays

the rent for the apartment they live in, while he secretly admires his father for having brought up the courage to leave. His adoration for his father's courage to put himself first becomes obvious during a fight with his mother: "Why, listen, if self is what I thought of, Mother, I'd be where he is – GONE!" (Williams 42). Furthermore, he is not only required to replace his father as a caretaker, but also as a confidant for his mother, for example when they discuss Laura's alarming state of mind in scene four (Williams 53f).

The gentleman caller for Laura that Amanda is hoping for serves as a double for the father as well, even though he is a nameless figure for most of the play. Rosefeldt even refers to the gentleman caller as a "savior figure" (43). This biblical reference to the gentleman caller again stresses the absence of a God that modern society can relate to and the subsequent need to create other God-like figures in people's lives. Amanda does not even care about who the gentleman caller is as long as there is somebody who visits them and brings about a radical change in the family's everyday life. Even though Jim does not show up until scene six and does not turn out to be the man they have been hoping for, the anticipation of the gentleman caller dominates the plot. Laura's attitude towards Jim – her immature admiration for his outdated photograph in her yearbook – mirrors the admiration of the entire family for the photograph of the father in the living room. One could say that due to the absence of her father and despite his paradoxical omni-presence on the photograph, Laura only knows men from pictures and does not know how to deal with them in real life.

When Jim asks Laura to dance, she declines because she claims that she cannot dance. Thereupon, Jim gives her the advice to "[l]et yourself go, now, Laura, just let yourself go" (Williams 112). As elaborated in the theoretical part of this thesis, the problem of not being able to let go and trust men is a typical character trait of women who have a difficult relationship with their fathers (Leonard 18f). The dangers of letting go become apparent when Laura starts to enjoy her dance with Jim and they bump against the table; the favourite piece of her beloved glass menagerie falls to the floor and breaks (Williams 113). The piece of glass that breaks stresses her own vulnerability. By letting Jim briefly into her life, she risks getting hurt: "Für einen kurzen Augenblick scheint sich Laura der Wirklichkeit zuzuwenden, doch im prekären Moment emotionaler Zuneigung gesteht Jim, daß er bereits verlobt sei und bald heiraten werde" (Schäfer 107). It is interesting how Laura continues to like the man, even when he treats her badly. Even though Jim is engaged to be married, he kisses her before he tells her about his commitment (Williams 117). In a way, by liking a man who leaves her in

the end, she also re-enacts her mother's tragic history. She shows that, as Rosefeldt states, there is no way out of the prisonhouse of her life and that her failure is already predetermined (43). "The failure of this performance, however, leaves Laura with only one theatre in which to live out her life, that of her glass menagerie" (Bigsby, *Entering 'The Glass Menagerie'* 40). In the end, all father figures abandon the Wingfield family and there is no other replacement for them in sight (Rosefeldt 43).

It is not only Laura who substitutes the hope for the return of the father with the hope for the appearance of a suitable gentleman caller. Instead of dealing with the absence of the father, Amanda is hoping for better times once a decent suitor for Laura shows up. According to Bigsby, Amanda is trying to "redeem her own failed life by finding romance for the daughter she loves but who must always stand as a reproach" (*Entering 'The Glass Menagerie'* 41). At the beginning of scene three, Tom acts as a narrator again and talks about the gentleman caller as being omnipresent: "Even when he wasn't mentioned, his presence hung in Mother's preoccupied look and in my sister's frightened, apologetic manner – hung like a sentence passed upon the Wingfields!" (Williams 36). It is striking how he might be talking about his father with exactly the same words. Just like they cannot get rid of the burden of the absent father, they can also not get rid of the mysterious absent figure of the gentleman caller. Therefore, those two figures can be seen as substitutes for each other. Both Amanda and Laura focus on the gentleman caller because they do not want to deal with the more pressing problem of an absent family member. Furthermore, Tom's usage of the word "sentence" implies that it is not in the power of them to change their situation, because a sentence is imposed by a superior power.

#### **4.1.4 The absent father and the mother**

An absent father immediately draws the attention to the present mother and her role in the family. Even though at the first sight, Amanda Wingfield acts like a traditional mother when she tells Tom how to eat properly, she is not a strong mother that could take over the role of the failing father (Williams 56). A reason for this might be that she is constantly looking for replacements for the absent man in the house, which is why she expects Tom to fulfill his father's role and to look for a gentleman caller for his sister. Instead of dealing with the present, she constantly dwells in the past, for example, when she tells her children over and over again how many suitors she had in the glorious days of her youth. While the whole play is defined as a "memory play", Amanda lives in her own memories that have nothing to do

with the harsh reality of her life. Even her appearance shows that she is stuck in the past; her clothing style seems outdated, and when she dresses up for Laura's gentleman caller she wears an old, unfashionable dress (Williams 78). Rosefeldt interprets her appearance when Jim shows up as a re-enactment of the day when she met Mr. Wingfield: "She brings out her wedding silver to serve the new father figure" (43). In another scene, she wears her husband's worn out bathrobe, which further demonstrates that she cannot let go of the past (Williams 40).

Amanda's holding on to the past also becomes apparent through her interaction with her children. On several occasions, she refers to Laura as her "sister", for example during family dinner (Williams 21). This hints at the fact that she does not even want to fulfill her role as a mother, but that she rather wants to be seen as a young girl that is equal to Laura. According to Kallenberg-Schröder, Amanda is responsible for her daughter's shyness; by constantly dwelling in her glorious past, she makes Laura become aware of the fact that she will never be as popular with men as her mother used to be (101). While, traditionally, children are dependent on their mother to take care of them, Amanda is dependent on both Laura and Tom and she puts pressure on them to fulfill her expectations. According to Bock, Amanda clings to her children "and especially treats Tom as her baby, since the role of a mother was the only one she was allowed to play since she had got married and her beauty had faded" (8). This does not seem to be entirely true; Amanda does not treat Tom like a baby, but much more like a partner replacement and as a husband who has to earn the money for the family. Amanda is also dependent on Laura, which becomes obvious when she finds out that she dropped out of school and asks "[...] what is going to become of us, what is the future?" (Williams 28), as if her future was dependent on her daughter's career. Of course, one could argue that Amanda acts like a traditional mother in this context because she is mainly worried about Laura's future after her death. However, Bigsby argues that Amanda wanted to free both Laura and herself when she invested her money into Laura's typewriting course and the fact that she fails hurts her self-esteem (*Entering 'The Glass Menagerie'* 34). Laura is facing a dilemma: she cannot work and therefore she cannot take care of herself, yet at the same time she does not find a husband to take care of her. Laura's dilemma is indeed insoluble and it therefore hints at the tragic outcome of the play. Another hint at Amanda's failure in fulfilling her maternal role is that she is more worried about the fact that Tom might be leaving without finding an appropriate husband for Laura than about his decision to leave in general (Williams 57).

The fact that Amanda desperately wants her daughter to get married, even though her own marriage has proven that a husband does not automatically guarantee a prosperous life, shows that she is not capable of critically reflecting on her life. Her attitude towards her husband is ambiguous. On one hand, she still seems to love him, for example, when she mentions how charming he was and how well he took care of his appearance (Williams 35, 61). On the other hand, there are several moments during the play that illustrate how hurt she is. For example, when she confronts Laura with their uncertain future and asks whether they are going to “[e]ternally play those worn-out phonograph records your father left as a painful reminder of him?” (Williams 32). This clearly shows that she does not want to go on with her life the same way, even though, at the same time, she does not show much initiative to change their living situation. Amanda also seems to be scared of Tom becoming like his father and she makes him promise not to become an alcoholic (Williams 52). She also unknowingly predicts Tom’s future when she says: “More and more you remind me of your father! He was out all hours without explanation! – Then *left!* Goodbye!” (Williams 57). A viable question at this point is if Amanda’s belief in the men of her family is so shattered that she does not expect Tom to stay with them or if she gives Tom the idea of leaving because of her constant comparisons to his father. Amanda’s disenchanting view of men is also illustrated by her fear that the mysterious gentleman caller might be an alcoholic just like her husband (Williams 66).

It is only in the final scene, when Amanda’s meaningless chatter cannot be heard anymore, that she comforts her daughter and her “gestures are slow and graceful” (Williams 125). Being abandoned again seems to unite the two women. When she leaves the stage after giving the photograph of her husband a final look, she not only retreats from “the stage which Tom has summoned into being but also from the arena in which she has chosen to play out her own drama” (Bigsby, *Entering ‘The Glass Menagerie’* 39). Bigsby also emphasizes the peaceful picture Tom draws of his mother at the end of the play:

At least in memory Tom embraces the woman he has otherwise blamed for his own problems, for the suffocating years in the shoe warehouse and for the guilt which has made him return, in memory, to St. Louis where he had abandoned her and failed to redeem his sister from her isolation (*Entering ‘The Glass Menagerie’* 43).

#### 4.1.5 The deconstruction of the American Dream

When analyzing the American Dream in the play, it is important to also consider its social and historical background. According to Bigsby, “[t]he play is set at a moment of change, change in the private world of the characters but also in the public world” (1997, 35). *The Glass Menagerie* also illustrates America’s lost innocence: “The Depression had already destroyed one American dream; the war destroyed another” (*Entering ‘The Glass Menagerie’* 36).

Jim is the only character in the play who seems to believe in the validity of the American Dream. While the Wingfield family is completely disenchanted due to a lack of financial security, he is convinced that every human being is gifted at something. Therefore, Jim is the personification of the American Dream (Baier 39). He thinks that he has a future in the emerging television business: “In fact I’ve already made the right connections and all that remains is for the industry itself to get under way!” (Williams 109). As an advocate of the the American Dream, he also believes in democracy, one of the key ingredients of the American Dream: “Full steam – [...] Knowledge- ZZZZZp! Money – Zzzzzp! – Power! That’s the cycle democracy is built on!” (Williams 109). This comic outburst makes it obvious that he cannot be taken seriously. His superficial listing of the key elements of democracy is a critique by Tennessee Williams of American democracy and it can therefore be seen as a deconstruction of the American Dream: “If knowledge, money and power do, indeed, constitute democracy then democracy is itself under threat” (Bigsby, *Entering ‘The Glass Menagerie’* 35). Another interesting detail about Jim’s outburst is that he seems to equalize democracy with capitalism. He just talks about the future and how successful he will be instead of focusing on the present. Obviously, the present is not very promising for him; even though he used to be popular in high school, he ended up working in a warehouse just like Tom. It is therefore more than unlikely that he will ever have a career in the television business. However, his optimism conceals his unsuccessful life: “Selbst durch die Erzählungen Toms werden zumindest bei seiner Mutter der Eindruck und die Hoffnung erweckt, Jim sei noch immer der Erfolgstyp der Zukunft“ (Baier 40). Ultimately, the American Dream is not going to come true for him, even though he firmly believes in it.

Schäfer considers Jim a “messenger” of the American Dream for Laura. Yet, when Laura needs him most, he lets her down (107). As Falk puts it, “[h]e brashly analyzes Laura as a victim of an inferiority complex, talks to her as if he were addressing his public-speaking class in evening school, and is completely impervious to the reactions of his little one girl,

wide-eyed audience” (50). According to Babcock, Jim is “the voice of the Culture industry” (26). Therefore, it is important not to underestimate Jim or to consider him a comical character (26).

According to Babcock, Jim and Amanda are similar characters in that “[b]oth embody the prescriptions and values of organized society, and their identities cannot be separated from the conventionalized modes of behavior authorized by the Culture industry”(21). While it is certainly true that Jim and Amanda are the two characters that are most concerned about society’s expectations, Jim’s obsession with the great future of America clashes with Amanda Wingfield’s world view because she only believes in past values. This shows that the two characters are very different from each other. While she used to be a member of a higher social class down in the South, she now unsuccessfully sells subscriptions to magazines on the phone (Williams 38f). However, neither Amanda nor Jim seem to be willing to face their exclusion from the American Dream. Baier gives a possible explanation for this: “Die Gesellschaft täuscht vor, blind zu sein; sie verschließt die Augen, gerade weil das Scheitern des trügerischen Traumes vom wirtschaftlichen Erfolg offen sichtbar ist“ (38). Just like Amanda and Jim, Laura is excluded from the American Dream too; it would be tempting to say that her physical handicap prevents the American Dream from becoming real for her. However, Williams himself states in the description of her person at the beginning of the play that her physical disadvantage is not so dominant in her appearance and that it “need not be more than suggested on the stage” (6). Still, according to Baier, her handicap has a strong effect on her position in society. Therefore, she lacks the self-confidence to openly pursue happiness:

Sie entwirft keine eigenen Pläne, weil sie zu schwach ist, sich gegen die Träume Amandas zu sträuben und sie bleibt somit von einem eigenen American Dream ausgeschlossen. [...] Das Versprechen auf persönliche Freiheit und die Chance auf gesellschaftlichen Erfolg ist für Laura nicht einlösbar, und die Diskrepanz zur im Mythos verankerten Allgemeinzugänglichkeit des American Dream ist augenfällig (50).

In the end, it is not only the American Dream that is shattered; all the personal dreams of the characters are annihilated and there is no hope left. While Jim returns to his fiancée and his monotonous warehouse job, Tom loses his job (Williams 125). He ends up leaving his family, after, paradoxically, being accused by his mother of being a dreamer (Williams 124). Amanda herself is living her own dream that has nothing to do with their real situation. Bock states that

Williams' plays often deal with a character like Amanda Wingfield: "misfits of modern society, who often cling to their own views of a society, the ante-bellum South, which no longer exists and perhaps never existed" (5). Her "dream of freedom, gentility and wealth"(Bock 5) clashes with "the reality of inescapable poverty and vulgarity"(5) and it ends up in a "battle of survival"(5) that most of Williams' characters lose. According to Baier, Amanda's origins in the conservative South led her to believe that the American Dream was merely a dream for men. Therefore, she was led to believe that the dream could only come true for her if she married a mythical hero (Baier 44). By reducing the American Dream to marriage, she excluded herself from it. Furthermore, she completely misunderstands it, because she equates money with happiness and therefore reduces Tom to his role as a breadwinner for the family:

Unter Berufung auf soziale Normen stülpt sie anderen ihren American Dream über. In diesem Verfahren Amandas, interpersonalen Druck auszuüben, erweist sich der Traum vom Erfolg selbst als Teil gesellschaftlichen Anpassungsdrucks. Er bietet keine Freiheit, sondern stellt einen Zwang dar, der die Menschen in einem moralischen Gefängnis hält (Baier 49).

In the end, although Tom escapes this moral imprisonment, there is no escape from the fatherless world of mourning and nostalgia that he lives in. It is unclear whether he is looking for adventure or his father, but he ends up finding neither. Instead, he feels guilty for having abandoned his sister. In a way, this unromantic ending of the journey of a tragic hero sheds new light on his father's absence. Even though his departure seemed easy and Tom glorified the adventurous life that his father supposedly has in the far distance, nobody knows what really happened to him and whether he has ever regretted his leaving or not.

To sum it up, every family member is affected by the absence of the father: the two children both suffer from problems with their self-esteem. While Tom Wingfield chooses to follow his father's path, which is a self-destructive and lonely one, Laura chooses to exclude herself from society and the American Dream. Instead of going to school and doing something for her future, she stays at home and takes care of her glass figures. Both of them end up alone. Amanda tries her best to find her daughter a good husband, but she fails as a role model and as a mother figure. She can therefore be seen as an ineffectual mother, which is, according to Paul Rosefeldt, a frequent type of mother in combination with an absent father (10).



The title of the play does not only refer to Laura's obsession with her little glass animals. First, according to Schäfer, the glass animals can be seen as a metaphor for beauty: "Allerdings ist das eigentliche Thema [...] die Unmöglichkeit für das Ideal zarter Schönheit, von Laura verkörpert und in ihrer Glasmenerie symbolisiert, in dieser groben Welt zu überleben" (107). What is more, *The Glass Menagerie* could also refer to the vulnerability of the family as a functioning social unit in general and to children in particular. Both Tom and Laura were very young when their father left them. Furthermore, the departure of their father causes economic problems for the family because Amanda Wingfield fails to earn enough money by herself. Therefore, one could use Lamb's hypothesis, which was elaborated in the theoretical section, and suggest that the Wingfield children have problems with coping with their father's absence especially because the economic, social and emotional gap that he left could not be filled by the mother (8). Even though his photograph is omnipresent and he is mentioned numerous times, nobody ever talks about the reasons why he left. Furthermore, his name is never mentioned throughout the play. This refusal to talk about the father might further contribute to the problems of the family. According to Aigner, the way in which the mother handles the absence and whether she is on good or bad terms with the father strongly influences how the children cope with their father's absence (154).

The leaving of the father changed the family's dynamics forever. Even 16 years later the absence of the father still leaves a visible gap. Towards the end of the play, Laura says: "Glass is something you have to take good care of" (Williams 107). Due to the fact that she identifies herself with the glass figure that Jim breaks, this remark can be interpreted as a remark about herself. She, as well as her brother and her mother, have been broken and there is no way they can ever be fixed, just like the unicorn that lost its horn and will therefore never be the same again. As a final act, Laura blows out the candles on stage, which on one hand emphasizes that absolutely no hope remains for the Wingfield family. On the other hand, since *The Glass Menagerie* is a memory play, this ending could also be interpreted as an attempt by Tom to shut out the memories he has. Allan Lewis stresses that Tom Wingfield urges Laura to blow out the candles "for nowadays the world is lit by lightning" (Williams 129). "Images of light and darkness weave in and out in a chiaroscuro of unattainable happiness" (Lewis 63). This shows that Tom is trying to move on while his family holds on to old values.

## 4.2 Kelly Rebar: *Bordertown Café*

### 4.2.1 The absent American father in a Canadian play

*Bordertown Café* is different from the other plays discussed in this thesis in several aspects. First, the play, which premiered in 1987, is a Canadian play written by the Canadian playwright Kelly Rebar. Moreover, it is set in Canada, while all the other plays are set in the United States of America. However, the play is still a worthwhile object of investigation for this thesis because the question of what differentiates Canada from its neighboring country, which is crucial in this play, also automatically raises questions about the main character's origin and his identity. According to Raeithel, there are critics who say that Canada is not independent from the United States of America: "Ein böses Bonmot besagt, der Unterschied zwischen Kanada und Alaska bestehe darin, dass es in Kanada zwei Grad wärmer ist und die Kanadier keinen Volksvertreter in Washington haben" (273). Due to the geographical as well as the cultural proximity, the play can be investigated with the same theoretical framework as the other plays in this thesis, especially because the United States and representations shown through the father and the grandmother are constantly at the centre of the plot. Another reason for choosing *Bordertown Café* is that the play has obvious similarities with *The Glass Menagerie*: it is also about an adolescent son who is taking care of his mother and at the same time longs for his father.

The play not only differs from the other plays as far as its setting is concerned, but it is also unique because the father calls twice at the beginning and the end of the play and is therefore not completely absent. With his first call, he "presents the origin of the drama" and he "initiates the quest" (Rosefeldt 10), because he forces Jimmy to make an important decision. The process of making that decision dominates the plot. His father's second call gives Jimmy the opportunity to re-negotiate their relationship and to gain some power in doing so. However, Jimmy's father Don can still be classified as an absent character because he never appears on stage and the audience never actually hears him talk. Furthermore, he is not listed as a character at the beginning of the play.

Due to the fact that *Bordertown Café* is not widely-known, the plot will briefly be summarized at this point: Jimmy, the main character, is an abandoned son. He lives on the Canadian side of the border with his mother Marlene and his grandparents Maxine and Jim; they own a shabby café called "Bordertown Café". The play starts with Jimmy's father calling and inviting his son to come and live with him and his new wife in the United States. Jimmy

has to decide whether he wants to be with his father in America, or stay in the middle of nowhere with the rest of his family. While Jimmy's mother Marlene is convinced that Canada is a better place to live, he not only glorifies his father and his supposedly adventurous job as a truck driver, but is also intrigued by the country of his father's origin. In the course of the play, he is constantly torn between Canada and America.

The beginning of the play can be seen as a metaphorical allusion to the fact that Jimmy's adolescence as well as the constant boredom he feels while being stuck in the middle of nowhere are coming to an end. The still of the night is interrupted by the sound of a combine approaching. The noise that is getting louder might hint at a disturbance during the play that is going to approach fast and then fade away eventually, just like the combine. The lighting on stage gives the kitchen, where the play is set in the first act, "a photographic quality [...], as if things have been caught in time" (Rebar 11). However, just like the sun is rising, the lighting gets harsher and "things appear functional" (Rebar 11). Even the changing of the lighting shows that things are going to change during the play and that Jimmy is going to undergo a transformation from boy to man, because things cannot stay the same forever. When the sound of the combine fades away, Jim wakes up and "the sound of a meadowlark is heard" (Rebar 11).

This peaceful morning is interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. Jimmy's father is calling and he sparks the action on stage. Marlene, Jimmy's mother, appears and she answers the phone, clearly expecting it to be her mother, which suggests that Jimmy's father does not call frequently. Apparently, Jim's father wants to come visit him that afternoon. The fact that he does not even know that school starts again after summer on that very day shows that he has no idea of what is going on in his son's life (Rebar 11).

The beginning of the play is significant for several reasons. First, it shows how much Jimmy wants to see his father. When his mother mentions that school starts, he says: "Friday's just registration" (Rebar 11) in order to downplay the importance of the day. Second, his parents' conversation on the phone is an intriguing way of introducing an absent character: the audience can only hear the bits of the conversation that the mother says. Just like Jimmy, the audience has to figure out what the person on the other side of the line is saying, because they never actually hear the voice of the father. This makes the audience identify immediately with Jimmy, because they are in a similar situation. Furthermore, this artistic device stages the

absence of the father and emphasizes the void that the father left behind; he is part of a conversation, but he cannot be heard.

Furthermore, the fact that the father obviously does not even want to speak to his son, but rather discusses his plans with his ex-wife in a matter-of-fact way show that there is no functioning father-son relationship (Rebar 12). After his mother hangs up, Jimmy figures out that his father will be late for his visit that day. He seems to be used to his father not showing up on time (Rebar 12). In addition, it turns out that his father got married and Jimmy was not even invited to the wedding. When Marlene tries to find out more about her ex-husband's new wife, Jimmy gets angry with her, which prompts his mother to reply: "I knew it! Every time your dad comes up to Canada, I end up getting yelled at" (Rebar 14). Jimmy's aggression after his father's call suggests a certain level of frustration about his father's indifferent behavior. Due to the fact that he cannot direct it towards his father, he makes his mother the victim of his aggressions.

Jimmy, however, is a victim, too. On the one hand, he does not want to say anything negative about his father and his new wife, while on the other hand he is fully aware of the fact that his mother does not want him to see them in a positive light. Furthermore, his problematic role in the relationship of his parents becomes obvious when Jimmy leaves to catch the schoolbus but suddenly returns, saying: "Okay, this is the kind of total jerk I am. I knew Dad was gonna marry Linda, I knew since July, I kep' it to myself" (Rebar 70). This shows that he was trying to protect his mother from the inconvenient truth, but at the same time he was left alone with the secret and had to deal with his father's re-marriage on his own.

Until the talk with his grandfather Jim in the second act that makes him realize that he is a grown-up, Jimmy is stuck in a phase of unreflected admiration for his father and his profession as a truck driver. All he wants to do for most of the play is to become like him and live his way of life in the United States. Jimmy equates America with adventure whereas Canada means boredom and a lack of future perspectives to him: "We live smack dab in the middle of nowhere – correction, the Canadian side of nowhere. Houses 'at were here're long gone, fillin' station's history, and us? – we're sittin' in this café like we're stuck in the muck" (Rebar 19).

#### 4.2.2 The self-conscious mother in *Bordertown Café*

Marlene is very insecure; she frequently questions her abilities as a mother, without her son ever openly criticizing her, for example, when she suddenly says “[a]nd I know I shoulda got you a new bedspread four, five years ago, but I didn’t! [...] Didn’t Jimmy, didn’t. Should change it to my name, Marlene Didn’t” (Rebar 14) after Jimmy’s father calls for the first time. Even though Jimmy’s room has no privacy, he never complains about it. Still, Marlene keeps talking about it, which further emphasizes the bad conscience she has towards her son (Rebar 16). She blames herself for the worn-down place they live in, but at the same time she does not take the initiative to change their living situation. Instead, she constantly talks about what is going to happen once they get a lot of money: “Gonna be changes. Big ones. Just soon’s I get the money [...] Gonna put a decent bathroom in there. [...] Gonna have a bathtub and a shower, and I’m gonna do it all up in pink. [...] Gonna have it lookin’ just like the magazines, so just you wait” (Rebar 20). However, the way Jimmy reacts to her promises shows that she has been talking about this for a long time, and nothing has ever happened. The way she talks about the new bathroom also hints at a distorted view of reality; instead of dealing with their current living situation – they have to go to her parents’ house to take a bath – she envisages a fake pink world from a magazine. In a fight, Jimmy analyzes her constant state of waiting for better days: “Oh waitin’, waitin’, waitin’ – for what?! – him to come back to you?” (Rebar 21). This shows that, just like Jimmy is stuck in his phase of admiration for his father, Marlene is still waiting for her husband to come back. It also becomes obvious at an early point of the play that she has still not got over her ex-husband. Even though she does not want to admit it, she is deeply hurt when she finds out that he has become re-married. Therefore, she keeps asking Jimmy questions about the looks and the character of his new wife (Rebar 14).

Even though, as a mother, Marlene would traditionally be expected to take care of her son, their roles are reversed. For example, Jimmy not only comes up with the money for the new bathroom, he also organizes the whole renovation without her knowing (Rebar 113). A reason for Marlene’s self-consciousness as a mother could be that she had Jimmy when she was 16, her husband left her and she moved back in with her parents. Her moving back in with her parents when she was supposed to start taking care of her own family must have had an effect on her self-confidence as well. Moreover, the fact that she never finished high school, while Jimmy is moving on to the twelfth grade now, makes her feel intellectually inferior to him (Rebar 57). It also becomes obvious in *Bordertown Café* that it is not only the father who has

an important role as a role model, but also the mother. Maxine, Marlene's mother, keeps babbling all day long, but she never says anything of value and therefore nobody takes her seriously. Maxine mentions that she had to raise herself because her mother was an alcoholic (Rebar 107). This shows that history repeats itself in this play and that the bad relationship of Jimmy and his mother does not come unexpectedly; a lack of both female and male role models throughout the generations has built up to it. The conflict between the generations is also emphasized by the way the children refer to their mothers. Jimmy constantly refers to Marlene with her first name and when she complains about it he replies that she refers to her own mother with her first name, too (Rebar 19). By doing that, they might show that they do not appreciate the role of the mothers in their family.

His father Don's suggestion that Jimmy could move in with him and his new wife shatters Marlene's world even though it is highly questionable that, as a truck driver, he can actually afford the lifestyle that he promises to his son. While she cannot even provide her son with a new bedspread, let alone an orderly family life, his father supposedly offers him everything Jimmy is longing for: a new start with two caring parents and a nice, big house in the USA. Marlene, of course, sees the USA in a different light. While her son uses the USA as an imaginary escape from his everyday life at the border, she actually used to live there during her marriage. However, her life in the USA did not turn out to be any better than her boring life at the other side of the border. She became pregnant and she got stuck in a trailer park in Wyoming. Excluded from the promises of the American Dream, all of her other dreams were shattered, too: as Jimmy mentions, his father was cheating on his mother during his business trips through the country.

In a way, Marlene misunderstands what constitutes a good parent. She thinks that only because Don has the financial means to give expensive presents to his son, and because he can take his son out of his boredom by taking him to Texas on his truck, Jimmy likes his father better: "[...] his dad shows up end o' August and takes him down to Texas like it were across the road – I'm supposed to compete with that?" (Rebar 58). She keeps apologizing for the fact that she never bought a new bedspread for Jimmy, because she thinks that these materialistic issues make her a bad mother. Her obsession with the old bedspread hints at the underlying issue that Marlene cannot deal with the fact that her son has grown up and is turning 18 soon, which means that he is old enough now to decide whether he wants to live with his father or his mother (Rebar 14). His growing-up is also hard for her because Marlene is constantly

reminded of what she herself went through when she was his age. What Marlene fails to realize is that materialistic goods are not what Jimmy is looking for, which is proven by the fact that it is not the materialistic prospect that makes him consider moving in with his father. Furthermore, his humbleness is also illustrated by the fact that with all the money he has ever earned, he bought something for his mother instead of for himself. At the end of the second act, Jimmy sums up why he is considering moving in with his father: “[...]– my dad’s finally giving’ me something’ I want. Not some bike or toy [...]. My dad’s bin promisin’ me this all my life. Okay it’s a little late. And Mum’s not gonna be a part of it. But I quit dreamin’ that one a long time ago” (Rebar 104). This shows that even though Jimmy is not part of a nuclear family, he is longing for it as an ideal version of family organization. This longing for traditional family forms has been suggested by McCarthy in the theoretical part of this thesis (1).

Marlene’s biggest fear seems to be that Jimmy is becoming like his father. This becomes obvious when she says “[n]ow who is that I’m hearin’ talkin’, your dad all over again” (Rebar 19) after Jimmy tells her that he would learn more from truck driving than he could ever learn in school. These comparisons have an effect on Jimmy because he seems to associate all his bad character traits with his father. In the first act, he has a fight with his mother. After a sudden outburst of emotions he apologizes, saying: “I’ll tell you how – it’s – it’s him comin’ out in me, it’s my dad, just like you said” (Rebar 21). In this scene, Jimmy is using the bad image his father has in his mother’s family as an excuse for his emotional outburst. This shows that Jimmy is very well aware of the fact that none of his family members have anything positive to say about his father. Therefore, he is constantly torn between admiring and despising his father. He fails to embrace the heritage of his father as something positive in his life, which further contributes to his identity crisis.

#### **4.2.3 Filling the void of the father**

The fact that both male characters in the play, Jimmy and his grandfather, share the same first name, already suggests that they have a unique relationship. In fact, his grandfather serves as a replacement, a role model, and as a contender of the absent father. The two father figures in his life are completely opposed, a fact which adds to Jimmy’s identity crisis. His grandfather is a humble man, who has worked as a farmer and lived in Canada for all his life; he is a quiet person who only says something if it is really of importance. Don, however, leads the unsteady life of a truck driver who has affairs with women all over the country. Furthermore,

he never keeps his promises and he always shows up late when he comes to visit. This is illustrated by the fact that Jimmy is not even surprised when his father does not show up on time (Rebar 89).

The differences between the two father figures are also emphasized by their different nationalities. Don can be seen as an American hero, as his job stands for freedom and adventure for Jimmy. He wants to follow in his footsteps instead of finishing school in Canada. Jimmy is often intimidated by his grandfather's tranquility and wisdom, even though he realizes that he would rather be like his grandfather than his father: "But no, I can't be your clone, I gotta have a father doesn't even know it's harvest" (Rebar 78). While Jim is down-to-earth and has a connection to nature, Don is chasing the dream of freedom with his truck. One could say that Jim stands for nature and traditional values, while, using Wakefield's Marxist approach, Don stands for new technology and men's alienation from themselves and their families (Wakefield 3f). Even if Jimmy's parents were not divorced, Don's job as a truck driver and the need to earn money for his family would force him to be absent for most of the time. Another thing that shows Don's alienation from his son is that he always makes Jimmy miss his hockey practice and important games, because he makes him wait for him instead (Rebar 18).

Even though he is only his grandfather, Jim plays a more important role for Jimmy's development from a boy to a man. Marlene asks Jim to talk to Jimmy about his father's offer to move in with them, because she does not know how to deal with her son: "[...] I can't talk to that kid, I never could, and you know that" (Rebar 41). It is interesting how Jim fulfills the role of a caring father for both his actual daughter Marlene and his grandson Jimmy. In a way, however, being constantly torn between opposing father figures makes Jimmy react aggressively when Jim gets involved in a fight between Marlene and Jimmy and refers to him as "son": "Son? – I'm not your son. I never will be, okay?" (Rebar 111).

As Vogt and Sirridge put it, a father is traditionally expected to pass on his experience to his son (20f). However, in *Bordertown Café*, it is the grandfather who fulfills this role. By letting Jimmy in on his experience, he helps him get over his crisis. Marlene and Maxine seem to believe that everything is determined by who you are related to: Maxine constantly offends Marlene by comparing her to her unloved aunt Thelma. Similarly, every character trait that Jimmy has is immediately attributed to another family member. As mentioned before, he



himself attributes all his bad character traits to his father, while, for example, Maxine attributes his athletic abilities to her side of the family. Marlene and Maxine even get into a fight about this when Marlene replies: “Mum, you don’t have a side when it comes to Jimmy” (Rebar 88).

Jim, however, takes the burden of having no choice about who you are, because everything is determined by your nationality and your family, off Jimmy’s shoulder: “Blood only goes so far. It depends what a person sees around him. Some people, like your dad, they for whatever reason think they need the nonsense in life. That’s not your problem” (Rebar 118). This is a crucial sentence in the context of absent fathers in drama. As mentioned earlier, abandoned children in modern drama often try to “follow in his path, or recreate a part of his life” (Rosefeldt 10). Jim, however, provides his grandson with a different opportunity: just because his father left, does not automatically mean that Jimmy has to follow him. By doing this, Jim saves Jimmy from making the wrong decision, because following the absent father hardly ever leads to a happy reunion (Rosefeldt 10).

While Jimmy has issues with his self-esteem for most of the play and frequently says that he does not deserve to be treated nicely, Jim helps him to get over it by stating that Jimmy himself is more of a man than his father (Rebar 118). Furthermore, he pours him a drink and tells him how he actually met Maxine, both of which shows that he acknowledges Jimmy’s new status as a man. Sharing a secret with his admired grandfather makes Jimmy realize that he is no longer the son who always has to wait for his father, but that he is old enough to make his own decisions. Just because Don is his biological father does not make him his actual father, because, after all, it is Jim who encourages him to be his own man:

Jimmy, get yourself in the driver’s seat. You’re lettin’ your dad take the reins, take control of your life, waitin’ on him like this. You want somethin’ outa this bargain, but don’t you think he does too? Eh? If he calls, you give him a time and if he doesn’t meet it, well, that’s his loss (Rebar 119).

Interestingly, Jim uses the metaphor of driving a truck for Jimmy’s life. On the one hand, this shows how well he knows his grandson and his admiration for his father’s job. On the other hand, this metaphor, which is taken from a field of work with a masculine connotation, shows that he acknowledges his grandson’s status as a man. All of this leads to a totally different behavior when Jimmy’s father calls again at the end of the play; Jimmy finally manages to tell his father what he thinks and he thereby gains independence from him (Rebar 124). In the

end, Jim goes back to work on the fields instead of celebrating his victory over the other father figure in Jimmy's life. This, again, shows that he is a humble, sensitive man and that he is therefore a better influence for Jimmy than Don.

#### **4.2.4 Two countries – two identities**

The setting of the play at the border of the USA and Canada is mirrored in the family dynamics. While Maxine and Don are Americans, Jim and Marlene consider themselves Canadian. The border that separates the countries also separates the family members. The central conflict of the play – Jimmy's search for identity between two borders – stems from this constant state of being torn between two countries and two parents: "American, Canadian – back, forth – like it mattered what a guy was – why couldn't I've bin born in Australia, nowhere near the American border?" (Rebar 74).

In his family, the question of which side of the border you associate with defines who you are. Everybody is expected to take a side; while Maxine went to the United States to have Marlene, Marlene went back to Canada in order to have Jimmy in Canada (Rebar 37). Furthermore, Maxine makes it clear that she wants to be buried in America, even though it implies that she will not be buried with her husband (Rebar 45). The language of the family members is a strong marker of their loyalty towards their country of origin; the Canadian family members, especially Jim, make a strong use of the Canadian English marker "eh" in questions whereas Maxine never uses it.

It is possible that Marlene once was as torn between the two countries as her son is today. She left Canada for a man and she came back disenchanted. She might be trying to keep her son from making the same mistakes she made and therefore she does not even try to hide her attitude towards the country of origin of Jimmy's father. An example of this is when she talks about her husband's new American wife: "Oh, those American girls, don't tell me about American girls, I lived down there, I know exactly what they're capable of down there" (Rebar 15). By constantly emphasizing that "up here" is a better place to live than "down there", Jimmy's mother contributes to his identity crisis and prevents him from embracing both his father's and his mother's heritage. Like a jealous child, she tries to get Jimmy to side with her instead of his father. Marlene's aversion towards the USA also stems from the ongoing conflict with her mother, who is a proud American and looks down on Canada and especially on her Canadian relatives. For example, her attitude towards her country of residence becomes clear when she quizzes her grandson on American history in order to make

him a perfect American. In the course of their conversation, she complains about Canadian children and their lack of knowledge about the USA:

[...] but it's a cryin' shame these kids don't know their American history. Sittin' on the most powerful nation in the world and all they wanna do is play hockey. [...] – and I know my Canadian history! – what there is of it. But I don't forget my American ruts, and you don't either (Rebar 49).

While Maxine obviously glorifies the United States, she sees Canada in a one-dimensional, stereotypical way. She does not deal with the harsh reality in the USA until Jimmy actually decides to move there and packs up his stuff. In the first act, Maxine has an idealized image of the United States of some glorious past days. Jimmy is aware of this when he says: “Grandad and me are the only ones know it's the present” (Rebar 93). In the second act, her attitude towards her home country has suddenly altered when she warns Jimmy about how dangerous it is to live in the United States (Rebar 83). However, in the end, when Jimmy tells his father what he really thinks and decides to stay in Canada, she shows her pride in her home country again: “That's the American finally comin' out in him” (Rebar 125). Her remark shows that even though Jimmy has made an important achievement for his future development, their family dynamics are not going to change from one day to the other.

As mentioned before, cross-border marriages have a tradition in the family. The fact that mother and daughter have similar names suggests that they also have a similar fate; both marriages did not work out as they had hoped for. While it remains unclear what really happened between Marlene and Don and what finally led to their break-up, Maxine and Jim are still married. However, they do not seem to be happy. Maxine tries to make up for their lack of closeness with her constant babbling, and Jim escapes the situation by spending all day outside on the fields. Maxine fulfills the stereotype of a noisy, self-assured American woman, while Jim is the complete opposite. Even when they recollect the early days of their marriage, it is hard to understand how they ended up together, because after only a few days of marriage Maxine ran away across the border and back to the United States (Rebar 108).

Jimmy is the victim of both unhappy marriages and he sees the problem rooted in their different countries of origin. Therefore, he draws the conclusion that he only wants to marry a girl from the same side of the border. When Maxine asks which side that would be, he replies: “No side” (Rebar 86). This again shows how unsure Jimmy is of his own identity. Looking at his family, in which everybody has to be either American or Canadian, he does not see the

possibility of being both at once. This is a paradoxical problem because both the USA and Canada pride themselves on being multicultural countries. In a way, the family's failure in acknowledging two cultures in their lives might hint at a failure of American society and its essential American Dream.

While the Canadian side of the family condemns the United States, Don also does not show much interest for the country where his son lives. This further illustrates the lack of interest he has for his son. Jimmy sums up the whole problem with his father when he says:

The Hawks' game, a prime example. Game's over, we won, whole team come truckin' in here for Cokes and burgers and who do they find sittin' in that till? Mr. Humiliation, still waitin' for his off-and-on dad to turn up, take him on a haul. Not only could I a' played, I coulda come back and gone to sleep for five hours before his rig pulled up. Oh, but hockey games, they don't matter, sleep? Who needs it? – Hop on up, kid. If I wanna see the guy, it's in his rig (Rebar 18).

By saying that, Jimmy also stresses the lack of power he has in the relationship to his father. It is always up to his father to decide when he wants to come visit him. Even when he is not there he exerts power over Jim, because whatever he has planned for the day comes to a halt when he calls. However, when Marlene suggests that he does not have to wait for his father all the time, he replies: "A guy would have to be a fool not to wanna go on those hauls – those hauls are the highlight of my life!" (Rebar 19).

The profession of his father – a truck driver – is glorified by Jimmy. To him, the job is equated with adventure. The job also has a connection with the myth of the legendary American hero who ventures West. His father's status as a hero makes Jimmy accept to wait for his father for most of the play: "[H]ow many of my friends get to ride in a truck higher'n any ole building we got around here? You know there's not a truck stop here to California don't know my dad?" (Rebar 19). It is also interesting that Jimmy mentions California, which is a dream destination in the West of the United States. This legendary destination also shows that Jimmy is chasing a dream instead of dealing with reality.

His father's truck, as well as cars in general, are American status symbols and symbols for freedom that also have a significance in the play. They provide a constant background noise throughout the play and thereby give an impression of the family's stressful living situation. If we use Rosefeldt's terminology, the sound of trucks approaching also acts as a metonymic

substitution for Don; when waiting for his father, Jimmy interrupts the conversation as soon as he hears a truck approaching, just to realize that the truck is not his father's (Rebar 104). From this perspective, the sound of the combine, an agricultural vehicle, at the very beginning of the play might serve as a metonymic substitution for Jimmy's grandfather, who works in the fields. The fact that the sound of it fades away could hint at the fact that Jim's status as a father figure in Jimmy's life is questioned by the father himself in the course of the play.

Cars are also the only thing that can take Jimmy away from the café, which is located in the middle of nowhere. However, by having wrecked his car before the action of the play takes place, Jimmy has lost the opportunity to get away from the café and he is again dependent on Jim, Marlene and Maxine to lend him their car. Because "the belief in unhampered mobility" (Freese 106) is a part of the American Dream, Jimmy is excluded from it without his own car, just like his mother, who was stuck in a trailer park in Wyoming at his age. The loss of his car also prevents Jimmy from "challenging the frontiers". Using Freese's definition, "the idea of the continual challenge of respective frontiers" (106) is a central ingredient of the dream. This idea is also deconstructed in several other ways in *Bordertown Café*. First, paradoxically, they live at the border. Instead of challenging these frontiers, the frontiers challenge them, because the question of which country to side with forms the basis of a never-ending debate. Second, the profession of the father, a truck driver, can be seen as a modernized version of the American hero, who challenges the frontiers on his search for freedom. However, he fails as a real hero, because he fails in establishing a relationship to his son. Furthermore, Don used to cheat on Marlene during his adventures on the road. The idea of the hero is therefore distorted in the play. Another part of the American Dream that is proven to be invalid is the belief in "its historical mutations from cultural pluralism to multi-ethnicity" (Freese 106), because in the family's opinion, one cannot be both Canadian and American; one has to side with one country.

To sum it up, Jimmy does not have the most promising future perspectives at the beginning of the play; blind admiration for his father and his job make it likely for him to accept his father's offer and leave his family behind. The reason why Jimmy does not follow his father's path is that he has a strong father figure in his life that helps him find his masculinity and thereby develop his identity.

### 4.3 Two adolescent sons – two possible outcomes

Even though separated by more than 40 years and written by two playwrights with completely different backgrounds, the two plays take up one similar topic. Two young men try to fill the gap of their absent fathers by taking care of their mothers. Tom Wingfield takes a job in a warehouse that offers him no future perspectives in order to provide for his family. He has no male role model and he therefore never finds out that he has a choice in his life. While Jim tells Jimmy that “blood only goes so far” (Rebar 118), nobody ever tells Tom that he can be completely different from his father. His blind admiration for the hero on the picture in the middle of their living room leads to a tragic ending of the play; Tom leaves his family in order to become like his father and thereby find him. However, as Paul Rosefeldt suggests, his quest ends like the attempts of most abandoned sons: there is no reunion with the father (10).

Jimmy’s story ends on a more positive note. Due to the fact that his grandfather has taken over the chores that are traditionally attributed to the father, he is aware of the choice he can make. In the end, he does not follow his father, but he stays with his grandfather. Jimmy’s problems with his self-esteem cannot necessarily be attributed to the absence of his father but rather to the way his father treats him when he is present: “I don’t deserve no father, I don’t deserve a home, that’s why Dad’s not showin’ up” (Rebar 105). In the end, Jimmy gets into a position of power; even though his father will probably never be a good father, at least now Jimmy knows how to cope with it.

As Rauchfleisch suggests, the way in which the family as a whole deals with the absence of the father determines how the children cope with it (165). In *The Glass Menagerie*, the name of the father is never mentioned. He is reduced to the role of an absent father and a failing husband without ever viewing him from a different angle. His role in the family is illustrated by his picture in the living room; he is forever caught at the centre of attention, without any member of the family ever openly confronting him with what he did to them. In *Bordertown Café*, it is the father who clings to his son’s picture from the fifth grade and who thereby does not acknowledge the fact that his son is grown-up and equal to him. Most importantly, the father is openly criticized by his son. By doing so, Jimmy can move on and, literally, stop waiting for his father.

Being stuck in the past, talking about the future and not dealing with the present are important themes in both plays. Amanda Wingfield glorifies her youth in the American South and

represents outdated values without dealing with the family's current living situation. Due to the fact that she hides from the real world, she cannot provide her son with advice, which contributes to his downfall. In *Bordertown Café*, Maxine does the same. She glorifies the United States as the miraculous place of her youth. Just like her mother, Marlene is stuck, too; Instead of renovating the café, she sits back and waits for a change to happen. However, in the end, Marlene takes initiative when she books a flight to Hawaii for herself, because she no longer wants to wait for something to happen. This step away from him makes Jimmy realize how much he wants to be with his mother (Rebar 113f).

The absent fathers in both plays are very similar. Tom Wingfield's father "fell in love with long distances" (Williams 19) and therefore left his family in search of adventure. Jimmy's father could be seen as a modernized version of this father; instead of sending a postcard saying "Hello – Goodbye" (Williams 19), he calls his family from far away. Both men are looking for adventure in the distance. While Tom's father is possibly in Mexico, Don drives trucks through the country. Modern technology cannot change the outcome of the lack of communication between father and son. Alienated from each other, the son has to either find a replacement, or fails. In both cases, the audience never finds out what happens to the fathers or if they succeed in their search for adventure. Due to the fact that they do not want to deal with their adolescent sons and thereby with an important part of themselves, it is very likely that they eventually fail.

In a way, the family in *Bordertown Café* can be seen as a modernized version of the Wingfield family. If we assume that American plays mirror American society, the different ways in which the sons deal with their fathers' absence can be attributed to radical changes in society between the 1940s and the late 1980s. The premier of the play in 1987 coincides perfectly with Kallenberg-Schröder's analysis of the American family in 1990, in which she states that the American family is developing from a "family of security" to a "family of freedom" (9). By that, she means that the nuclear family lost its importance while alternative forms of family organization started to evolve. The different, more positive outcome of Kelly Rebar's play might be traced back to Jimmy's freedom to choose his family members himself. As illustrated by the acceptance of his grandfather as a father figure, which is accompanied by the dismissal of his real father, fatherhood is no longer about physical fatherhood, but rather about the social role that a father fulfills. Jim himself says so when he tells his grandson that "[b]lood only goes so far" (Rebar 118). This new freedom leads to a more positive outcome of

the play and might illustrate the change in the role of the father in American society because it shows that absent fathers can be replaced and their absence does not necessarily have to be a loss for their children. Even though Rosefeldt states that for his children, the absent father is the “ultimate goal of the quest”(11) in modern drama, this does not seem to be true for Jimmy’s “family of freedom”. In the end, he gives up his search for his physical father, and celebrates the replacement of the father in his life.

40 years earlier, Tom Wingfield did not have that the opportunity to find a replacement for his father and he therefore ended up alone. Using Rosefeldt’s approach, one could argue that although it is true that at the end of *The Glass Menagerie* there is a sense of loss, there is certainly more of a sense of hope and new beginnings in *Bordertown Café*.

## **5. Two pairs of brothers and two absent fathers**

### **5.1 Suzan-Lori Parks: *Topdog/Underdog***

*Topdog/Underdog* premiered in 2001, and Suzan-Lori Parks received the Pulitzer Prize for it in 2002. Its main characters are two black brothers in their thirties. The older one, Lincoln, works at a game hall; he has to dress up as Abraham Lincoln for his job. The younger one, Booth, earns his money as a criminal. They have been deserted by their parents when they were teenagers and they now live in a shabby apartment with only one bed. As opposed to the two other plays that have been discussed so far, the men in this play not only have to deal with an absent father, but also with an absent mother.

At the end of a short introduction by the playwright herself, she writes: “This is a play about family wounds and healing. Welcome to the family.” By that, Parks already stresses the significance of family in the play, which is also emphasized by the fact that the two brothers are the only characters. The warm welcome to the family for the reader clashes with the harsh reality of the play. When Booth talks about the time their parents left and says “[i]t was you and me against thuh world, Link” (Parks 70), he sums up their lives: it is still them against the rest of the world, because they have nobody else. According to Ben Brantley, *Topdog/Underdog* is a “variation of sorts on the story of Cain and Abel, a tale that has traditionally served American artists well in exploring the divided nature of their country” (*Con Game*). Like the biblical figures Cain and Abel, the two brothers have no reason to trust each other and their relationship remains ambiguous throughout the play. According to Margo Jefferson, both brothers can be seen as



[...] dead-end clowns who play dead-on funny games with each other. Nothing is quicker than the move from understanding to unyielding resentment between siblings; they know each other's physical and psychological moves; they can finish each other's gestures and sentences (Jefferson).

The fact that they have nobody except each other makes the ending of the play even more tragic for Booth because the world he lives in is hostile; without his brother, his future is even more uncertain. It is surprising that Suzan-Lori Parks mentions the process of healing in her afore-mentioned introduction, because the ending does not suggest any way of healing for anyone.

### **5.1.1 Two sons in search for identity**

By just looking at the names of the two main characters, it becomes obvious that identity is one of the most important themes of the play. While Lincoln was named after the former US-president Abraham Lincoln, Booth was named after Wilkes Booth, who assassinated Lincoln and was later killed himself. According to Jefferson, their names emphasize that

[l]ike the South and the North, they are divided brothers; like Lincoln and Booth, they are actors in a theater of war. But there are many kinds of war, and the pain in "Topdog /Underdog" is matched by the comedy -- comedy is what makes intimacy bearable (Jefferson).

The names "Lincoln" and "Booth" are inextricably linked to American history. Therefore, it could be suggested that the two men mirror American society in their undecidedness of either embracing or rejecting their heritage. Furthermore, their names immediately put a focus on their parents because names automatically hint at people's origins; their names make the audience wonder with what intentions the parents have chosen those particular names for their sons. The question is answered at the end of the first scene when Lincoln tells his brother that their names were their father's "idea of a joke" (Parks 24). This cruel joke shows the lack of a sense of responsibility as well as a lack of affection by their father, because the name of a person is an important part of their identity. Therefore, their names illustrate the dysfunctionality of their family from the very beginning of their lives. Their names also suggest a tragic outcome of the play, which is constantly hinted at by the deliberate use of weapons, alcohol and their violent language. Of course, one could also see their names in a more optimistic way and state that history gives the historic figures Lincoln and Booth another chance to find a more positive outcome for their conflict. However, the outcome of

the play proves these hopes to be wrong and once again shows that history continuously repeats itself; the fate of the two young men has been predetermined.

Interestingly, even Booth and Lincoln themselves seem to be aware of the importance of their names for their identities. For example, Booth decides to change his name when he takes up the 3-card monte card game professionally. Rosefeldt did not analyze *Topdog/Underdog* in his book about absent fathers, however, he takes up the significance of changing one's name with another play. His observations also seem valid for Parks' play: "His change of name is a way of creating an identity for himself that will remove him from the influence of the absent father" (58). By changing his identity, Booth "reverses the circumstances by having [the] father engage in a fruitless quest for a son who has changed his identity" (Rosefeldt 58). Booth's new name 3K, which is supposed to emphasize the role of the card game for his identity, is never accepted by Lincoln, which is another strong indicator of the importance of the names that are given to children at the moment of their birth and at the futility of changing one's name in order to change one's identity. This futility is also stressed by Lincoln's remark when Booth first tells him that he wants to change his name: "You gonna call yrself something african? [...] Only pick something that's easy to spell and pronounce, man, cause you know, some of them african names, I mean, ok, Im down with the power to the people thing, but, no ones gonna hire you if they cant say yr name" (Parks 14). This shows that in the society they live in names are not about one's heritage, but about blending in. While Booth tries to change his name, Lincoln, paradoxically, is forced to embrace his name because he has to dress up as Abraham Lincoln for work; he gets paid to be shot by customers. Booth constantly makes fun of Lincoln's job, even though he himself does not earn any money.

In scene two, Booth comments on how bad Lincoln's job is, and Lincoln replies: "It's a living" (Parks 35). In his response, Booth sums up Lincoln's problem: "But you aint living" (Parks 35). Booth's remark ties in well with Wakefield's theory, because it emphasizes that Lincoln's job leads to an alienation from himself; he is not just under the constant threat of losing his job and being replaced, but he is also under the threat of being replaced by a wax dummy, because this would be a cheaper solution for his boss (Parks 44). If we argue from Wakefield's point of view, this inhumane treatment separates Lincoln from his "intrinsic human worth" (2), because he is only valued in "monetary terms" (2). Furthermore, Lincoln's job requires him to paint his face white; a fact which further complicates his search for identity and a healthy masculinity and which further draws attention to the hostile and racist world Lincoln lives in: the only way he can earn money is to deny his identity as a black man.

In addition to the existential problems at his workplace, Lincoln not only has to deal with the divorce from his wife Cookie, but he also lives with his brother, who frequently shows off with the fact that he seduced her (Parks 45).

It would be easy to condemn Booth's behavior as immoral; however, the lack of a parental role model that is already suggested by the choice of their names seems to make it impossible for either of the brothers to have such thing as a conscience, because betrayal is central to their family. Brantley suggests that for the two main characters,

[b]rotherly love and hatred is translated into the terms of men who have known betrayal since their youth, when their parents walked out on them, and who will never be able entirely to trust anyone, including (and especially) each other. Implicit in their relationship is the idea that to live is to con (*Con Game*).

This motif of mutual betrayal has its beginning with their parents cheating on each other and making their children witnesses of it. While Booth came home early one day and caught his mother with another man, Lincoln accompanied his father to his various girlfriends (Parks 100, 89f) . Due to the fact that none of their parents felt the urge to talk to their children about their problems, Booth and Lincoln were left alone with dealing with the situation. As a consequence, they are both incapable of having a normal relationship to any human being, including each other. No matter what crime they commit, they never have any sign of a guilty conscience, which clearly indicates that their moral conscience has never been developed. For example, Lincoln takes a boy's money, because the boy thinks that he is actually Abraham Lincoln, or he remembers how he was cheating on his wife, without regretting it at all (Parks 11, 42). Booth even considers stealing as his job, which again shows that he has no morals (Parks 29). Furthermore, the 3-card monte game, which dominates the plot of the play, is based on the idea of cheating the audience by taking their money. When Lincoln recollects his "glorious days" as a professional card player, he remarks:

We took that man and his wife for hundreds. No, thousands. We took them for everything they had and everything they ever wanted to have. We took a father for the money he was gonna get his kids new bike with and he cried in the street while we vanished (Parks 55).

His remark also illustrates the fact that he does not know what a normal family life is like and that he therefore cannot feel empathy with a family father.

It can be argued that Booth and Lincoln are victims of a bad childhood that prevents them from developing into mature human beings, which is further illustrated by the fact that both brothers are not capable of reflecting about the roles that their parents played. For example, they do not openly condemn them for having abandoned them. Instead, they plan on doing the exactly same thing to their children one day: “That’s what Im gonna do. Give my kids 500 bucks then cut out. That’s thuh way to do it” (Parks 69).

The crises that both brothers are facing can undoubtedly be traced back to their childhood. Both parents abandoned them within two years, and, even though they were already teenagers when it happened, they are aware of the fact that they were not old enough to be all by themselves: “16 and 11 aint grown” (Parks 68). Furthermore, their recollections prove that their childhood before their parents’ departure was not happy either, for example, when Booth remembers his mother’s affairs (Parks 100). It is interesting how Booth and Lincoln constantly emphasize their masculinity, for example, by using vulgar language and by talking about women in a derogatory way. At the same time, however, memories of their parents keep suddenly coming up and are accompanied by long pauses before, in which they probably recollect some memories of their childhood (Parks 21). Their mother is already mentioned for the first time in scene one, when Booth suddenly says “[y]ou know what Mom told me when she was packing to leave?” (Parks 21). Even though Booth asks that question as if they had never talked about it before, it becomes obvious during the play that they frequently talk about their parents’ departure, because there are many open questions that keep haunting them. Booth’s question just gives him the opportunity to talk about that significant day in his life.

The reason why Booth saw his mother leave, while Lincoln did not, was because Booth skipped school that day. Looking at his later life as a petty criminal, one could hypothesize that the fear of being left without being able to say goodbye makes it impossible for him to have a decent job. While Booth seems to be mainly holding on to his mother in his memories, Lincoln talks more about his father; this ties in with the fact that their mother gave Booth her “inheritance”, while their father gave Lincoln 500 dollars before he left. The fact that their parents seemed to have an arrangement about their departure, but that at the same time they left in a hurry, contributes to the crises of their sons; they keep raising questions about whether they just left them in order to have another family together: “Maybe they got 2 new kids. 2 boys. Different than us, though. Better” (Parks 70). Lincoln sounds like a little boy who is not sure about his parents’ love for him. Underneath all their vulgar language and their

hyper-masculine behavior, they are still two boys with a low self-esteem and no belief in their future.

### **5.1.2 Filling the void of the father**

The boys have no inheritance of the father left: Lincoln spent all the money his father gave him. Furthermore, he burnt his father's clothes (Parks 29): "I got tired of looking at em without him in em" (Parks 29). His clothes probably also reminded the two brothers of their father's selfish lifestyle: "What he didnt spend on booze he spent on women. What he didnt spend on them two he spent on clothes" (Parks 29). One could argue that by burning the remaining clothes of his father, Lincoln wanted to get rid of the dominance of the absent father in his life.

Due to the fact that Lincoln and Booth only have each other, they switch their roles and their dependencies several times. At the beginning, it seems that, paradoxically, Booth, who is the younger brother, is the one who fulfills the role of the caretaker of the family, because they live in his flat and he does the budget for them every Friday when Lincoln gets paid. Furthermore, he tells Lincoln in scene one that before their mother left, she told him to take care of his older brother (Parks 21). Another hint at his more responsible attitude is that, unlike Lincoln, he never spent his mother's money and still has the 500 dollars even though they are in constant need for money in order to pay the bills.

However, Lincoln is the one who earns their money, while Booth has never had a job in his life. The fact that Booth does not even try to find a decent job can also be traced back to his parents' influence: "[...] I don't blame them. You don't see me holding down a steady job. Cause its bullshit and I know it. I seen how it cracked them up and I aint going there" (Parks 68). Booth's incapability of finding a more positive role model for his life makes Lincoln become the only caretaker of the family. Furthermore, he is the one who teaches his younger brother the 3-card monte card game. This could be seen as a way of passing on his knowledge, which would traditionally be the task of a father (Vogt and Sirridge 20f). Again, this shows their moral decline, because the only knowledge that Lincoln can pass on is the knowledge of cheating somebody.

Lincoln also seems to be more experienced in life, which could be attributed to their age difference of five years. While Booth sees the illegal card game in a naïve way, because he is

just interested in the money that he could make out of it, Lincoln knows about the dangers of the game, because one of his friends from back then was shot. He stopped playing the game after the murder, because he did not want to be shot himself. Ironically, however, now he gets shot every day as Abraham Lincoln at his workplace. Lincoln is aware of the fact that Booth is not a good player and that he would therefore not earn any money from the game. It is also likely that he is scared for his own sake, because he does not want to go back to earning his money with the card game. Another indicator on Lincoln's more mature role in the play is that, while it does not even become clear whether Booth's girlfriend Grace really exists, Lincoln managed to marry his wife and thereby showed his willingness to act according to society's expectations at least for a short time.

However, the ending of the play sheds a different light on Lincoln's motifs and leaves the audience wondering; in their final card game he tricks his brother into putting down the 500 dollars that he got from their mother. Booth gets excited for the money like a little boy and ends up losing all of it. To him, the money has much more than just its monetary value, because he refers to it as his mother's "payoff" (Parks 100) and his "inheritance" (Parks 100). The money, which was wrapped into one of his mother's nylon stockings, is all that Booth has as a memory of his mother. Therefore, the situation gets out of control and in his rage Booth kills his brother.

One could hypothesize that Booth sees his brother as a father figure; when he realizes that he has betrayed him, he feels the same way he felt when his real father betrayed him when he left the family. However, unlike when he was a child, he now has the physical power to punish the father figure that betrays him; in other words, he has the power to be a topdog. Therefore, he seizes the opportunity to finally get revenge and kill the only father figure in his life. As soon as the crime is committed, however, he realizes what he has done; instead of killing his unloved father, he killed his brother, who was the only one he could rely on in his life.

In this context, Booth's supposedly killing of his girlfriend Grace could also be seen as a killing of the only mother figure of the play, because Booth tells Lincoln that Grace wants to have children with him (Parks 89). Leaving aside the question of whether or not Grace is a product of Booth's fantasy, her willingness to start a family might have clashed with Booth's inability to trust somebody in his life.

The name of the play illustrates the constant switching of the power dynamics between the brothers. At one point, Booth is the topdog, and at another point, Lincoln seems to have the upper hand. However, at the end of the play, it becomes questionable whether or not Lincoln was just playing a game and was the topdog for the whole play. It does not become clear whether he was planning from the beginning on tricking Booth into putting down all his inheritance eventually. Due to the absence of a moral conscience, it is more than likely that he has been planning on taking his brother's inheritance all along. From Rosefeldt's point of view, the end of the play makes sense, because both sons not only follow their father's, but also their mother's destructive path that eventually leads them into a catastrophe. Due to the lack of a positive role model in their lives, they do not sense the power they have to change not only history, but also their own lives. Instead, they re-enact the tragic past and Booth ends up killing his own brother. Booth Wilkes' tragic ending suggests a similar ending for his namesake. In a way, Booth's deed sheds negative light on society: Abraham Lincoln fought slavery; 150 years later, the situation does not seem to have changed to the better. It is a racist world that the two brothers live in. To make matters worse, it is no longer a stranger that kills Lincoln for political reasons, but it is now his own brother who shoots him.

### **5.1.3 The exclusion from the American Dream**

Judging from Freese's definition of the American Dream, it fails for the brothers in every single aspect. While their parents left them in search of a better life far away from them, Lincoln and Booth are stuck in their lives without any future perspectives. Their situation is so depressing that they do not even form any future plans or dreams, except for the intention of leaving their children behind just like their parents did (Parks 69). Furthermore, society does not grant them equality, and the ideal of multi-ethnicity does not come true for them. Instead, they encounter racism on an every-day basis and are isolated from the outside world. For example, Lincoln's boss is stricter with him and he pays him less than his other employees just because of the fact that he is black (Parks 40).

In a way, Lincoln is the embodiment of the failure of the American Dream in the play. Instead of fighting inequality, he has given up and accepts the unfair treatment. In theory, the parents embody the American Dream because they had the mobility and the courage to move away in order to find happiness and have a new start. However, they only achieved their "dream" at the price of irresponsibility and harming their children. It can be assumed from the

recollections of their children that they have probably not found what they were looking for. Just like their children, they were presumably drug addicts and they equally excluded from the American Dream due to racism. It is likely that their parents at least at some points tried to make the American Dream come true for the family, for example, when, as their children recollect years later, they bought a nice house and their father tried to hold a steady job for some time (Parks 67f). However, their addiction was stronger than their longing for the fulfillment of their dream. Their parents' actions can be seen as a critique of the concept of the American Dream: by pursuing their own dreams, they eternally destroyed their children's dreams. This shows the downside of the dream: it cannot come true for everybody, some people are excluded from it for it to remain a dream. Furthermore, it can be seen from the parents' actions that the American Dream involves egotism and a narrow focus on the self; it is about self-fulfilment instead of social responsibility.

Lincoln at least tries to hold a job and earn money and thereby accepts the American Dream as an ideal. However, the dream is cruelly distorted for him and its unattainability is stressed by the fact that he has to whiteface in order to earn his money. At this point it must be noted that Parks' play was published before Barack Obama became the first black president of the United States; the fact that a black man has to paint his face white in order to be a (former) president can also be seen as a critique of racism in American society. Furthermore, the brothers' names that are deeply linked to American history make their exclusion from the American experience even harsher. They live in their forefathers' country, but at the same time their country treats them unfairly. Unlike his brother, Booth has entirely given up on his dream. Instead, he lives a perverse version of the American Dream, which is stimulated by his heavy consumption of alcohol and his unhealthy lifestyle and in which success is defined by profitable criminal tricks.

#### **5.1.4 Escapes from a reality without a father**

For Booth, the only way of having a relationship with a woman seems to be to make one up, because there are several hints that suggest that his supposed relationship with Grace can be traced back to his overactive imagination. For example, it seems more than unlikely that she does not show up to their date all night long and that he does not even bother to call her from a public phone to find out where she is (Parks 59ff). He later makes it look like a misunderstanding to his brother, but his story seems entirely unrealistic:



And guess where she was, I mean, while I was here waiting for her. She was over at her house watching tv. I'd told her come over Thursday and I got it all wrong and was thinking I said Wednesday and here I was sitting waiting my ass off and all she was doing was over at her house just watching tv (Parks 86).

Lincoln also makes up an imaginary world; he comes up with happy childhood memories due to a lack thereof: "We had some great times in that house, bro. Selling lemonade on thuh corner, thuh treehouse out back, summers spent lying in thuh grass and looking at thuh stars" (Parks 65). Booth interrupts this dwelling in memories that have never actually happened and forces him to come back to reality. Instead, they recollect what actually happened during their childhood, for example, when they slashed their father's tires, which was their idea of a joke (Parks 65).

Both brothers also escape their unpleasant reality by drinking too much alcohol. When Booth does their budget, he calculates that they are going to spend more money on alcohol over the next week than on food (Parks 31f). The importance of alcohol in their lives is also stressed by the fact that they frequently refer to it as "med-sin" (Parks 32). What makes their addiction even more obvious is the fact that they cannot even pay their telephone bills; however, they prefer to spend their money on alcohol instead. Judging from their recollections, it can be assumed that their parents were drug addicts as well. Therefore, history does not only repeat itself as far as their famous namesakes are concerned, but also as far as their family and their drug problems are concerned.

Brantley suggests that in her play, Parks states that

any human exchange involves sham, that a person can be himself only when no one else is watching. And when the person is a black man in the history lesson that is Ms. Parks's United States, the existential lies multiply. Then again, not being yourself can be a very fine art (*Brothers in a Game*).

It can be argued that by constantly pretending to be someone else, the brothers are also trying to get away from their reality. On the one hand, there is Lincoln's job that forces him to be a white man. On the other hand, Booth pretends to be a professional cardplayer when he is alone at home (Parks 7f). There are several other instances when the brothers pretend to be someone else, for example, when they pretend to be a married couple when Lincoln gets paid on Friday night and says to Booth: "Poppas brung home thuh bacon" (Parks 26). However, their fake happy family life immediately becomes distorted when they start drinking, in the course of which they go back to their usual behavior. This shows that they do not even know

how a happy family life works. Throughout the play, Lincoln practices getting shot in order not to lose his job to a wax dummy (Parks 37). At the same time, Booth impersonates his killer, which obviously foreshadows the tragic outcome of the play: “Hold yr head or something, where I shotcha. Good. And look at me. I am the assassin! I am Booth!!” (Parks 52).

To sum it up, the problems that Lincoln and Booth are facing can be traced back to several factors. They have more problems than an absent father; to make matters worse, their mother is absent, too. In Suzan-Lori Parks’ play, the family completely dissolves. In *Topdog/Underdog*, it can be assumed that even when their parents were present during their children’s childhood, they still failed to fulfill their caring roles as parents. However, it is striking how Lamb’s enumeration of effects that absent fathers were said to have on their children in studies conducted between the 1970s and 1990s sums up all the problems of Lincoln and Booth: besides problems with their gender identity, they also face problems with their “identity development, school performance, psychosocial adjustment, and perhaps in the control of aggression” (4). Lincoln and Booth were not only abandoned by their parents, but also by society as a whole, because the society they live in is racist and treats them unequally. Therefore, Amato’s and Dorius’ hypothesis about possible ethnic and racial differences between the effects that breakups have on children certainly has some validation in this context: Lincoln and Booth not only have to cope with the absence of their parents, but they also have to cope with a hostile society and subsequent economic problems that further diminish their self-esteem. From Rosefeldt’s point of view, one could argue that black abandoned sons are even denied the possibility to search for their father in the distance; they are entrapped in their one-room apartment and there is no escape for them.

## **5.2 Sam Shepard – *True West***

### **5.2.1 Two brothers in search for identity**

*True West* was published in 1980 and is considered the third in Sam Shepard’s series of family plays. Adolphs, however, stresses that, strictly speaking, there is no family anymore in *True West* and therefore family does not stand at the core of the play (176). Austin and Lee, the main characters, are two brothers who meet in their mother’s house in California. Austin, the younger one, is supposed to take care of the house while their mother is on vacation. Lee, a petty thief, happens to be in the area and unexpectedly shows up at his mother’s house. At

first sight, the brothers could not be more different: while Austin is a screenwriter for the movie industry and has a family and a home, his older brother has no job and breaks into people's houses. At the beginning, it seems that Lee identifies with his father, because he spent some time in the Californian desert, while Austin seems to identify with his mother because they have a similar lifestyle. This explains why his mother asked him to take care of her house.

The violence between the two brothers becomes apparent immediately, for example, when Lee asks Austin to give him his car and Austin refuses it: "Lee suddenly lunges at Austin, grabs him violently by the shirt and shakes him with tremendous power" (Shepard 8). Austin shows no sign of reaction, and the two brothers go back to normal immediately after the attack. This might hint at the fact that Austin is used to Lee's violence and that his sudden outburst is nothing unusual to him. Lee ends up taking Austin's car keys and refuses to give them back. Austin does not want to call the police because Lee is his brother. Lee's response to Austin's unwillingness to call the police sums up their relationship: "That don't mean a thing. You go down to the L.A. Police Department there and ask them what kinda' people kill each other the most. What do you think they'd say?" (Shepard 23). By saying that, Lee already hints at the violent outcome of the play. The aggression between the brothers builds up and reaches its climax at the end of the play, when Austin is the one who attacks Lee. There is also a lot of verbal aggression on both sides, for example when Austin accuses his brother of having "bulldogged yer way into contention" (Shepard 40). Lee, too, compares his brother to a dog when he says "Yer worse than a dog" (Shepard 49).

Their comparisons are striking because they also talk about the fact that coyotes kill people's pets: "This is the time of morning when the coyotes kill people's cocker spaniels. Did you hear them? That's what they were doing out there. Luring innocent pets away from their homes" (Shepard 45). The fact that coyotes, typical animals of the desert, constantly howl throughout the play emphasizes how close the desert and its wilderness are to the seemingly civilized society. The ending of the play proves that violence does not only happen in the wilderness, but also within society. The coyote can also be seen as a metaphor for the father, who is never present on stage but who is yet constantly present in the conversations and actions of his son. Just how the coyote lures away innocent pets, the father lures his sons to the desert. However, while the pets are killed by the coyotes, the brothers threaten to kill each other. If the sounds of the coyotes can really be interpreted as a symbol for the father, it is

interesting that Rosefeldt notes that “the ‘city coyotes’ can only cap instead of howling like those on the desert” (52). So not even the coyotes are authentic in the play.

In the course of the play, the differences between the brothers’ personalities become blurry until they dissolve entirely. From the beginning, there are strong hints at the fact that the brothers are more similar than they think, for example, when Austin starts writing the first outline for Lee’s movie script and Lee says: “I always wondered what’d be like to be you” (Shepard 26). According to McDonough, this also shows that “although each brother initially claims the superiority of his own way of life, deriding the other for not being ‘in touch’ or for living in a dream world, each also wonders if the other brother might have ‘the right idea’ in his lifestyle” (*Staging Masculinity* 49).

The fact that Lee sells an idea for a movie shows how similar they are. In the end, Austin turns into a drunk criminal while his brother sells a movie script to Hollywood and thereby lives his brother’s dream. Their complete role reversal happens in the seventh scene. Lee openly takes over his brother’s role: “I’m a screenwriter now! I’m legitimate” (Shepard 37). Austin accepts Lee’s challenge and takes over his job: “Well, maybe I oughta’ go out and try my hand at your trade. Since you’re doing so good at mine” (Shepard 37). Kleb sees this character reversal as the major dramatic device that Shepard uses in his plays (118). In Frank’s review of a 1987 production of *True West*, she argues that Lee can be seen as the dark side of Austin’s personality, as an “adult’s waking nightmare of the barbarian with whom no reasonable approach works” (Frank). Furthermore, she states that “[t]o those like Austin, who keep the veneer of civilization covering the dark underbelly of humanity, Lee represents a total loss of control” (Frank). Austin’s transformation into a barbarian shows that this dark side is hidden within every human being, and that everybody can be civilized and a villain at the same time. Tucker Orbison even refers to Lee as “Austin’s shadow self” (82).

According to Rosefeldt, abandoned sons frequently engage in storytelling and mythmaking in order to make up a mysterious world of adventures and to escape their unpleasant reality (60). Both Lee and Austin frequently make up stories. Austin even gets paid for making up stories and writing screenplays. Moreover, Lee’s life only consists of lies; neither the audience nor Austin ever know what to believe of the things he says. For example, when he returns from playing golf with Saul Kimmer, he tells his brother that Kimmer gave him his golf clubs as “part a’ the advance. A little gift like” (Shepard 28). However, Austin does not believe him because he knows that Saul Kimmer is very careful when it comes to his business (Shepard

28). On the one hand, Austin looks down on the the idea for a movie that Lee comes up with. On the other hand, Lee has the same attitude towards his brother's made-up stories. For example, right at the beginning, Lee tells Austin that there is no future in art (Shepard 7). It is interesting how both sons come up with entirely different ideas for movies: while Austin wants to sell his ideas for a love story, Lee comes up with the idea for a Western. Both brothers despise each other's products of imagination.

Lee's lack of knowledge about life in the prairies and consequently his lack of knowledge about his father's life becomes apparent when he talks about his movie. He wants it to be as realistic as possible, yet the plot is almost comical because it only fulfills stereotypes that people have of the West: "So they take off after each other straight into an endless black prairie. The sun is just comin' down and they can feel the night on their backs" (Shepard 27). The fact that the producer Saul Kimmer likes Lee's story further emphasizes that society has lost touch with the spirit of the West.

Austin and Lee make a mess out of their mother's place: "the stage is ravaged; bottles, toasters, smashed typewriter, ripped out telephone, etc." (Shepard 50). According to the stage directions, the lighting should be yellow so that the scene looks like "a desert junkyard at high noon" (Shepard 50). First of all, considering the importance of deserts in the play, it is interesting how their house is supposed to suddenly look like a desert junkyard. This shows that they are on their father's self-destructive path, with the illusion of finding him in the end. A second way of analyzing the stage setting is to use Paul Rosefeldt's approach. He mentions the "wasteland [...] filled with sterile objects, an illusory world that is often crumbling around them" (10). This wasteland world that the abandoned sons live in becomes more obvious on stage the more the play progresses.

The main characters of Lee's movie also resemble the two brothers. It is about two men who chase each other through the prairies. Lee and Austin are constantly chasing each other, too; especially Lee uses physical and verbal aggression towards his brother. The futility of their search is emphasized when Lee says: "And they keep ridin' like that straight into the night. Not knowing. And the one who's chasin' doesn't know where the other one is taking him. And the one who's being chased doesn't know where he's going" (Shepard 27). McDonough also stresses that Lee's movie is about the two brothers. According to her, the aforementioned scene shows that "[t]hey share more than they realize in that both are motivated by the same

fears and insecurities, but these qualities are manifested in each man in different ways” (*Staging Masculinity* 48).

Austin’s criticism of the characters of the movie can be interpreted as a commentary about themselves: “Those aren’t characters. [...] Those are illusions of characters” (Shepard 40). Like everything in their lives, even they themselves are illusions. The end of *True West* marks the end of their chase: the two brothers stand facing each other. There is no escape for either of them (Shepard 59). The stage directions state that “the figures of the brothers now appear to be caught in a vast desert-like landscape” (Shepard 59). This again hints at the fact that the chase through the prairies in Lee’s idea for a movie was about the two brothers to begin with. Considering the fact that Lee and Austin can be seen as “polar opposites, and yet in some sense they are two halves of one unit” (Bottoms 191) there is no realistic possibility for them to escape each other. In the end, they are inextricably linked together. McDonough puts the ending in a broader context within American society: “The ‘many doors’ into masculinity are collapsed into two contrasting options, and so the American male remains at war with himself because he cannot figure out which of the two he wants to be” (*Staging Masculinity* 49). The ending shows that for American males there is no possibility for multiple identities.

DeRose suggests that with the final scene “the brothers are transformed into archetypal figures, fighting on against the backdrop of eternity” (143). Adolphs offers a similar interpretation of the final scene: “[d]er Antagonismus wird nicht aufgelöst, sondern vielmehr festgeschrieben” (180). Adolphs states that the ending of *True West* is typical of Sam Shepard:

Stets wird die Familie als unauflöslicher Verband gezeigt, dem keines seiner Mitglieder entkommen kann. Sie erscheint als eine fast schon klaustrophobisch zu nennende Gemeinschaft, die auf unerklärliche Weise durch Blutsbande zusammengehalten wird; Blutsbande, die die Familie zur tödlichen Falle machen (181).

However, if we look at their fragmented family and the absence of the parents, this interpretation is disputable. It is true that the brothers, who have not seen each other for five years, talk about their father a lot and that there is a sense of claustrophobia between them throughout the play. However, it is beyond question that their father has managed to escape the family and that their mother abandons them to go to a motel.

### 5.2.2 Filling the void of the absent father

Even though, on the surface level, Austin has achieved much more than his older brother, he seems to admire and envy him for his apparent freedom. Austin fails to realize that Lee is not free at all because there is no other place for him to go than the desert. Just how Austin admires and hates his father for leaving them, he admires and hates his brother. One could therefore argue that Lee, paradoxically, serves as a father figure for Austin. Austin's admiration for Lee becomes obvious when he expresses his wish to move to the desert with his brother and abandon his family for their adventure. However, Lee immediately destroys Austin's romanticized view of his life in the desert: "Ya' think it's some kinda philosophical decision I took or somethin'? I'm livin' out there 'cause I can't make it here!" (Shepard 49). Just like he has an idealized version of the desert, the place where their father moved to after he abandoned them, their "old Man" himself stands for a romanticized version of the "loner, the man who has fled from society" (Rosefeldt 52). Due to the absence of a father as a role model that challenges them intellectually, both sons fail to see other possible outcomes for their lives than following their father on his self-destructive path. According to Rosefeldt, the sons are constantly torn between "the choice of whether to settle down and become a success or to abandon the restrictions of the civilized world" (52). While Austin seems to be the one that has settled down, Lee has abandoned all restrictions. However, the fact that they envy each other and switch roles shows that none of them feels comfortable in their roles. This illustrates that they in fact do not have a choice; both brothers follow their father's path when they decide to go to the desert together. However, the situation gets out of control when Lee wants to leave without Austin; for the first time in the play, Austin physically attacks his brother. One possible interpretation of this attack could be that as a boy he could not keep his father from leaving them. Now that he has the physical strength to prevent the other father figure from leaving, he does so with all his power:

It is Austin who finally goes berserk, who ends the play trying to strangle the brother – and the shadow of the father – who wants once again to betray him by escaping to the desert, who hopes once again to leave him behind to fend for himself in a world where any kind of connection with other people, or with real space and time, where any kind of deeply felt recognition, is impossible (Rosen 144).

Austin and Lee use the same techniques in their efforts to bring their father back into their lives. For example, they talk about how they went out to the desert to find their "old man". While Lee managed to adapt to life in the desert and ends up spending a lot of time there,

Austin failed to connect with his father, but ended up giving him some money instead (Shepard 9, 6f). According to Tucker, the brothers went to the desert to get the father's blessing. However, "[t]he father gives neither his blessing, because he is not capable of passing on a power that is only illusion" (139). Due to his failure of connecting with the father, Austin tries to take care of his brother instead. He even invites him to stay with him and his family in the North for a while (Shepard 9). However, "Lee, like the father, is too restless to settle down and is beyond reform" (Rosefeldt 54).

According to Rosefeldt, both sons mirror and double their absent father (53f). Lee doubles his father through his lifestyle; even though he is part of society, he resents and undermines it by breaking into people's houses. For Rosefeldt, Lee illustrates "the restless mobility of the American son. Shattered by loss and instability, the lost son is forever moving on to the next stop on the road to nowhere" (53). Just like Lee, Austin doubles his father; Rosefeldt sees this doubling represented in his habit to write his script in candlelight, which shows his rejection of modern technology (53). Austin's attempt to become like his father becomes more obvious at a later point of the play when he starts to drink heavily and breaks into people's houses to steal their toasters (Shepard 43). Rosefeldt makes out a pattern in *True West* which frequently occurs in other plays about fatherless children: "[t]he wandering brother seems to explore the world of the father while the settled brother longs to break free and follow his older brother on the path of the absent father" (54). However, it can be seen in *True West* that it does not bring the two brothers closer to each other when Austin decides to become a criminal just like Lee. Austin cannot follow Lee, even though he tries to by becoming a criminal. At the same time, Lee cannot follow Austin on his path, even though he tries to make it in the movie business. This proves that following their father on his path will not bring them any closer to him.

Both brothers constantly long for something authentic in their lives. For example, Austin wants to leave their L.A. suburb because it does not feel authentic to him: "There's nothin' real down here, Lee! Least of all me!" (Shepard 49). When Austin and Lee bet that Austin cannot manage to break into a house and steal somebody's toaster, Austin asks Lee for something in case he wins: "You got anything of value? You got any tidbits from the desert? Any Rattlesnake bones?" (Shepard 38). The fact that he does not want anything of monetary value, but something from the desert, illustrates his longing for the exotic world of his father. Even though Lee seems to be more in touch with their father's world, because he lived in the desert, he also feels a longing for authenticity in his everyday-life. For example, when he packs up the things he wants to bring to the desert, his mother offers him to bring plastic cups



instead of her expensive antiques: “It’s not the same. Plastic’s not the same at all. What I need is something authentic. Somethin’ to keep me in touch. It’s easy to get outa’ touch here” (Shepard 56). Their place of authenticity is the desert and their father, who lives a simple life there. Their constant search for something authentic illustrates their eternal search for a father in their lives. However, their search is futile. As McDonough puts it, “[y]et to ride away from the city and live independently in the desert is as much a mark of failure as of independence. [...] If neither the town nor the desert offers a solution to the question of male identity, where is that identity to be found?” (*Staging Masculinity* 48).

Another strategy that brings them closer to their father is the abuse of alcohol. Lee drinks a lot from the start and while Austin only drinks coffee at the beginning, he starts drinking heavily towards the end of the play. When he is intoxicated, Lee accuses him of sounding like their father and Austin replies: “Yeah, well we all sound alike when we’re sloshed. We just sorta echo each other” (Shepard 39).

### **5.2.3 The absent parents**

Lee’s and Austin’s nameless mother is absent for most of the play, because she is on vacation in Alaska. Even though she is present on stage in the last scene, she remains mentally absent. According to Bonnie Marranca, Shepard is mainly interested in presenting a male experience to his audience, leaving women aside to a great extent (30). Marranca even goes so far as to say that “[t]here is no expression of a female point of view in any of Shepard’s plays” (30). It is true that the mother does not play a big role in the play, but it could be argued that taking care of her house brings the two sons together to begin with and that she therefore plays a crucial role for the development of the play. Rosefeldt emphasizes that the mother and her house stand for an artificial world that the sons are trapped in while they are constantly longing for the exotic world that their father lives in. The artificiality of their mother’s life is illustrated by the soulless L.A. suburb that the play takes place in (Rosefeldt 52).

Both sons are aware of their entrapment in their mother’s world; Austin even refers to this sense of not belonging anywhere when he says:

There’s nothing down here for me. There never was. When we were kids here it was different. There was life here then. But now – I keep comin’ down here thinkin’ it’s the fifties or somethin’. I keep finding myself getting off the freeway at familiar landmarks that turn out to be unfamiliar. On the way to appointments. Wandering down streets I thought I recognized that turn out to be replicas of

streets I remember. Streets I misremember. Streets I can't tell if I lived on or saw in a postcard. Fields that don't exist anymore (Shepard 49).

As mentioned earlier, both sons long for the authentic world of their father. Strangely enough however, Lee is at the same time fascinated with his mother's world; he tells his brother about breaking into a house in their neighborhood that he especially liked: "Kinda' place you wish you sorta' grew up in, ya' know" (Shepard 12).

The role of the mother in *True West* is completely distorted, which further contributes to the dysfunctionality of the entire family; she comes home early from Alaska because she misses her plants which seem to be more important to her than her children. However, when she realizes that Austin failed to water them and they all died, she says: "Oh well, one less thing to take care of I guess" (Shepard 54). Her apparent relief about the death of her flowers hints at the fact that she was never a caring mother for her children. When Austin starts to physically attack Lee, she does not get involved. According to the stage instructions, she "calmly" (Shepard 57) asks her son whether he is intending to kill Lee. What is more, she seems to mainly worry about her sons fighting inside: "There's plenty of room outside to fight. You've got the whole outdoors to fight in" (Shepard 57). She ends up leaving them alone to stay in a motel (Shepard 58). She can therefore be seen as an ineffectual mother, because, just like the father, she leaves the children alone when they need her. The mother is a controversial character in the play; McDonough argues that women in Shepard's plays always refuse to participate in violence. "Yet, ironically, it is only in the women's spaces of Shepard's plays, off-stage or in the margins, that any hope for survival is offered" (*Stage Space* 65). At the same time, Adolphs stresses her insignificance for the play: "Sie steht der Situation verständnislos und hilflos gegenüber und beruft sich dann auf Rollenmuster, die ihr Sicherheit geben sollen" (178).

It can be argued that the mother has adapted to a world in which love no longer counts as a basic value. Saul Kimmer, the movie producer, even sums this up when he rejects Austin's script, saying: "Nobody's interested in love these days, Austin. Let's face it" (Shepard 35). McDonough offers a more optimistic interpretation of the mother's actions:

The mother's "withdrawal" is a refusal to collude in the male stories and their concomitant destruction. She chooses to leave because life on stage in Shepard's plays is usually a scene of destruction, violence, and death. Furthermore, unlike most of the men in the family plays, the women are often the only ones *able* to leave the destruction that engulfs Shepard's stage (*Stage Space* 69).

History repeats itself. Just like their mother could not prevent her ex-husband from going to the desert, she also fails at talking Austin out of his plans by reminding him that he has a family to take care of (Shepard 55). Austin tells his mother that he wants to live in a different desert than his father. Her response sums up the fate of abandoned sons: “You’ll probably wind up up on the same desert sooner or later” (Shepard 53).

According to Bigsby, it is common for Shepard’s plays that “figures of the past occupy the same space and time as those who inhabit an uneasy present” (1945 - 2000 166). In *True West*, this figure from the past is the absent father. Just like the mother, he remains nameless throughout the play. His sons refer to him as the “old man” (Shepard 12). He embodies “the loner, the man who fled from society. The father is holding on to the last vestiges of the Western pioneer spirit” (Rosefeldt 52). Austin even says so: “There’s no such thing as the West anymore! It’s a dead issue!” (Shepard 35). Still, both sons fail to realize that their father is merely a tragic, lost version of the American pioneer. Due to their inability to question their father, they are constantly longing for their idealized childhood world, which they have inextricably linked to their father (Rosefeldt 52).

Lee not only attempts to bring back the father into their lives by writing a movie script about the legendary American West, he also plans on giving him some of the money he earns. He even tells Saul Kimmer about his father, which shows how important his father is for his motivation to make a movie (Shepard 33). He repeatedly expresses his wish to earn money to persuade his father to return into society: “Maybe if we could work on this together we could bring him back out there. Get him settled down some place” (Shepard 39). This shows that the sons feel responsible for their father, whereas it can be assumed from his absence that he has never felt responsible for them. The two sons took over the role of the caring parents while their father plays the role of an irresponsible child who always immediately spends all the money they give to him. According to Tucker, the sons “are rivals for his approval/affection” (139).

Bonnie Marranca sums up the role of the parents in *True West*: “[t]he parents are shown to be comic-pathetic, dreamy figures unable to comprehend or initiate events. They are failures as parent-figures, and more troubled and out of control than their children” (16).

#### 5.2.4 The American Dream

According to Bigsby, in many of Shepard's plays "[a] dream has died and now lives on only as fantasy" (1945 - 2000 167). *True West* does not only focus on the deconstruction of the American Dream, but also on the deconstruction of other mythical dreams. For example, the plot and the title of the play stand in a strange contrast; it turns out in the course of the play that there is no "true West" anymore. McDonough states that

the 'true West' becomes increasingly illusory the more the brothers try to pin it down. [...] Is it the sterile, independent life of Lee in the desert, or is it the life of the green suburbs, a wife, kids, money, and a career as Austin lives it? Or is it blurred somewhere in between by that great image fuser, Hollywood movies?" (*Staging Masculinity* 49).

According to Marranca, with the lonely cowboy as the ideal of the play and the "longing after heroes and heroic deeds" (29), Shepard's play involves a lot of American West mythology. However, at the same time this myth is deconstructed because "the men [Shepard] creates are ineffectual, fearful, and emotionally immature" (30). According to McDonough, the men in Shepard's play have the Western cowboy as an ideal to their identity and they wrongly equate masculinity with violence. This mistake is passed on from American fathers to their sons (*Stage Space* 65f). Furthermore, the mere fact that Shepard still uses the theme of the American frontier myth in his plays shows "how deeply such concepts are imbedded not only in the American self-image, but especially in American ideas of masculinity" (*Stage Space* 35).

Another thing that is possibly passed on from the father to his sons is his rejection of the American Dream. He does not chase the dream as an ideal, but he wants to live in solitude in the desert. Even though his sons offer him money and want to help him to find his place in society, he stays in the middle of nowhere.

According to Orbison, the West that Shepard presents to his audience is a "'collection of junk'. This is the real West – the West of temporary living, full freeways, and empty hearts" (75). Orbison even refers to the image of the West that Shepard presents as "demonic" (76), because "it has crushed imagination and feelings, and substituted material success" (76).

By means of Lee's aforementioned entirely unrealistic idea of a Western movie, he not only ridicules the American Western, but he also deconstructs the American Dream. For example, he deconstructs the idea of "the continual challenge of respective frontiers" (Freese 106),

when he says: “[a]nd the one who’s chasin’ doesn’t know where the other one is taking him. And the one who’s being chased doesn’t know where he’s going” (Shepard 27). There is no concept behind the chase of the main characters of the movie. In the end, they are both just running from each other without ever arriving anywhere.

The mysterious American West is completely deconstructed in Shepard’s play: “America’s golden age has departed. In its place is an iron age of stolen toasters, TV sets, smashed typewriters, ripped-out telephones, and empty beer-cans [...] – the detritus of a materialist society” (Orbison 77). Marranca evaluates Shepard’s focus on the American West in his plays differently. According to her, Shepard does not deconstruct it, but he glorifies it: “What’s problematic in Shepard’s thinking is his overly Romantic, self-satisfied view of th historical past (even as a presence in his plays) and his inability to examine the implications of this position in broad terms” (22).

In the end, all of the characters’ dreams remain empty and hopeless; Tucker even exchanges the word “dream” with the word “disease” in order to stress that the futile dream has been passed on by their father (139). Even their mother returns from her vacation; her journey to Alaska is a hint at the American Dream. According to Paul Rosefeldt, Alaska can be seen as the “last frontier” (51). However, she did not feel uplifted there, but “desperate” (Shepard 59) and she decided to come home earlier than expected. The fact that there is no escape for Austin in the final scene in which his brother blocks the doorway is a metaphor for their society. The American Dream has turned out to be worthless, yet there is no escape out of their materialist society: “Past and present dissolve; Lee and Austin are left frozen, ‘stuck’ between an empty dream and an insubstantial reality”(Kleb 123).

For Auerbach, both the American family and the American West are deconstructed in Shepard’s plays: “The family that Shepard portrays over and over again is one that cannot nurture its children, that has become as fruitless and sterile as the betrayed American Dream of the West” (54).

### **5.3 Two pairs of brothers – one similar outcome**

Both *Topdog/Underdog* by Suzan-Lori Parks and *True West* by Sam Shepard offer a variation of the Cain and Abel Story (Brentley, *Con Game*). While *Topdog/Underdog* ends with Booth killing his brother and realizing what he has done too late, *True West* has an even more open ending; the audience does not find out what is going to happen next. However, it is more than

likely that Lee ends up killing Austin, because he already hinted at it at several points throughout the play. “The divided nature of their country” (Brentley, *Con Game*) becomes apparent in both plays. While Lincoln and Booth suffer from racial discrimination and even their names hint at the on-going racial divide in American society, Lee and Austin hold on to the ideals of the mythical American West which no longer exists. They are torn between the artificial, civilized world of their mother and the paradise-like desert which their father stands for. Auerbach notes about *True West* that “[t]he worlds of the father and the mother can never be reconciled” (58f).

One could argue that the two plays have different endings because of the different ethnicities of the two sets of brothers. Booth and Lincoln are black and are therefore entirely excluded from their racist society. Lincoln is denied any job except one for which he has to whiteface and thereby hide his identity. They share a one-room apartment with only one bed and they are in constant need for more money to pay their bills. In contrast, Austin and Lee belong to a middle-class family with a house in the outskirts of L.A. Austin even holds a prestigious job in the film industry. Even in the final scene of the play they have more options than Booth in the final scene of *Topdog/Underdog*: they can still go back to normal, because nobody has been seriously hurt yet. In Parks’ play, however, the damage has already been done and Booth is left alone.

Except for the ending, however, it is striking how similarly the brothers act. Even though they obviously belong to different social classes, they use the same ways of coping with their fathers’ absence. Aigner’s observation that children from a higher class cope differently with their fathers’ absence does therefore not turn out to be true in this case (154).

In both plays the fathers ran away in order to escape social restrictions; both remain nameless. While Lee and Austin know where their father is in case they want to find him, Lincoln and Booth are denied any opportunity to find their father. They even come up with the question of whether their parents have reunited in the distance and started a new family there. While Lincoln and Booth seem to talk about both their absent mother and their absent father to an equal amount, Lee and Austin mainly seem to be concerned about their father. While they turn their mother’s house into a junkyard and completely forget to water her plants, they keep planning on integrating their father back into society. This shows Shepard’s strong focus on male characters in his plays.

Both sets of brothers are stuck in the phase of admiration for their fathers; it is obvious that they never reached the position of openly pointing out their fathers' mistakes. Therefore, none of them managed to deconstruct the father's status as a hero (Vogt and Sirridge 62). It is interesting how they all lack a male role model; none of the sons seem to have a positive role model in their lives. As a result, out of the four young men that have been discussed in this chapter, two – namely Lee and Booth – are criminals to begin with. Lincoln used to be a criminal, and Austin turns to crime in the course of the play. Therefore, a lack of moral conscience seems to be a recurring pattern with abandoned sons.

Another recurring and paradoxical characteristic is that even though they do not have a male role model, they have a very distinct and stereotypical view of masculinity. Booth and Lee are hyper-masculine; they frequently talk about women in a derogatory way. Austin has a family, but he never mentions them. They do not seem to be important to him. Lee wants to call women to have sex with them in the middle of the night, which shows that he has no respect for them. Therefore, it can be assumed that due to a lack of parental role models they all have a distorted view of relationships between men and women. This observation ties in well with Amato's and Dorius' observations that children who do not have a father tend to have problems in their relationships in their later lives (185).

Imitating each other is a recurring pattern in both plays: in *Topdog/Underdog* Booth wants to learn the 3-card monte game from his older brother. However, Lincoln is hesitant to teach him. In *True West*, Lee wants to start working for the film industry just like his younger brother. When he sells his idea for a movie to Saul Kimmer, he needs Austin's help to write the entire script. It is interesting how in both plays this sudden shared interest could be a possible chance for the brothers to find a connection to each other. However, in both plays the situation gets out of control and ends in a catastrophe instead: Booth kills his brother after losing all of his money in the game and Lee breaks his promise of taking Austin to the desert with him. Both plays have their climaxes when one brother betrays the other one. While they were all too young to fight their fathers when they betrayed and left them, they are now strong enough to defend themselves. Booth and Austin, the younger brothers, either attack or kill the father figures in their lives: Austin gets into a fight with Lee; Booth ends up killing his older brother Lincoln.

Austin and Lee gradually turn their mother's tidy place into a junkyard which mirrors their inner confusion and their constant state of being torn between their mother's and their father's

world. Booth's and Lincoln's abode also mirrors their inner state: their apartment only consists of one room and there is not enough space for both of them. What is more, it is "seedily furnished" (Parks 7) and they do not seem to have many personal belongings. On the one hand, this can be seen as a metaphor for the fact that their parents did not leave them anything: no personal belongings and no values. On the other hand, this also shows that the two brothers have nothing of value to fight for and no choice in their lives. They are doomed to follow their parents on their self-destructive path. Both sets of sons walk on the self-destructive paths of their fathers; they all drink a lot of alcohol and thereby double their fathers.

There is a sense of claustrophobia in both of the plays; the audience never sees anything else than their apartments. Even though society seems hostile in Parks' play and fake in Shepard's play, it is not society that hurts them, but they themselves harm each other. Bigsby also senses claustrophobia in the relationship of Austin and Lee: "Not only are his characters, like Tennessee Williams's, trapped inside their own skins for life, they are caught in a biological trap which condemns them to re-enactment" (1945 - 2000 183). This sense of claustrophobia can certainly also be found in the relationship of Lincoln and Booth; they are entrapped in their constant fight about becoming the topdog in their relationship.

Austin and Lee's ongoing search for something authentic in their lives can be interpreted as their constant search for their father's heritage, due to a lack thereof in their own lives. According to Bottoms, there is also the underlying issue of inherited diseases in *True West*: "there are clear traces of the concern with biological heredity [...] and to some extent Austin's climactic violence reads as another image of the resurfacing of an inherited blood disease" (195). Martin Tucker also brings up the question of inheritance: "The two boys are infected with the same dream as the father; he passed the disease onto Lee, and now Austin has contracted it" (139). Inheritance also plays an important role in *Topdog/Underdog*. The fact that Lincoln takes their mother's money away from Booth leads to the catastrophe. Furthermore, Lincoln burnt his father's clothes in order to get rid of his constant presence in their lives.

Both plays can be interpreted as a critique of capitalist society. In order to earn money, Lincoln is forced to hide his black identity. There is nothing to look forward to; it is more than unlikely that he will be promoted in his job. Austin has a job, yet at the same time all the money he earns does not bring him happiness and he envies his brother, even though Lee



holds no steady job. Through his job, Austin has become alienated from the authentic life at the desert, and Lincoln has become alienated from his true identity.

Both mothers are absent in different ways. While in *Topdog/Underdog*, the mother has run away before the father left, in *True West* the mother is in Alaska for most of the play. However, even when she comes back, she proves to be ineffectual. Both mothers failed at taking over the roles of the father or in providing their sons with another male role model. To make matters worse, they also failed at fulfilling their own roles as caring mothers. Their mental and physical absence further contributed to the downfall of their sons. For both sets of brothers, there is not even the option of a family of freedom after their family of security has failed. They are too much focused on each other, yet at the same time they fail at trusting one another. Due to the resemblance to their fathers, they desperately need and hate each other at the same time.

In the end, even though their initial situations are different, all of the sons fail in their attempts to bring their fathers back into their lives. For Austin and Lee, even the scenery changes to make the stage look more like a desert. At the same time, while their surrounding starts to look like their father's place of living, his absence becomes even more obvious; even though the brothers now live in a similar place to their father, he is still not there. For Booth, there seems to be no way back after killing his brother. Just like his father, the only option seems to be to run away.

## **6. Daughters in search for their fathers**

### **6.1 Marsha Norman: *'night, Mother***

#### **6.1.1 A daughter in search for her absent father**

*'night, Mother* by Marsha Norman premiered in 1983 and has become her most famous play (DiGaetani 245). Unlike the other plays that have been analyzed so far, Norman's play has a female main character that is looking for her absent father. However, due to the fact that there are only two main characters – mother and daughter – it seems that, on the surface level, *'night, Mother* is mainly about a mother-daughter relationship. However, Paul Rosefeldt emphasizes that the absent father is also important for the course of the play (64). In this context, Christopher Bigsby stresses Marsha Norman's unique talent as a playwright: "For not only does she find in dialogue between women a way of opening up channels to emotional

needs and anxieties but she is aware of the degree to which theatre itself depends on dialogue, a dialogue not restricted to the stage” (*Playwrights* 210). It is certainly true that the dialogue of the two women is not restricted to the reality on stage, because it soon becomes obvious that they mainly talk about characters that are absent, for example Jessie’s dead father, her brother Dawson and her husband Cecile. It is also noteworthy that, with the exception of Cecile’s wife and Thelma’s friend Agnes, all these absent characters are male. Therefore, one could argue that despite the fact that there are no male characters on stage, patriarchal society keeps influencing the two women and their actions on stage.

Rosefeldt’s view of abandoned daughters in the patriarchal world ties in well with this interpretation: unlike abandoned sons, abandoned daughters in modern drama are even denied the possibility of finding their father through space and distance (63). In contrast, abandoned sons frequently seize the opportunity of running away from their everyday life in order to search for their fathers in the distance. Like the deceased father in *‘night, Mother*, the absent father often “creates for the daughters a romantic vision of life that leads them toward self-destruction” (Rosefeldt 63). While Rosefeldt stresses the differences between sons and daughters in coping with their fathers’ absence, for Bigsby, Marsha Norman mainly tries to show how similarly men and women act, because there are no real differences between the genders: “[...] they confront the same absurdities, inhabit the same bewildering social and psychological worlds, express the same sense of loss, look for the same possibility of connection” (Bigsby, *Playwrights* 211). This hypothesis about Norman’s dramatic body of work goes along with most of the scientific literature that has been reviewed in the theoretical part of this thesis, where it has been showed that both abandoned daughters’ and abandoned sons’ psychological problems do not differ to a great extent.

It is questionable whether Jessie’s psychological problems can be traced back entirely to her first mentally, then physically absent father. Grantley mentions some other factors that certainly had an influence on Jessie’s unwillingness to go on with life. In the course of the play, the conversations of the two women on stage reveal

the quiet estrangement between Jessie’s parents, the chronic lack of communication and distance between members of the family, covert rivalry and jealousy, resentment and misunderstanding. What results is a picture of a family of mediocre, limited people unable to understand one another but capable of enormous, unconscious harm (155f).

All these factors certainly contributed to Jessie's depressions and her failure at finding meaning in her life. She also obviously suffers from low self-esteem, which is a common issue with abandoned children. For example, when she talks to her mother about the break-up with Cecile, and Thelma asks why Cecile did not take her with him when he left, she replies: "Mama, you don't pack your garbage when you move" (Norman 41).

### **6.1.2 The absent father**

Even though Norman stresses the importance of the mother-daughter relationship in *'night, Mother*, the father-daughter relationship can be seen as a driving force behind Jessie's motivation to kill herself. Bigsby argues that even though Jessie is detached from her son, and abandoned by her husband, the only real loss she has ever experienced was the loss of her father. However, in the play "[h]e is, theatrically speaking, marginal. He exists only in the contested memories of two women, is reconstructed only linguistically, which is ironic given his silence" (Bigsby, *Playwrights* 236).

Even before Jessie's father died fifteen years ago, he had been mentally absent for a long time. Rosefeldt refers to the father's mental absence as "symbolic absence" (66) and as a "detachment from the world" (66). From the conversations between mother and daughter it becomes clear that he tried to escape the world he lived in and especially his marriage by making use of several strategies. First, he was a quiet man who, unlike his wife Thelma, did not feel the need to talk about unimportant things to fill the emptiness in his life. Instead, he resorted to silence, which made it unbearable for his wife to deal with him. Even on his deathbed he remained silent, which further emphasizes that he had nothing to say to his wife: As Rosefeldt puts it, "[t]he father refuses to communicate with his wife and withdraws from the world in silence" (66). Rosefeldt's way of saying it emphasizes the power that the father had: he consciously chose not to communicate with his wife in any way – while Jessie was able to not only communicate with him but also reach a level of mutual understanding with him.

A second strategy that he made use of was to pretend to go fishing, while instead he just drove to the lake and sat in the car for hours (Norman 33). His third strategy of dealing with his unpleasant reality was to escape into a world of fantasy; he enjoyed creating little pipe cleaner families and frequently gave them as presents to Jessie (Norman 32). By assembling his own little family of pipe cleaner animals, he tried to avoid dealing with his actual family. Rosefeldt

draws special attention to this magic world that the father created for Jessie: “Jessie’s memory of him is attached to a childhood world of toys where Jessie is safe from hurt” (64). These romanticized memories of her childhood contribute to Jessie’s longing for her father and his world. She has inextricably linked her father to her childhood. It can therefore be argued that her longing for her father is a longing for an innocent childhood without her debilitating disease. However, towards the end of the play Jessie finds out that her childhood was not as carefree as she had thought it was; it turns out that even as a 5-year old Jessie already had seizures (Norman 45f). Therefore, it can be said that her childhood was an illusion and her attempt to go back to this childhood by killing herself is doomed to fail.

The close relationship between Jessie and her father is stressed by numerous similarities. The most obvious one is that, just like her father, Jessie suffers from epilepsy. Thelma was the only one who knew about their disease and she decided not to tell either of them. Again, her decision shows how much power communication, or the conscious withdrawal of it, gives to somebody. It can be argued that, if Jessie had known for how long she had been suffering from her disease and that her father had it too, she would not have killed herself. The secret about their disease is central to the plot and it directly connects Jessie to her father (Rosefeldt 66). One could therefore argue that, as it happens in many plays that deal with absent fathers, the revelation of the secret brings the father closer to the reality on stage and, vice versa, Jessie closer to death. In the conservative society that Jessie lives in, her disease is deeply stigmatized; Agnes, her mother’s friend, is even scared of her, and therefore refuses to come to their house (Norman 30). Hebach puts Jessie’s disease in a broader context: “*’night, Mother* thematisiert außerdem die Vererbung der elterlichen ‘Sünden’ auf die Kinder oder, je nachdem, wem man die Schuld geben will, deren zwanghafte Wiederholung durch den Nachwuchs” (208). In a way, Hebach’s interpretation suggests that Jessie has no real choice but to follow her father to death, because history merely repeats itself; just like her father, Jessie withdraws from her mother when she kills herself.

Father and daughter also have a similar personality: just like his daughter, Jessie’s father was very quiet. For example, as Thelma recalls, Jessie leaves the room when her relatives come over to visit her (Norman 20). At the beginning of the play it is noted that “Jessie has never been as communicative or as enjoyable as she is on this evening” (Norman 4). This shows that the honest conversations that mother and daughter have that night are a mere exception. Rosefeldt argues that because of all their striking similarities, father and daughter are not just

similar; Jessie actually doubles her father, which is a frequent pattern with abandoned children in modern drama (66).

Interestingly, the closeness of father and daughter still makes Thelma jealous 15 years after his death. She still tries to get Jessie to side with her instead of her father. The fact that Thelma used to feel threatened in her marriage by her own daughter is hinted at when she says: “You loved him enough for both of us. You followed him around like some...” (Norman 32). Thelma does not finish the sentence; Rosefeldt hypothesizes that what she wanted to say would have been offensive for Jessie, and Thelma did not want to further upset her daughter: “Did Jessie, who gave her father the love that Thelma could not give him, follow him around like some kind of lovesick woman?” (64). It is interesting how this interpretation of Thelma’s remark immediately gives the relationship between father and daughter a sexual connotation. This focus on the sexuality between father and daughter has also been mentioned in the summary of scientific literature in the chapter about father-daughter relationships in the theoretical part of this thesis (Sharpe 2). However, Thelma is not just jealous of her daughter for having reached a level of understanding with her nameless father that Thelma herself was never able to reach; she is also jealous of her deceased husband: “Sie ist auf die Tochter eifersüchtig als handelte es sich um eine Nebenbuhlerin, und sie ist auf ihren Mann eifersüchtig, der die Tochter ohne Anstrengung derart an sich zu binden vermochte“ (Hebach 208). Thelma even openly says so: “I was jealous because you’d rather talk to him than anything” (Norman 33).

The sexual connotation in the father-daughter relationship is further emphasized by Jessie’s choice to kill herself with her father’s gun, because “the absent father’s phallic weapon is not only a crucial plot device, but a clear representation of the father and his world” (Rosefeldt 5). The gun has a strong connection to her father and, even though he did not kill himself, his death, because it is hidden in the shoebox of the shoes that he wore the day he died (Rosefeldt 68, Norman 10f). Furthermore, Jessie has strong feelings about the gun and its possession; when she starts looking for it and her mother says that Jessie’s brother Dawson might have taken it, she says: “Dawson better not’ve taken that pistol” (Norman 11). It is interesting how Jessie feels that she is the rightful heir to the gun even though in the patriarchal world she lives in it would be her brother Dawson who inherits the gun. Therefore, the gun is also a symbol for “a struggle to claim the father and his power” (Rosefeldt 68). Jessie’s alternative to using her father’s gun for killing herself was to use her husband’s gun “[...] but I’d rather

use Daddy's" (Norman 14). By that, she means that Cecile's gun would have only served as a substitute for her father's gun (Rosefeldt 68). One could argue that she wants to kill herself with the gun of one of the two only men she ever loved, "the two men who might have saved her had they not left, abandoned her in their different ways" (Bigsby, *Playwrights* 240). With the help of her father's gun she wants to follow him into his world of silence as opposed to the world of meaningless babbling that her mother lives in. Jessie even openly expresses her longing for eternal quiescence: "Dead is everybody and everything I ever knew, gone. Dead is dead quiet" (Norman 16).

Rosefeldt stresses that the family dynamics have been influenced by the close relationship of Jessie and her father. Thereby, the mother has been isolated (64). While Thelma had no clue of what was going on in her husband's head, it was Jessie who understood her father without even talking to him. Hebach states that one of the core problems that the play deals with is the fact that both parents tried to use Jessie as a replacement for their partner. While the father succeeded in doing so, Thelma failed (208). Jessie's disease could also be seen as a metaphor for this power struggle between her parents; while they were fighting over her, she remained powerless and dependent on somebody to help her during her seizures. At one point, Jessie sums up Ricky's personality as a constant fight between herself and Cecil. This remark also sums up her own personality: "Ricky is the two of us together for all time in too small a space. And we're tearing each other apart, like always, inside that boy and if you don't see it, then you're just blind" (Norman 40). Just like Ricky is torn apart between his parents, she has been torn apart between her own parents for her entire life. The fact that she is still torn between them, even though her father has been dead for almost two decades, shows how much power he used to have over her.

Jessie's unconditional love for her father also becomes apparent in her death because, after trying to double her father in life, she even tries to double her father in death. For example, she wants her mother to wear the same dress that she wore to her father's funeral and she also wants the same pastor to perform the service (Norman 52, Rosefeldt 69f). Jessie's much-debated death at the very end of the play is not a final victory, but a defeat. As Rosefeldt puts it, "[a]lthough her path might seem heroic, it is not. The romantic death is just another illusion" (70). Just like the abandoned sons who fail at finding their fathers far away in the distance, Jessie will not find her father in death.

### **6.1.3 The present mother**

According to Paul Rosefeldt, Jessie not only doubles her father, but also, to a certain extent, doubles her mother. What is more, Jessie's marriage strikingly resembles the marriage of her parents (67). Just like her mother felt that Jessie's father had nothing to say to her, Jessie was never what Cecile "wanted to see" (Norman 41) either. In addition, her father died without saying good-bye to her mother while Cecile left without bidding farewell to Jessie (Rosefeldt 67). In order to hide the fact that her husband did not even care enough about her to say good-bye, Jessie wrote a note to herself and pretended that it had been written by Cecile (Norman 41). In the end, Jessie leaves without saying a proper goodbye to her mother, too. She only whispers "'night, Mother" (Norman 57), before she kills herself. Furthermore, just like Thelma fails in communicating with her daughter, except for their last night together, Jessie fails as a mother for her son who has ended up becoming a criminal (Rosefeldt 67).

In her mother's house, Jessie fulfills several roles and she frequently switches between them. She acts like a child when it comes to her parents' relationship, for example, when she anxiously asks her mother whether she loved her father or not (Norman 31). This seems to be an odd question for a grown-up woman to ask her mother. In addition, Jessie tries to act like a child in order to give her mother some meaning in her life. For example, when she lets her mother make her some cocoa and a caramel apple (Norman 26). However, Jessie refuses to eat and drink what her mum prepares for her. Providing her children with food is one of the basic tasks of a mother; Jessie's refusal to eat her mother's food can be seen as a way of refusing her mother's role and her position of power in her life.

For most of the time, however, it is Jessie who provides her mother with food. The beginning of the play already predetermines the mother-daughter relationship: Thelma appears on stage; she is looking for food. Even though Jessie has not even appeared on stage yet, her mother already gives her orders: "Jessie, it's the last snowball, sugar. Put it on the list, O.K.? And we're out of Hershey bars and where's that peanut brittle?" (Norman 9). Jessie comes on stage to look for towels for her suicide, while her mother is, paradoxically, looking for food (Norman 9). While Jessie is anorexic, Thelma is constantly eating and talking about food. Those opposed activities – dying and eating – turn out to be similar in the Cates family; one could argue that by eating only unhealthy food, Thelma just chooses a different, slower way of killing herself. Brown puts the importance of food in a broader context. According to her, "[h]unger, and the need to appease it, form the play's central metaphor. Both women experience psychic hunger brought about by the helplessness women have historically

experienced as part of a patriarchal culture that offers little hope for personal power” (L. Brown 185).

Jessie’s role as a caretaker for her mother already becomes obvious at the beginning of the play; she even orders sweets for her mother for the time after her death (Norman 10). Jessie also takes care of her mother in several other aspects. She organizes her mother’s entire life after her death. For example, she cancels all newspaper subscriptions except for the one on Sunday (Norman 23). Furthermore, she tries to talk her mother into moving in with Agnes so that she has somebody who takes care of her (Norman 35). In the course of the play, it turns out that Thelma has merely pretended to be helpless so that Jessie feels responsible for her. When Thelma tells Jessie that she does not have to do anything in the household anymore, Jessie says: “I know that. You’ve just been letting me do it so I’ll have something to do, haven’t you?” (Norman 24). This again shows that Jessie’s entire life is an illusion, because nothing has ever been the way it seems.

For Jessie’s entire life, Thelma has been in a position of power because she held back the secret about Jessie’s disease until the very end (Norman 42). In general, it can be said that Thelma wants to have as much control as possible over her daughter’s life. For example, she found a husband for Jessie because she did not think that her daughter would be capable of doing so on her own (Norman 39). In addition, when Jessie reveals her plan of killing herself, Thelma does not take her seriously: “You know what the doctor said about getting excited. You’ll cock the pistol and have a fit” (Norman 16). It can therefore be argued that in Jessie’s case her quest cannot only be reduced to following the father into his world of silence. More importantly, she also wants to finally gain control over her life and her body. Even in Jessie’s characterization at the beginning of the play, Norman stresses that “[i]t is only in the last year that Jessie has gained control of her mind and body” (Norman 4). In a way, Jessie’s disease can be seen as a metaphor for her lack of control for most of her life. Bigsby’s interpretation goes along with that. According to him, Jessie’s fits are a metaphor for “her inability, to date, to affect her life or determine her fate” (*Playwrights* 233). When Thelma talks about the seizures, Jessie’s lack of control becomes even more obvious: “You just... crumple, in a heap, like a puppet and somebody cut the strings all at once” (Norman 43). As a consequence, Jessie’s suicide could, paradoxically, be interpreted as a victory: “She will finally determine the shape of her life by deciding its ultimate parameter” (Bigsby, *Playwrights* 233).



Throughout the play, Thelma tries to find a rational explanation for Jessie's intention to kill herself. She tries to blame her longing for death on Jessie's father: "But I bet you wouldn't be killing yourself if he were still alive. That's a fine thing to figure out, isn't it?" (Norman 34). The question of whose fault her daughter's suicide is keeps reappearing throughout the play. In this context, the fact that Jessie frequently asks her mother to wash her hands for a manicure can be interpreted as a metaphor for trying to get rid of her feelings of guilt (Norman 12, 13, 41, 56). The importance of clean hands keeps re-curring throughout the play. Paradoxically, only minutes before her death, Jessie washes her hands and applies hand lotion (Norman 52). Jessie also warns her mother that the police are going to check her hands for traces of gunpowder after her suicide (Norman 17). Grantley interprets the fact that Jessie wants to give her mother a manicure in a different way. For her, this action, even though it never takes place during the play, can be seen as an image of "care and nurture which reverse[s] the expected mother-daughter relationship" (155).

In the end, there is nothing that clears Thelma from her guilt. On the one hand, Jessie exclaims after telling her mother over and over again that her suicide is not her fault: "Then what if it does! What if it has everything to do with you! What if I could take all the rest of it if only I didn't have you here? What if the only way from you for good is to kill myself? What if it is? I can *still* do it" (Norman 47). On the other hand, Thelma admits that she is guilty the moment her daughter kills herself: "Jessie, Jessie, child...Forgive me. [...] I thought you were mine" (Norman 58). For Bigsby, those words are "the words of a mother whose love requires that she accept what her love would urge her to reject, the severing of a vital cord" (*Playwrights* 240). Bigsby even compares Thelma's letting go at the very end to the process of letting the daughter go when she gets married: "The terror is that the bridegroom to whom she thus relinquishes her daughter is death" (*Playwrights* 240).

However, it is important to note that the suicide cannot only be interpreted as a victory for Jessie; it is most certainly also a sign of despair (Bigsby, *Playwrights* 234). Even though it would be easy to say that the death of her father or the failed relationship with her son are the reasons for killing herself, Bigsby argues that "her reason is at once simpler and more complicated" (*Playwrights* 234): "I'm just not having a very good time and I don't have any reason to think it'll get anything but worse. I'm tired. I'm hurt. I'm sad" (Norman 22).

It is important to bear in mind that both Thelma and Jessie are mothers who fail at fulfilling their roles. Jessie has entirely lost control over her son Ricky, who has become a criminal. Instead of staying with her son, Jessie decided to move back in with her mother. It is interesting that she decided to abandon her role as a mother for her son, just to take up a caring role for her own mother. Instead of protecting her son, Jessie wants her son to get arrested: “I hope they put him away sometime. I’d turn him in, myself, if I knew where he was” (Norman 13). What is more, Thelma initially thinks that Jessie wants to kill Ricky when she looks for the gun, which hints at the bad relationship of mother and son (Norman 12). In the night of her death, Jessie does not even know where her son is, which further shows that she has no connection with her son at all (Norman 55).

Bigsby argues that, paradoxically, the moment Thelma realizes that she has to fight for her daughter to stay alive, she finally finds a purpose in her life: “For once, that mother lays aside the trivia with which she distracts herself, ceases playing the role into which she has fallen, and fights for her daughter’s life with every weapon to hand” (Bigsby, *Playwrights* 235). For example, Thelma tries to talk her daughter out of her suicide, she tries to cheer her up by telling her entertaining stories about her friend Agnes, she begs her to stay, and she tries to shock her by telling her that Cecile has cheated on her (Norman 38). “For a brief while this person [...] finds a purpose in her own life – to save her daughter” (Bigsby, *Playwrights* 235). However, it should be noted that Thelma’s motives for saving her daughter are selfish; she mainly wants her daughter to stay so that she is not alone. According to Grantley, Thelma’s “petulant self-centredness [...] shows clearly through her concern for Jessie, that her own emotional maturation has been stunted” (154).

To sum up the mother-child relationships in the play, both Thelma and Jessie as well as Jessie and Ricky suffer from a general lack of communication. Jessie even admits that she has never before talked to her mother as openly as in the night she kills herself. However, at the same time she knows that they can only be completely open with each other because it is their last conversation (Norman 49). It is also noteworthy that, on the surface level, Thelma constantly talks. However, at the same time, she never really communicates with her daughter, because they often talk about different things. For example, when Thelma wants to know whether Jessie’s intention to kill herself is her fault and she asks “What did I do?” (Norman 18). At the same time, Jessie is busy refilling the candy jars and she replies: “Nothing. Want a caramel?”

(Norman 18). They never seem to reach a level of mutual understanding. Grantley finds a pattern behind these misunderstandings in their communication:

It sometimes works comically and the juxtaposition of the very ordinary with the extraordinary event being proposed is extremely effective in throwing the whole episode into a chilling relief, but it also betrays a sort of hopeless irremediability about the situation because of the limitation of the protagonists. This is tragedy of the ordinary at its best (156).

The fact that the only thing Jessie wants her son to get from her after her death is her watch also stresses the lack of real communication with her son. Instead of leaving him a letter that answers some questions after her suicide, she is only concerned about his financial instead of his psychological well-being (Norman 55). In general, clocks have a strong significance for the play: just like the clocks on stage function as a countdown to Jessie' death, the watch that Jessie wants Thelma to give to her son can also be interpreted as a threatening countdown to his own death. Especially if one considers the importance of inheritance in the play, it is interesting how Jessie only leaves a functional device like a watch for her son: "I appreciate him not stealing it already. I'd like to buy him a good meal" (Norman 56). In the context of inheriting the parents' belongings as well as their characteristics, their sins and their diseases, Hebach offers an interesting interpretation of the end of the play: "[Jessie] hat nur einen Schlusstrich unter ihr eigenes Leben gezogen, nicht aber die Existenz des Hauses beendet, das in ihrem kriminellen Sohn weiter besteht" (209). Ricky's destiny is already decided when Jessie talks about how similar he is to her: "Ricky is as much like me as it's possible for any human to be" (Norman 40). Therefore, it is likely that Ricky inherited her disease and that he is going to make her mistakes all over again; history is just going to repeat itself. There does not seem to be a way out of the situation, which is further emphasized by the end of the final scene of the play: „Die Unmöglichkeit, in dieser Familie zu leben, wird durch die tote, abwesende Jessie versinnbildlicht, während gleichzeitig Thelma die Möglichkeit des Weitermachens symbolisiert" (Hebach 209). Bigsby has a more positive interpretation of the end. According to him, "[i]f the play is about the redemption through suicide of one woman, it is about the survival of another. Both show heroism" (*Playwrights* 235). Brown stresses the fact that in the end, both women overcome the strict rules of patriarchy: Jessie gets what she wants by killing herself and Thelma "finally communicates in a powerful way never before possible. Some mothers live and die without ever communicating with their daughters at such a deep level" (185).

#### 6.1.4 The deconstruction of the American Dream

Several indicators suggest that Marsha Norman tries to depict reality in her play; she wants to make the audience uncomfortable with the fact that Thelma and Jessie are not just two characters on stage, but that they are just like their audience. For example, she stresses in the author's note at the beginning of the play that there should be no indications about "the intelligence or taste" (Norman 7) of the two main characters. Furthermore, the characters on stage should not have "heavy accents, which would further distance the audience from Jessie and Thelma" (Norman 7). To the contrary, Norman wants her main characters to be "very specific real people who happen to live in a particular part of the country" (Norman 7). In order to make the atmosphere on stage even more threatening and realistic, the clocks on stage are always visible and there are no intermissions so that it seems realistic because it unfolds in real time (Norman 6). Bigsby even argues that "'*night, Mother* goes far beyond offering a critique of American society" (*Playwrights* 232). The play is much more about the fundamental questions of "what is our life worth and how may we justify its continuance" (1999, 232). However, because of Norman's obvious attempts to keep the action on stage as realistic as possible, it can be assumed that she is to some extent trying to depict American reality on stage.

Therefore, the deconstruction of all of the dreams of the characters can be interpreted as a hint at the general failure of the American Dream in society. The nuclear family, linked to the American Dream, proves to be dysfunctional in '*night, Mother*. In the end, Thelma is the only family member that is left: "Hatte Thelma die Verkleinerung noch zu verhindern gesucht, indem sie Jessie wieder zurück ins elterliche Heim holte, wohnt sie dort nun nicht nur ohne Mann, sondern auch ohne Kinder, völlig allein" (Hebach 209). While Thelma and her husband at least tried to succeed in raising a traditional family, Jessie's brother Dawson and his wife Loretta do not have any children, and Ricky is a single child (Hebach 209). "So führt das ideologische Konstrukt der Kernfamilie für die Familienmitglieder in eine emotionale und genealogische Sackgasse" (Hebach 209). Jessie fails at founding a family with Cecile. After trying to have a family on her own, she returns to her parents' house; she reverses the crucial step of detachment. According to Hebach, there was never a family of security for Ricky, however, he also failed at finding a family of freedom (209). Therefore, his only way out of his misery was to reject society and become a criminal.

Jessie herself is the personification of the failure of the American Dream, for example, she is denied any chance of attaining success. Epilepsy prevents her from holding a job and forces her to stay at home with her mother (Norman 26). According to Brown and Stevenson, “[Jessie’s] lack of marketable skills, her preference for solitude, and the degraded and meaningless nature of most work in our society prohibit Jessie from using work as a way of making her life meaningful” (194). Furthermore, society excludes her because of her seizures: “I can’t do anything. I’ve never been around people my whole life except when I went to the hospital” (Norman 26). While American society prides itself on their ideal of the “melting pot and its historical mutations from cultural pluralism to multi-ethnicity” (Freese 106), society in Norman’s play does not seem to have sympathy with weak and sick people. At the same time, however, Jessie rejects the idea of the American Dream and its often-quoted pursuit of happiness when she decides to kill herself: “I’m just not having a very good time” (Norman 22). Instead of pursuing “the idea of the continual challenge of respective frontiers” (Freese 106), she decides to end her life. She uses a bus trip as a metaphor for her suicide: “Well, I can get off right now if I want to, because even if I ride 50 more years and get off then, it’s the same place when I step down to it” (Norman 24). However, Thelma, keeps on believing in the American Dream, because she keeps thinking that her daughter will manage to become successful one day. Therefore, she keeps encouraging her to try again, for example when she tells her to find a job (Hebach 191, Norman 25). Hebach considers the American ideal of being successful as problematic for Jessie: the society Jessie lives in cannot deal with defeats, therefore Jessie fails to accept her failed marriage as a temporary setback in her life with a chance for recovery. There is no way back for her in the restrictive society she lives in (201).

### **6.1.5 Filling the void of the father**

Nischik mentions the significance of gender stereotypes in *‘night, Mother*: “Das Rollenvorbild, das Dawson in seinem sich zurückziehenden Vater hat, trägt zu seiner frühzeitigen Ablösung von der Familie bei, während Jessie das negative Selbstbild, das ihre Mutter von sich hat und an Jessie weitergibt, für sich übernimmt“ (72). Besides Jessie, who obviously fulfills a caring role for her mother, Jessie’s brother Dawson also serves as a replacement for the absent father: “Dawson scheint in der Familie Cates eine zentrale Stellung einzunehmen, unterschwellig stets präsent zu sein” (Nischik 70). It is interesting how both male members of the family are absent, however, they are constantly present in the women’s conversations. For example, Thelma mentions her son as soon as she enters the stage; she accuses him of having stolen her sweets (Norman 9). Unlike Jessie and Thelma, Thelma and

her son at least share one common interest: eating sweets. Dawson also seems to be an authority for Thelma, for example, when Jessie announces that she is going to commit suicide, Thelma immediately wants to contact Dawson: “Well, I’m calling Dawson right now. We’ll just see what he has to say about this little stunt” (Norman 15). It almost seems like Thelma tries to intimidate her daughter by mentioning Dawson. He is also mentioned on several other points of the play, for example when Jessie reveals that it was him who got her the bullets for her father’s gun (Norman 15). The fact that Jessie was not even able to get the bullets for her suicide by herself hints at her subordinate position in society: “I asked Dawson if he thought they’d send me some bullets and he said he’s just call for me, because he *knew* they’d send them if he told them to” (Norman 15). This stresses the power and the prestige he has in their community.

According to Nischik, Thelma follows a certain strategy when she talks about Dawson: “Die Tochter wird in bezug auf den Bruder in die gleiche unselbstständige, subalterne Position zu drängen versucht, die auch die Mutter selber ihm gegenüber eingenommen hat” (70). According to Marsha Norman, it is not only the subordinate self-image that Thelma has, but the negative image Thelma has of women in general that influences her behavior towards her daughter (DiGaetani 249). Thelma tries to pass her problems on to her son so that she does not have to deal with them. “Jessie hat dies durchschaut und weist diese Position wie überhaupt die unreflektiert auf familiäre Bindungen verweisende Argumentationsweise von sich” (Nischik 70). At the same time, Jessie accepts that her mother needs her son to hold on to after she has killed herself. Therefore, she orders her mother’s groceries in Dawson’s name and she tells her to call Dawson when the lights in their house go out (Norman 23). Most strikingly, she orders Thelma to call Dawson after her suicide (Norman 57). It almost seems like she expects him to take over her role after she is gone.

To sum it up, one could argue that in *‘night, Mother* both kinds of family that Kallenberg-Schröder introduced fail; the family of security dissolves because of Jessie’s and her dad’s death and because of Dawson’s absence, while the family of freedom that Jessie attempts to create fails because both her husband and her son abandon Jessie. Norman’s play shows the dysfunctionality of both family types within one family. This failure could be seen in a broader context: there is no security in their society, but there is also no individual freedom. Rosefeldt and Norman seem to agree in the differences of dealing with problems in life between men and women. While, as mentioned before, Rosefeldt says that abandoned

daughters follow their fathers in a different way to abandoned sons, Norman states something similar: “We are a different tribe, we have different values than men. We solve problems in different ways, and we even disagree with men about what constitutes a problem, or a solution” (DiGaetani 249).

## **6.2 Beth Henley: *Crimes of the Heart***

*Crimes of the Heart*, which premiered in 1979, has many similarities with *‘night, Mother*: “Both [...] started at the Actors’ Theatre in Louisville, played Off-Broadway, won a Pulitzer Prize, and had successful Broadway runs. Both plays made instant successes out of women playwrights and sparked heated debates among feminist critics” (Rosefeldt 75). Furthermore, in both plays the main characters are women who “have led troubled lives and are seeking desperate solutions to their problems” (Rosefeldt 75). Because of these similarities, it is rewarding to investigate especially the role that the absent fathers play in both plays to see whether they have the same significance for their daughters. On the surface level, *Crimes of the Heart* is a comedy. In this context, Bigsby stresses Henley’s unique talent to deal with a lot of “pain and desperation through humour” (1945 - 1990 319). Paul Rosefeldt argues that “behind the play is a psychological pattern that links the drama to the absent father” (75).

The play is about three sisters who have become alienated from each other. Meg moved to Los Angeles to pursue a career as a singer; Babe got married; Lenny stayed at home to take care of their grandfather. However, it turns out that they all failed: Meg cannot sing anymore and she now works for a dog-food company, Babe has an affair with a 15-year old black boy and ends up attempting to kill her husband, and Lenny suffers from complexes because she is infertile. At the beginning of the play, they are reunited in their grandfather’s house because of the crime that Babe has committed. When asked about the reasons for her attempted murder, she merely replies “I just didn’t like his stinking looks” (Henley 14).

Their unconventional way of expressing their feelings is also pointed out by Charles Isherwood from *The New York Times*. He refers to the three sisters as “these adorable eccentrics, laughing through their tears and crying themselves back to laughter again” (Isherwood); raging hysteria and heartbreaking sadness are indeed closely related emotions in *Crimes of the Heart*. Brantley, too, comments on the memorable scene in which Lenny and

Babe find out about their grandfather's stroke and cannot stop laughing hysterically (Henley 84): "Surely you've been there, to that point where life has sprung so many horrors that you're punch drunk" (*The Good News*).

Possibly because of these horrors, eating and drinking play an important role in *Crimes of the Heart* (Rosefeldt 79). Whenever Babe feels uneasy with herself she starts making lemonade, for example, when the sisters talk about their father (Henley 26). Most strikingly, she recollects that after she tried to kill Zackery, she went to the kitchen to make lemonade instead of calling the ambulance (Henley 48). The first reaction after Meg and Babe realize that they forgot about Lenny's birthday is that they decide to order her a cake: "Let's get her a big cake. A huge one!" (Henley 32). Furthermore, the sisters recollect that on the day of their mother's funeral, their grandfather took them out for breakfast and let them eat as many banana splits as they wanted: "I think I ate about five! He kept shoving them down us" (Henley 61). Even though this is supposed to be a funny story, the usage of the forceful word "shove" illustrates the power and the dominance of the grandfather. In this scene, Meg sums up the relationship with their grandfather: "The thing about Old Granddaddy is, he keeps trying to make us happy, and we end up getting stomachaches and turn green and throwing up in the flower arrangements" (Henley 62). Even though she is obviously talking about the incident with the banana splits, this can be seen as a metaphor for their relationship in general: their grandfather wants them to be happy but he does not give them what they really need and thereby makes them sick.

### **6.2.1 The absent father(s)**

There are several father figures in the play. Interestingly, all of them are absent. Bigsby stresses the significance that men in general have for the women in the play: "[...] there is a suggestion that male insensitivity has driven more than one of them to the verge of self-destruction" (*1945 - 1990* 320). Bigsby stresses that men only play a minor role in Henley's play, however, Rosefeldt emphasizes their significance for the course of the play (Rosefeldt 76). First, there is their physical father. He has abandoned the family and the daughters have no high opinion of him: "God, he was a bastard. Really, with his white teeth. Daddy was such a bastard" (Henley 26). Babe even says that if he had not left the family, their mother would not have killed herself (Henley 26). The sisters do not seem to know where their father is. Due to their father's absence, the family moved to Hazlehurst to live with their grandfather.



“Old Granddaddy” (Henley 29) obviously serves as a replacement for their father, however, he is absent throughout the play because he is dying in hospital. Rosefeldt argues that “[m]uch of the play’s action is surrounded around the absent patriarch” (76). It is certainly true that their grandfather is a very dominant figure in their lives: Meg only became a singer because her grandfather told her that she had a nice voice; Lenny broke up with the only boyfriend she ever had after he met her grandfather; and Babe married her husband because her grandfather thought he was the best choice (Henley 20, 67, 18). When Babe and Meg talk about Lenny’s infertility and her shyness with men, Meg gets angry about their grandfather’s influence on Lenny’s life: “Old Granddaddy’s the one who’s made her feel self-conscious about it. It’s his fault. The old fool” (Henley 29). In this context, Rosefeldt draws attention to the role of their physical father: “[...] he is also responsible for leaving them stranded in the house of Old Granddaddy, who has a disastrous effect in shaping their lives” (76).

Especially Lenny is entirely focused on taking care of her grandfather and therefore has no opportunity to meet men. A strong indicator of the dominance of the grandfather is that, only when he has to go to the hospital, Lenny sends pictures to a lonely-hearts club because she feels ready to meet somebody (Henley 30f). She ends up meeting a promising man, however, after he meets her grandfather, they split up. As Babe recollects, “she said it was on account of her missing ovary. That Charlie didn’t want to marry her on account of it” (Henley 31). It seems that her grandfather uses Lenny as a partner replacement for the dead grandmother; in order to have her entirely for himself, he constantly makes her feel self-conscious about her infertility. The fact that Lenny replaces her grandmother is also illustrated when Babe tells Meg that Lenny started wearing her grandmother’s old hat and garden gloves: “She’s turning into Old Grandmama” (Henley 28).

Even though the grandfather is absent, his dominance is apparent throughout the play; his slow dying “sets a deathwatch atmosphere against which the actions of the drama are played” (Rosefeldt 76). According to Rosefeldt, the death of the main father figure in their lives is reflected in other parts of the play; “illness is pervasive” (77). For example, Lenny talks about how old she is getting: “I’m thirty years old today and my face is getting all pinched up and my hair is falling out in the comb” (Henley 16). Chick tells Lenny about Mrs. Porter’s tumor in the bladder (Henley 6). Furthermore, Doc informs Lenny at the beginning of the play that her horse Billy Boy has been struck by lightning and died (Henley 11). Lenny’s infertility could also be interpreted in this context; instead of passing on her knowledge and experience

to a younger generation, she is doomed to take care of her dying grandfather instead. The authority that the grandfather still has for the sisters is also illustrated by Meg's lying to him when she visits him in hospital. She lies to him about her success with singing and she does not tell him that she is not even working in show business anymore:

I couldn't help it... these stories just came pouring out of my mouth! When I saw how tired and sick Old Granddaddy's gotten – they just flew out! All I wanted was to see him smiling and happy. I just wasn't going to sit there and look at him all miserable and sick and sad! (Henley 58).

This remark that she makes right after her visit to the hospital illustrates that all the sisters were taught to do was to make their grandfather happy; the sisters despise their grandfather for it. Lenny later admits that when she blew out the candles on her birthday cookie in the first scene she was wishing for her grandfather to die (Henley 80). Meg says that whenever she lies to her grandfather she feels horrible afterwards: "And then I have to go and do at least three or four things that I know he'd despise just to get even with that miserable, old, bossy man" (Henley 59).

The dominance of the grandfather is also apparent in the relationships between the sisters. As Lenny recollects about Babe, "[s]he was always the prettiest and most perfect of the three of us. Old Granddaddy used to call her his Dancing Sugar Plum" (Henley 18). This already suggests jealousy between the sisters about their grandfather's affection. This jealousy becomes even more obvious when Lenny gets angry about Meg's lies about her career:

Why, Meg's always run wild – she started smoking and drinking when she was fourteen years old; she never made good grades – never made her own bed! But somehow she always seemed to get what she wanted. She's the one who got singing and dancing lessons, and a store-bought dress to wear to her senior prom. Why, do you remember how Meg always got to wear twelve jingle bells on her petticoats, while we were only allowed to wear three apiece? Why?! (Henley 55).

The significance of father figures in *Crimes of the Heart* is stressed at several other points. Megan's ex-boyfriend is back in the city because his father died (Henley 20, Rosefeldt 76). In addition, Barnette Lloyd, Babe's lawyer, wants to destroy her husband, because he ruined his father (Henley 35, Rosefeldt 76). According to Rosefeldt, "Barnette is interjected into the plot to revenge the wounding of an absent father" (76). In the end, it turns out that Charlie Hill wants to be with Lenny even though she cannot give him children (Henley 98). This could be interpreted as Charlie's decision to entirely renounce fatherhood (Rosefeldt 76). According to

Rosefeldt, all these absent fathers prove that “*Crimes of the Heart* is inscribed within the world of the absent father” (76).

Even though Zackary, Babe’s husband, is not a father figure, Babe’s attempt of killing him is also significant in this context because her grandfather chose her husband: “He remarked how Babe was gonna skyrocket right to the heights of Hazlehurst society. And how Zackery was just the right man for her whether she knew it or not” (Henley 18). One could argue that the dominant grandfather passed her on to another dominant man in her life. In the course of the play, it turns out that Zackery was a violent and abusive husband (Henley 37f). Therefore, killing him can be seen as an attempt to get rid of the dominance of men in her life. Meg cannot hide her surprise when she finds out what Babe has done: “So, Babe shot Zackary Botrelle, the richest and most powerful man in all of Hazlehurst, slap in the gut. It’s hard to believe” (Henley 18).

### **6.2.2 The absent mother**

In *Crimes of the Heart*, the absent mother seems to be of greater importance to the daughters than their absent father. Of course, this can be attributed to the reasons for their absence: while their father just left, their mother killed herself. As elaborated in the theoretical part of this thesis, the reasons for the father’s absence often define the way how children cope with it. Therefore, it can be assumed that the reasons for the mother’s absence are as important (Rauchfleisch 165). As mentioned before, Bigsby blames the father for having left his daughters under the disastrous influence of their grandfather, however, at the same time it can be argued that their mother’s death also further contributed to their grandfather’s growing influence on their lives. Bigsby stresses that their mother’s grotesque suicide has “left them with psychological wounds, but it has also left them with a determination to survive” (1945 - 1990 321). When analyzing the play, however, this does not seem to be entirely true: Babe tries to double her mother by committing suicide at several points of the play. First, she recollects that instead of killing her husband she actually wanted to kill herself:

I went right to up to the davenport and opened the drawer where we keep the burglar gun... I took it out. Then I – I brought it up to my ear. Why, I was gonna shoot off my own head! [...] Then I heard the back door slamming and suddenly, for some reason, I thought about Mama... how she’d hung herself. And here I was about ready to shoot myself. Then I realized – that’s right, I realized how I didn’t want to kill myself! And she- she probably didn’t want to kill herself. She wanted

to kill him, and I wanted to kill him, too. I wanted to kill Zackery, not myself.  
'Cause I – I wanted to live! (Henley 41).

However, her willingness to live does not keep her from another suicide attempt: When her husband threatens to have her sent to a mental asylum, Babe again considers killing herself (Henley 96ff). Due to the role model of her mother, killing herself seems to be an easy solution as soon as she faces problems. Interestingly, Babe first attempts to commit suicide by hanging herself; she imitates her mother even by choosing the same method of killing herself. Unlike her mother, however, Babe fails at killing herself. Just like Meg had to find her mother's corpse after her suicide, she now finds Babe before she dies. In a way, the fact that she can actually rescue her sister, while it was too late for her mother, shows that history does not necessarily repeat itself. According to Andreach, Babe and Meg are haunted by the fear of having inherited their mother's mental problems (12). It is interesting how, unlike other abandoned sons and daughters, the McGrath sisters are scared of actually following their parents on their self-destructive paths.

The "psychological wounds" (Biggsby, *Playwrights* 321) of Meg become apparent in recollections of Babe and Lenny. Meg was the one who found their mother after her suicide and she became obsessed with looking at appalling pictures in order to cope with it:

[...] she'd force herself to look at the poster of crippled children stuck up in the window at Dixieland Drugs. You know, that one where they want you to give a dime. Meg would stand there and stare at their eyes and look at the braces on their little crippled-up legs – then she'd purposely go and spend her dime on a double-scoop ice cream cone and eat it all down. She'd say to me, 'See, I can stand it. I can stand it. Just look how I'm gonna be able to stand it' (Henley 56).

After her mother's suicide, Meg was afraid of being considered a weak person. Therefore, she forced herself to be strong. The fact that Meg's career as a singer failed and that she had a mental breakdown a few months ago hints at the fact that she never really learned to cope with her traumatic experiences (Henley 71f).

### **6.2.3 The American Dream**

Meg and Babe especially prove that the American Dream is not attainable for everyone and that certain people are forever excluded from it. Meg left her smalltown life behind in order to become a famous singer in Hollywood. Hollywood, the manufacturer of dreams, first

welcomed her warmly, but then ended up using and rejecting her. Instead of singing, she now works in a shop selling dog food; instead of starring in a multi-million dollar production, she spent her Christmas in a mental ward because of a nervous breakdown (Henley 72).

Just like Meg does not find fulfillment in chasing her dream, Babe does not find fulfillment in marriage. Her family of security fails. Her husband, even though successful and wealthy, does not turn out to be the man she – and especially her grandfather – had been hoping for. The fact that their grandfather chose Zackary for Babe for economic reasons shows that wealth and success are more important in their society than love. The result of the “arranged marriage” can be seen as a critique on this success-oriented American way of thinking: Zackary did not turn out to be a noble gentleman, but a bully who frequently abused his wife (Henley 37f). The fact that in his prestigious job as a lawyer he is supposed to defend and help people who need his help makes his behavior behind closed doors even more appalling.

Babe’s affair with a 15-year old black boy is not only a scandal because of his age, but also because of his skin color. When she recollects the day that her husband came home and beat Willie Jay up, she also remembers the racism and the hatred that her husband expressed towards Willie Jay. Even when she tells her sister about it, Meg is surprised that she would start an affair with a black man instead of wondering what made Babe start an affair in the first place: “I’m amazed Babe. I’m really completely amazed. I didn’t even know you were a liberal” (Henley 40). Babe’s love affair can be seen as a way of deconstructing the American ideal of the melting pot, because it is only considered an ideal as long as the different ethnicities do not mix up in their private lives.

The critique of the failure of American society as a melting pot goes even further. Meg finds it amusing that her ex-boyfriend Doc is married to “some Yankee woman who made clay pots” (Henley 20). When she finds out that the couple has two kids she says: “God. Then his kids must be half Yankee. [...] That really gets me. I don’t know why, but somehow that really gets me” (Henley 21). This shows that there is not only no melting pot, but also no unity and solidarity between the North and the South of the country.

The failures of the sisters’ dreams have been predetermined, because they did not follow their own dreams, but their grandfather’s dream. Just like the abandoned sons in Rosefeldt’s analysis, who failed because they follow their fathers’ path, the daughters fail because they also did not follow their own paths. The sisters even realize that when Lenny says that their

grandfather always wanted the best for them and Meg replies: “Well, I guess it was; but sometimes I wonder what we wanted” (Henley 59). In the end, however, they are freed from the burden of their grandfather’s high expectations; at the end of the second act he has a stroke and is definitely going to die (Henley 75).

Andreach makes an observation that is interesting in the context of the American Dream:

[e]ach of the three Magrath sisters violates cultural norms: Lenny by driving their socially conditioned cousin , Chick, from the house and by taking the initiative with a man, Meg by rebelling from her teenage years onward and by going for a moonlit ride with a married man, and Babe by having an affair with a black youth and by shooting her husband (9).

This observation shows that the MaGrath sisters do not even want to act according to society’s expectations. This discrepancy between the outside world and the inner self is an recurring theme in Henley’s plays that were written during the 1980s (Andreach 10). In a way, the sisters are rewarded for their attitude at the end of the play because they end up finding themselves: “Lenny discovers that she is a person of worth who can have a loving relationship with a man; Meg, that she can care about someone; and Babe, that she is not insane and in danger of being put away – that she is therefore not alone” (Andreach 10). Therefore, the end of the play is a hopeful and optimistic one. The sisters have locked their cousin Chick, who can be considered a metaphor for a restrictive society, out of their house and, accordingly, their lives. Chick is an extremely judgemental character, for example, she calls Meg “Christmas trash” (Henley 5) and is only worried about her own reputation when Babe gets arrested (Henley 5).

The end of the play seems surreal; the stage directions indicate that the lights should “frame them in a magical, golden, sparkling glimmer” (Henley 105). According to Andreach, these final moments of the play can be interpreted as follows: “[t]he intentionally marginalized can reconcile the pressures from within and without the self so long as there are others with whom to share magical moments” (10). After many years of physical and psychological separation, the MaGrath sisters manage to establish a family of freedom; they choose to live without any replacement for their absent parents. This becomes obvious in their lack of grief for their dying grandfather. Instead of crying for him, they laugh hysterically (Henley 84ff).

Using Rosefeldt’s terminology, one could say that the sisters choose to follow neither the path of their mother nor the path of either father figure, but choose to walk their own path together.

This interpretation is strengthened by Lenny's vision when she makes her birthday wish in the final scene: "I don't know exactly. It was something about the three of us smiling and laughing together. [...] Just this one moment and we were all laughing" (Henley 104). This vision stresses the importance of her two sisters in Lenny's life.

The ending of the play is an optimistic one. Even though their traditional family of security has failed – their mother and their grandparents are dead, their father is absent – they have a new family concept. What is more, their 3-person family is going to have an additional member, because Lenny also calls her boyfriend at the end of the play, which shows that she is no longer under the influence of her grandfather. It is also significant that the play takes place on Lenny's birthday; a person's birthday marks the start of a new year, therefore, the fact that it is Lenny's birthday already hints at a possible future change for her. However, for most of the play everybody seems to forget about her birthday, which could hint at the fact that until the end of the play the sisters do not think that change is really possible. They end up celebrating Lenny's birthday with delay.

### **6.3 Four daughters – two endings**

Even though Rosefeldt stresses the similarities between *'night, Mother* and *Crimes of the Heart*, there are also a lot of differences between the plays (75). While in *'night, Mother*, Jessie is trapped in the world of her dead father, the MaGrath sisters in *Crimes of the Heart* are reunited at the beginning of the play in their grandfather's house. The differences between them are that there seems to be no escape for Jessie but death, whereas the MaGrath sisters actively choose to come back to their grandfather's house to support Babe. The grandfather's house seems more like an escape than a prison for Meg and Babe: Meg's career in L.A. has failed and Babe returns home from a disastrous marriage and prison. Lenny, however, has been forced to take care of her grandfather; there is certainly a sense of entrapment for her.

Even though he died 15 years ago, Jessie's father still has a tremendous influence on her life. His influence becomes obvious through her interaction with her mother, when the mother still tries to get her to side with her. Therefore, it would be likely for the dying grandfather in *Crimes of the Heart* to keep having influence on his granddaughters' lives even after his death. However, towards the end of the play, it becomes obvious that his influence is diminishing. Lenny gets the courage to call Charlie and tell him about her infertility and she even wishes for her grandfather to die when she blows out the candles on her birthday cookie

(Henley 81). A reason for “Old Granddaddy’s” decreasing power could be that the sisters discover female solidarity between them. Meg and Babe encourage Lenny to call Charlie, and Meg saves Babe from killing herself. There is no solidarity in Jessie’s life. She has been abandoned by her son and her husband while her mother is unable to help her find a meaning in her life even though in their last night together they find a way to communicate with each other. One could argue that the women in both plays are longing for solidarity. This need for solidarity even becomes obvious with the suicide of the mother in Henley’s play. Babe realizes that the reason their mother killed their cat, too, was that “she was afraid of dying all alone” (Henley 100). While the MaGrath sisters find consolation with each other, Jessie chooses loneliness as seen when she closes the door of her room behind her at the end of the play.

A reason for the importance of female solidarity is that the women in both plays live in a male-dominated world. Thelma wants to call Dawson as soon as Jessie announces her suicide; due to a lack of a father, Jessie’s brother has taken over the role of an authority for Thelma and Jessie. In *Crimes of the Heart*, the grandfather makes the important decisions for the sisters, for example, he talks Babe into marrying an abusive bully. Both plays offer suicide as a possible escape from this patriarchal world. Jessie in *‘night, Mother* chooses this way of escaping. She makes her decision seem logical while the fact that she organizes her mother’s entire life after her death shows that she is fully capable of making decisions. The MaGrath sisters, on the other hand, see suicide as part of their family history. In their opinion, their mother killed herself, because she had a “bad day” (Henley 26). Babe realizes when she is about to shoot herself that it is actually her husband that she wants to shoot and that her mother was once in the same situation (Henley 41). She breaks the vicious circle and shoots him instead of killing herself. It is interesting how both Jessie and Babe think about suicide, which means that they first want to direct their anger towards themselves instead of somebody else.

The nuclear families in both plays fail. Thelma’s secret about Jessie and her father’s epilepsy make it impossible for the family to openly communicate. All men have left the family. In the end, only Thelma remains. In Henley’s play, both parents are absent and the grandfather has taken over the patriarch’s role. However, his influence has contributed to the failure of his granddaughters. Lenny, Meg and Babe end up reuniting in the final scene, which hints at the possibility of founding a family of freedom. The fact that, unlike other abandoned sons and



daughters, the MaGrath sisters have this choice of finding a new family form already becomes apparent with the setting of the play: the stage instructions stress that there are “four different entrances and exits to the kitchen” (Henley I). These numerous exits and entrances might be a metaphor for the numerous choices they have in their lives. In contrast, in *‘night, Mother* the only visible door is the one to Jessie’s room; and it becomes more and more threatening the further the play develops.

Jessie was focused on her deceased father and since, unlike her mother, she rejected her brother as a possible replacement for her missing father, she never managed to find a replacement for her father. The MaGrath sisters moved in with their grandfather after their father’s departure, which made it easy for their grandfather to replace their father. However, their grandfather was not a good influence on their lives. Just like most men of the play, he wanted to dominate the sisters’ lives and make decisions for them. Babe’s husband was even physically violent, and Lenny’s trust in men is so shattered that she does not even bother telling Charlie about her infertility, as she expects him to leave her because of it.

It is interesting that food plays a significant role in both plays and that this significance goes hand in hand with the absence or the failure of the mother: Jessie orders sweets for her mother for after her death and Thelma prepares food for her daughter; Jessie, however, rejects it. Just how *‘night, Mother* starts with Thelma looking for food in the kitchen, *Crimes of the Heart* starts with Lenny looking for food, too. Both women are alone, looking for sweets to comfort themselves. According to Brown, “certain female characters use their relationships to food to symbolize the gnawing psychic hunger each experiences” (L. Brown 177). The fact that the action of *‘night, Mother* starts in the kitchen, and *Crimes of the Heart* takes place entirely in the kitchen also plays a crucial role in the context of food:

The kitchen, usually smaller than the other rooms in the house, functions as a womb – a warm and safe place. Memory conjures up images of mother fixing breakfast for us before we trudge off to school and taking cookies from the oven upon return (L. Brown 186).

Of course, this traditional meaning of the kitchen as a setting clashes with the dysfunctional family structures in both plays that prevent the daughters from having these memories.

Linda Ginter Brown interprets the hunger of the main characters of *‘night, Mother* as a metaphor for different types of hunger. According to her, “Jessie hungers for understanding,

but more importantly, control” (187). Using the same terminology, one could argue that the sisters in Henley’s play hunger for solidarity as opposed to the loneliness they all suffer from in their everyday lives.

Stuffing somebody with food is also a way of asserting one’s power in both plays: Jessie refuses to eat Thelma’s food and the MaGrath sisters eat so many banana splits from their grandfather that they end up getting sick (Norman 31, Henley 61f). Rosefeldt interprets the ending of the play, when the sisters eat a birthday cake together, in a critical way: “[t]he MaGrath sisters are condemned to repeat Old Granddaddy’s eating ritual” (82). Furthermore, the play ends “on a nostalgic longing for a childhood world and vague, uncertain hopes for the future” (Rosefeldt 82). Both of these observations are questionable because there is also a more optimistic interpretation of the final scene: traditionally, a birthday marks the start of a new year. Therefore, the celebration of Lenny’s birthday in the end can be seen as a celebration of a new start for the sisters. In this context, it is also more than questionable whether it is true that the daughters in both *‘night, Mother* and *Crimes of the Heart* are “haunted by an absent father [...]. They have all trapped their daughters in a world of illusion.” (82). This interpretation is certainly true for Norman’s play, because Jessie consciously decides to join her father in death. However, Henley’s main characters free themselves from their entrapment. The MaGrath sisters have a choice in their lives. They do not have to follow either their father’s or their mother’s path because they have each other. Babe even says so: “And I’m not like Mama. I’m not so all alone” (Henley 102).

Due to the fact that both families are dysfunctional, it is difficult to attribute certain characteristics of the daughters to the absence of the father. However, it is striking that several of the abandoned daughters in the plays share a strong need for privacy. Jessie gets upset about her mother’s plan of getting her brother involved, because she wants this to stay between the two of them. Furthermore, Jessie also complains about the fact that Dawson calls her Jessie, because that implies that he actually knows her (Norman 19). Lenny, too, wants to keep her failed love affair for herself and gets upset when she finds out that Babe has told Meg about it (Henley 66ff). It could therefore be assumed that the abandoned daughters have problems with trusting people, even members of the family, because they have once been abandoned by somebody they trusted. This lack of trust in other people ties in well with the consequences of absent fathers that have been discussed in the theoretical part (Amato and Dorius 185).

All three father figures in the plays remain nameless: Jessie's father, Meg's, Lenny's and Babe's father and their grandfather. This could hint at the fact that the father figures are only symbols for a patriarchal society.

## 7. Conclusion

The answer to the main research question of this thesis – namely in how far the absent fathers influence the outcome of the six plays – is simple. The influence of absent fathers on their children's life is significant in all of the plays; all plays prove that a father cannot easily be replaced and that the abandoned children are tempted to follow the father into either some adventurous life or death.

In the first chapter of the analysis, the two abandoned sons in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Bordertown Café* were analyzed. Their fathers escaped into some mysterious, distant place and left their sons longing for adventure and facing the family's economic problems after their fathers' departure. It could be assumed that in the second chapter of the analysis the two pairs of brothers provide each other with support to deal with those problems as a team. Paradoxically, however, the opposite is true: the two sets of sons in *Topdog/Underdog* and *True West* continuously drive each other closer to destruction until, at the end of the plays, the tension reaches its climax with physical violence or death.

Unlike the other plays that were analyzed in this thesis, *'night, Mother* and *Crimes of the Heart* have female main characters. Both Jessie's actions in *'night, Mother* as well as the MaGrath sisters' actions in *Crimes of the Heart* differ to a great extent from the actions of the abandoned sons. Instead of directing her frustration towards her family, Jessie directs it entirely towards herself and therefore makes the decision to commit suicide. While Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* leaves his family in order to find his father, she can only find her father in death. Her illness as well as her clinging mother and a patriarchal society prevent Jessie from going out and finding adventure by herself. Jimmy in *Bordertown Café* becomes the master of his own fate when his grandfather makes him realize that he has a choice in his life and he does not have to waste his time waiting for his father. Similarly, Jessie is also aware of the fact that she has a choice. However, unlike Jimmy, she opts for an escape from the fatherless world she lives in instead of finding a replacement for their failed family of security. It is interesting that the second play that deals with abandoned daughters, *Crimes of the Heart* by Beth Henley, offers its protagonists a similar escape by committing suicide. It has been discussed in the theoretical part of this thesis that parents are a crucial role model for their children. Considering the fact that the mother of the MaGrath sisters committed suicide, it is not surprising that Babe immediately considers doing the same when she faces problems. In the end, unlike the brothers in *Topdog/Underdog* and *True West*, the sisters in *Crimes of*

*the Heart* have a positive influence on each other; their female solidarity helps them overcome their family history as well as their grandfather's destructive influence on their lives. While their traditional family of security has dissolved with the death of their mother and the abandonment by their father, they manage to form a new form of family that appears to be stronger than the one they had before.

One could argue, however, that the three sisters in Henley's play have no other option than forming a close-knit community. The male-dominated world they live in is hostile towards them; their only option is to be there for each other. In most of the other plays, society is hostile and scary, too, which adds to the sense of loss and abandonment that the main characters experience. In *Topdog/Underdog*, the racist society forces Lincoln to whiteface and the exclusion of the brothers from any participation in society adds to the claustrophobic atmosphere on stage. In *True West*, both brothers start undermining society by breaking into people's houses and stealing their electronic devices in the course of the play. Lee and Austin are desperately looking for something authentic, because society has become artificial and fake to them. In *Bordertown Café*, the tensions between two countries do not even stop within the family; even the family itself is divided. The Wingfield family in *The Glass Menagerie* is isolated from the rest of the world; their attempt of connecting with the outside world by inviting a gentleman caller into their home fails terribly and the fact that the gentleman caller breaks one of Laura's glass animals hints at the fact that the family will never recover from the incident.

One of the main hypotheses by Paul Rosefeldt is that the abandoned father symbolizes the absence of God. According to him, the absent father in *The Glass Menagerie*, for example, is "a seductive illusion, a mythical and almost transcendent image in a world that had lost its faith in transcendence" (39). It is certainly true that the search and the longing for the father and his world have an almost religious connotation for many of the abandoned children. Just like a God-like figure, the photograph of the omniscient father watches over the Wingfield family in *The Glass Menagerie*. This God-like presence of an absent character can also be found in *True West*. The father appears to be the only authentic person in the play, and his sons search for authenticity in their everyday lives because they cannot get through to him. The grandfather in *Crimes of the Heart* is also a God-like figure who exerts a lot of power over his granddaughters. It is not until he dies that the McGrath sisters can rid themselves from his influence and start to live a life on their own.

Considering the religious connotations that many of the absent fathers have, it is also of great importance to take a look at the inheritance that their children receive from them. In *The Glass Menagerie*, Laura Wingfield still plays her father's old music. As a goodbye-gift, Lincoln receives 500 Dollars from his father, but he spends them immediately. What is more, Lincoln also burns the clothes that his father leaves them in order to get rid of the memories of his father. Jessie wants to kill herself with her father's gun; this shows the significance that personal belongings have for abandoned children.

However, inheritance is about much more than just inherited personal belongings; many of the abandoned children have inherited character traits from their fathers. In addition, they often consciously or unconsciously mirror their fathers. Lee from *True West*, Lincoln and Booth from *Topdog/Underdog* and Tom from *The Glass Menagerie* resemble their fathers, for example, in their drinking habits. It is noteworthy that, in those plays where the mothers are present, they are terrified of their children becoming like their fathers: Amanda Wingfield is worried about her son becoming an alcoholic just like his father; Marlene in *Bordertown Café* blames her husband for every negative character trait of her son; Thelma initially tries to put the blame for Jessie's suicide on her deceased husband. In *True West*, however, even though the mother is present for some of the play, she does not show any emotional reaction to her sons' obvious similarities to their father.

The abandoned children have not only inherited some personal belongings and character traits from their fathers; some of the plays also deal with inherited diseases. Most obviously, Marsha Norman's play deals with the dark family secret of the Cates family. Jessie only finds out that her father suffered from epilepsy, too, the night she dies. According to Tucker, there is also the motif of inherited diseases in *True West*, because both brothers have inherited their father's seductive "dream", which lures them out to the desert (139). Using the same terminology, one could argue that Lincoln and Booth, too, are infected with an inherited disease: just like their parents, they are planning on abandoning their children at an early age and just like them, they see no value in families. Furthermore, Booth is especially unable to act according to society's expectations, and he has become a criminal. *Crimes of the Heart* also has a similar motif: their mother committed suicide, therefore her daughters inherited the idea of escaping by suicide from her.

As far as character traits are concerned, the abandoned sons have a lot in common. Due to a total lack of positive male role models, the protagonists of *Topdog/Underdog*, *True West* and *The Glass Menagerie* have a completely distorted image of masculinity. The brothers in Shepard's and Parks' plays have a stereotypically masculine way of talking, and Tom Wingfield secretly admires his father for leaving the family. A character trait that all abandoned children have in common is their lack of trust in other people. Lincoln and Booth as well as Austin and Lee even fail to trust each another and both sets of brothers betray each another. Lenny from *Crimes of the Heart* as well as Jessie from *'night, Mother* do not want to share secrets with their closest family.

While the abandoned children do not trust anybody, they simultaneously believe unquestioningly in their own unrealistic illusions. Tom from *The Glass Menagerie* equates his father's life with adventure; Jimmy from *Bordertown Café* believes that his father can offer him a luxurious lifestyle, even though he is only a truck driver; Booth from *Topdog/Underdog* presumably makes up the entire relationship with his girlfriend.

Every single play can be seen as a critique of the ideal of the American Dream. It has been mentioned in the theoretical part of this thesis that Tennessee Williams was among the first playwrights to deconstruct the notion of the American Dream (Saddik 41). In her analysis of *'night, Mother*, Hebach also mentions the American Dream; she makes an observation that is valid for all of the other plays in this thesis. According to her, it is crucial for the American Dream to exclude certain people in order for it to remain a dream. The American Dream merely exists because of the fact that there are winners and losers, otherwise it would no longer be an ideal for people to long for (Hebach 202). All the characters of the plays are excluded from the American Dream. Except for the protagonists of *Crimes of the Heart* and *Bordertown Café* there is no hope for them at the end to ever fulfill their dreams.

*Crimes of the Heart* and *Bordertown Café* are the only plays with an optimistic, hopeful outcome. The reason for it is similar in both plays; unlike the other plays, the protagonists of those plays choose to follow a different path than their fathers. In the course of the play, Jimmy realizes that he does not necessarily have to be like his father; the MaGrath sisters, too, realize that they do not have to be what their grandfather wants them to be. In all of the other plays, there remains no hope for a positive outcome, because the main characters unquestioningly follow their fathers on their destructive paths.

In the context of absent fathers, the mothers are also significant. According to Rauchfleisch, single mothers have to let their children go out and find replacements for the absent fathers (117). However, the mothers in *The Glass Menagerie* and *'night, Mother* are too clinging, so Tom Wingfield and Jessie Cates have no opportunity to find new father figures in their lives. What is more, Lamb stresses that in many cases, the absence of the father has a significant influence on the children, because of the economic problems that single mothers often face (7). This is certainly true for the Wingfield family, because Amanda does not earn enough money for the family by selling magazine subscriptions and she therefore reduces her son to the role of a breadwinner for the family. Marlene, the mother in *Bordertown Café*, feels like a bad mother, because she cannot offer her son a luxurious life. In *Topdog/Underdog*, the mother left the family before the father abandoned them; in *True West*, the mother is absent for most of the play and even when she returns from her vacation she appears to be mentally absent. Both mothers are absent for similar reasons: Lincoln's and Booth's mother left them in search for a better life in the distance, and Austin's and Lee's mother went on vacation. To sum it up, Rosefeldt's hypothesis that in the context with absent fathers, "[t]he mother/wife is either missing [...] or ineffectual" (10) can be verified by the six plays that have been analyzed. Every mother turns out to be a version of the "Terrible Mother who ignores, persecutes or betrays her children" (10). It is obvious that just like the absent fathers, the mothers have an equally destructive influence on their children, for example, Thelma, who keeps their family secret from Jessie, or the mother of the MaGrath sisters, who abandons them, which is the reason why their grandfathers takes control over their lives. According to Rosefeldt, "the primal forces of maternity and paternity are both disrupted, leaving the lost children unable to construct a self" (138). This failure in constructing a self due to the lack of parental guidance becomes especially obvious with *True West* and *Topdog/Underdog*, where the two sons constantly switch their identities, which shows that they have no fixed identities.

It has been mentioned in the theoretical part of this thesis that studies on father-daughter relationship tend to focus on incest and abuse (Sharpe 2). This sexual connotation can also be found in the two plays that deal with abandoned daughters. Thelma is jealous of her daughter for her closeness to her father, and Lenny serves as a partner replacement for her grandfather after her grandmother's death.

Due to the fact that the plays range within a time span of 60 years, it is tempting to investigate whether changes in American society are mirrored in the plays. The society that is presented



in most of the plays, however, remains relatively similar. It does not seem to have changed at all and there is no real development within society; regardless of the year of publication, the abandoned children mostly live in a hostile, racist and restrictive society that makes it tempting for them to leave their everyday lives behind to follow their fathers. Furthermore, one could say that the reasons for the fathers' absence are similar in most of the plays; regardless of the year of publication, the fathers often abandon their families because of boredom and a lack of adventure in their everyday lives. However, there is an interesting development as far as the role of the mother is concerned: In the three older plays, *The Glass Menagerie*, *True West* and *Crimes of the Heart*, the (absent) mothers are not challenged by their children, because especially in the first two plays, the abandoned children focus entirely on their fathers. In the more recent plays, the mothers play a more central role: Thelma Cates tries to talk her daughter out of committing suicide; Marlene in *Bordertown Café* is about to lose her son to his father, and the mother in *Topdog/Underdog* is absent, yet her absence seems to play an equally important role to her sons as their father's absence. Therefore, one could argue that while the role of the (absent) father has not changed in American society, it is the mother who has gained even greater importance for the family life in order to fill the void that the father has left. At the same time, however, this importance makes the failure of the mother even more tragic for her children.

Why did the father disappear from so many American plays in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? There are several possible answers to this question. First, some of the plays that have been discussed are openly autobiographical; for example, Marsha Norman's and Sam Shepard's plays (Biggsby, *Playwrights* 238). While there have been several suicides in Norman's family and she later said that she felt like betraying her family when she wrote her play, Sam Shepard, just like Tennessee Williams, also had a difficult relationship to his father (Bottoms 14). Another reason for the absence of the father in American drama could be the change of the fathers' roles in American families, which was discussed in the theoretical chapter of this thesis. It could be argued that, since the father left the family's home to earn money, he lost his importance within family life, which is where the plays are often set. Of course, as Paul Rosefeldt argues, the father's absence is also a highly symbolical one. However, while he says that the absence of the father hints at the absence of God, the analysis of the six plays in this thesis has proved that the absence of the father stands for much more than religion: his absence shows on the small scale in the family that there is no solidarity in society anymore and that there are no longer moral values.

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## Appendix A: Curriculum Vitae

### Angaben zur Person

Nachname(n) / Vorname(n)	<b>Zoidl Franziska</b>
Akademischer Titel	Bakk.phil
Staatsangehörigkeit	Österreich
Geburtsdatum	29.04.1988

### Schul- und Berufsbildung

Daten	Seit September 2011
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Name und Art der Bildungs- oder Ausbildungseinrichtung	Master für Journalismus und Neue Medien an der FH Wien
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Daten	Oktober 2006 – Mai 2011
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Name und Art der Bildungs- oder Ausbildungseinrichtung	Bakkalaureatsstudium Publizistik und Kommunikationswissenschaft an der Uni Wien
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Schwerpunkte	Printjournalismus, TV-Journalismus, Historische Kommunikationsforschung
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Daten	seit Oktober 2006
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Name und Art der Bildungs- oder Ausbildungseinrichtung	Diplomstudium Anglistik an der Uni Wien
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Daten	September 1998 – Juni 2006
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Name und Art der Bildungs- oder Ausbildungseinrichtung	Bischöfliches Gymnasium Petrinum, Linz
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Bezeichnung der erworbenen Qualifikation	Matura am 12. 6. 2006 mit ausgezeichnetem Erfolg
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Daten	September 1994 – Juli 1998
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Name und Art der Bildungs- oder Ausbildungseinrichtung	Volksschule Ottensheim
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## **Bisherige Berufserfahrungen**

Daten	August 2011
Funktion	Praktikantin in der Austria News Redaktion: Recherchieren und Zusammenstellen eigener Fernsehbeiträge
Dienstgeber	Puls 4
Daten	Seit April 2011
Funktion	Mitarbeit bei der Linzer Studierendenzeitschrift Unifon: Verfassen von Artikeln über studentische Themen
Dienstgeber	Verein Unifon
Daten	Februar 2011
Funktion	Praktikantin bei den Oberösterreichischen Nachrichten: Verfassen von Kurzmeldungen und Artikeln; Durchführen von Interviews und Meinungsumfragen
Dienstgeber	Oberösterreichische Nachrichten
Daten	August und September 2008
Funktion	Praktikantin beim „Hitradio Ö3“: Tätigkeit in der Musikredaktion
Dienstgeber	Hitradio Ö3

## **Auslandsaufenthalte**

Daten	September 2009 bis Juni 2010: Studium an der University of Toronto im Rahmen des Joint Study Austauschprogramms der Uni Wien
Schwerpunkte	Fokus auf English Literature, Linguistics und Film Studies

## Appendix B: Abstract in German

Die vorliegende Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit der Analyse von sechs modernen amerikanischen Stücken, die die Zeitspanne von 1945 bis 2002 umfassen. Sämtliche Stücke haben gemeinsam, dass der Vater als das zentrale Familienoberhaupt abwesend ist und dieses Fehlen der Vaterfigur im Leben die Kinder auf oft ähnliche Weise beeinflusst.

Im theoretischen Teil der vorliegenden Arbeit werden erst die psychologischen Konsequenzen eines abwesenden Vaters beleuchtet, und es wird auch auf aktuelle Entwicklungen in der Psychologie eingegangen. Als zweiter Punkt wird im theoretischen Teil auf radikale Veränderungen der amerikanischen Gesellschaft eingegangen: Die Rolle des Vaters hat sich im Laufe des 20. Jahrhunderts gewandelt und ist heute im Vergleich zur Rolle der Mutter in vielen Familien oft unwesentlich. Auch das Konzept des „Amerikanischen Traums“ ist hier von Bedeutung, da die Familie in ihrer traditionellen Form im Zentrum dieses traditionellen amerikanischen Ideals steht. Neben dem psychologischen sowie dem soeben erwähnten soziologischen Erklärungsansatz für die Abwesenheit des Vaters soll aber auch Paul Rosefeldt Erwähnung finden, der mutmaßt, dass der verschwundene Vater im modernen amerikanischen Theater für den verschwundenen Gott in der modernen Gesellschaft steht.

In den Kapiteln des analytischen Teils werden jeweils zwei Stücke miteinander verglichen. Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, das einen vom Vater verlassenen Halbwüchsigen als Hauptfigur hat, wird dem thematisch sehr ähnlichen *Bordertown Café* von Kelly Rebar gegenübergestellt. Im zweiten Kapitel der Analyse werden jeweils zwei vom Vater verlassene Brüderpaare verglichen. Dafür werden *True West* von Sam Shepard und *Topdog/Underdog* von Suzan-Lori Parks verglichen. Beide Brüderpaare versuchen laufend, Macht über den jeweiligen anderen zu bekommen und bewegen sich durch dieses Wechselspiel immer weiter auf den Abgrund zu. Im letzten Kapitel werden zwei Stücke untersucht, die weibliche Hauptfiguren haben: *’night, Mother* von Marsha Norman wird *Crimes of the Heart* von Beth Henley gegenübergestellt. Aus der Analyse aller Stücke wird deutlich, dass jene Hauptfiguren, die keinen Vaterersatz finden, in ihrem Leben scheitern. Auch die Unterschiede zwischen verlassenen Töchtern und Söhnen sind erwähnenswert. Während die Söhne nach den abwesenden Vätern in der Ferne suchen, bleibt verlassenen Töchtern in ihrer patriarchalischen Gesellschaft oft nur die Möglichkeit, den abwesenden Vater im Freitod zu finden.