



## Dysfunctional Family in *A Lie of the Mind*

LI Jing<sup>[a]</sup>; XIONG Shanshan<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>School of Foreign Language, Zhongnan University of Economics and Law, Wuhan, China.

\*Corresponding author.

Received 24 April 2016; accepted 12 June 2016

Published online 26 July 2016

### Abstract

In *A Lie of the Mind*, Sam Shepard has described two dysfunctional families. The main cause of the dysfunctional family is the distorted relationship between the family members. This paper analyzes the dysfunctional families respectively of the relationships between father and son, mother and son, mother and daughter, father and daughter. It concludes that Sam Shepard proposes an ideal family form through describing the dysfunctional families which are made up of men and women, who must be androgyny.

**Key words:** Sam Shepard; *A Lie of the Mind*; Dysfunctional family; Androgyny

Li, J., & Xiong, S. S. (2016). Dysfunctional Family in *A Lie of the Mind*. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 12(7), 24-27. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/8555>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8555>

### INTRODUCTION

Many scholars have studied the function of dysfunctional families in Sam Shepard (born November 5, 1943-present)'s family plays. *A Lie of the Mind* (first published in 1986) is one of the plays. For example, David Pendery studied Sam Shepard and Neil Simon from Aesthetic-Moralist Currents in American Drama. P. Balasubramanian carefully introduced Sam Shepard and his life experience. Aydin Grmez analyzed Sam Shepard from the perspective of social study of man, woman and domestic violence. Carol Rosen examines women's issues

in *A Lie of the Mind*. Whereas, a few of studies stress the dysfunctional family and the reason why Sam Shepard wrote family plays. This thesis cogently argues that, there is barely scholarly in-depth study of the causes of the dysfunctional families in Sam Shepard's works. This paper aims to analyze the dysfunctional families from the relationship of family members and make a conclusion that the members of normal family must be androgyny.

### 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

*A Lie of the Mind* the three-act drama set in snowy Montana. The plot was unfolded alternately between two families after a violent accident of domestic violence. The two families, one is composed of Baylor, Meg, Beth, and Mike, the other is composed of Lorraine, Sally, Frankie, and Jake, they are connected by the marriage of Jake and Beth. At the beginning of the play, Beth was severely injured beaten hardly and subsequently hospitalized at the hands of Jake. Exploring the family's dysfunction and the nature of "love", the play evolves with Jake's journey to find Beth, arrive at her family, and they quarrel with Beth's brain damage.

It is observed that, both Jake's family and Beth's family are dysfunctional. The interposed relationship among/between family members accounts for the dysfunction of the two families: the relationships between father and children, mother and children, father and mother, all twisted and alienated.

### 2. JAKE'S FAMILY IS DYSFUNCTIONAL

The relationship between father and Jake: On one hand, Jake inherited some of his father's personalities. His father influenced his character and his life. He became as brutal and irresponsible person as his father. Jake wanted to seek freedom and identification.

SALLY: Didn't you ever wonder about him? About what became of him?

LORRAINE: Who?

SALLY: Dad. (Shepard, 1987, p.91)

Here, the mother believes that Jake follows his father's suit. Sally notices the similarity between the father and son. Though, Jake, to some extent, the extension or the junior version of his father, Jake hates the similarity, or in another words, the "patriarchal" part of himself. As a result, he "killed" his father.

It was just the same—it was just the same as if he'd had a gun. He knew what was gonna happen. Dad couldn't even walk any more. He couldn't stand. His knees were all bloody. Jake knew that all he had to do was push him over the edge. Just a few more drinks and he'd be gone (Ibid., p.94).

The mother also denies Jake's maturity despite the fact that Jake is an adult. According to Nancy Chodorow (January 20, 1944—present), such paradoxical relationship between father and son can be explained by the son's refusal of his feminine part and inclination for his father:

Freud's description of the boy's oedipal crisis speaks to the issues of rejection of the feminine and identification with the father. As his early attachment to his mother takes on phallic-sexual overtones, and his father enters the picture as an obvious rival (who, in the son's fantasy, has apparent power to kill or castrate his son), the boy must radically deny and repress his attachment to his mother and replace it with an identification with his loved and admired, but also potentially punitive, therefore feared, father. He internalizes a superego (Chodorow, 1989, p.51).

Well, I'll make him up a batch a' that cream of broccoli soup. That'll put the weight back on him, that's his favorite... Whad'ya mean he won't eat. That boy'll eat the paint off a plate if you let him. Whad'ya been feedin' him...He's an emotional boy. Always has been. (Shepard, 1987, p.21)

Borrowing Chodorow's paradigm, Jake is a man with Oedipus complex. In a sense, he is a complex of child-adult. In general psychoanalytic theory, complex refers to the fact that a person is controlled by something known as the unconscious and he cannot restrain himself in his mind and behaviors, even he indulges himself in some circumstances. What's worse, his ideas and behaviors frequently run against common sense, have excessive and extreme characteristics. However, he himself isn't aware of it at all; others around him can obviously sense it. If someone has Oedipus complex means that mother is at the center in his consciousness and his mother's image occupies the first place in the eyes of him. While, Freud's Oedipus complex consists of two closely related factors. In other words, to boy, yearning for his mother has reached a degree, which repels his father. To girl, she often wishes to overthrow and replace her mother.

Jake bore unusually deep and tender love for his mother, so Jake "killed" his father to provide a chance for him to take his father's place. Unconsciously, Jake is aware of his Oedipus complex. The causes of his Oedipus complex were the lack of father's love and his mother's partiality. "He's run off to wild world when he could've stayed here under my production. He could've stay here forever and no one could've touched him" (Ibid., p.87). Jake's father isolated from the family, so that there is void between the couple. In order to compensate the lack of love from her spouse, Lorraine transplants her love from her husband to her son, Jake who had something common with his father. Lorraine made Jake as her substitute husband to get comfort and fulfillment which she couldn't find in her own marriage. The father's lack in family, to some extent, leads to Jake's Oedipus complex.

Besides the alienated relationship between father and son, the relationship between father and daughter is also doomed with father. It is obvious that the father sexually harasses his daughter Sally.

The relationship between father and Sally: sexual harassment. "He'd put on Lefty Frizell and twirl you around the kitchen until you got so dizzy you had to run into the bathroom and puke" (Ibid., p.64). The father treats his daughter as a seductive woman, regardless Sally was his generic daughter. His sexual harassment reflected his immorality and his psychology. Father's sexual harassment had bad influence on Sally's life. Sally is transformed into a woman who's fear of sexual involvement with a man. She "doesn't even have a man. Never did" (Ibid., p.92). Father's sexual harassment had deep psychological impact on the "seductive" daughter. Sally hated her father and she was afraid of her father, so when Jake beaten up Beth and went back home, Sally remembered his father and left home, because she was afraid of Jake too.

The father, though absent in the play, forms and configures the other end of the relationship between man and woman. "Culturally, this means that it is important for men to gain power and to insure that the attributes of power and prestige are masculine, or, more precisely, that whatever cultural role accrues to the male is then accorded power and prestige" (Chodorow, 1989, p.35). On one hand, man wants to conquer woman and escape from family responsibility.

Those were the days we chased your daddy from one air base to the next. Always tryin' to catch up with the next "Secret Mission" (Shepard, 1987, p.36). "Is there any good reason in this Christless world why men leave woman? (Ibid., p. 86).

Father escapes from the bondage of family chore and responsibilities.

Because—he's still alive in me. You understand that? He's still walkin' around inside me. He put the stuff into me that'll never go away" (Ibid., p.91). "Love. Whata crock

a' shit. Love. There's another disease. Only difference is it's a disease that makes ya feel good (Ibid., p.92).

Yet, the patriarchal power / authority crystalized by the absent father still prevails in the play.

It is obvious that Lorraine didn't like her daughter Sally. He thought Sally was a failure, because Sally didn't marry and still lived in her house. "Tired what? Who are you to be judgin' me now? who are you? You don't even have a man. Never did" (Ibid., p.92).

SALLY: I'm not leavin'!

LORRAINE: How can you be so mule-headed stubborn and selfish! (Ibid., p.66)

She even blamed the father's death on Sally who was an onlooker when father and Jake wrestled. They denied each other. Lorraine paid more attention to Jake and ignore communication with the daughter's existence.

The relationship between mother and sons is also peculiar. Lorraine had partiality to Jake and ignored Frankie. The relationship between Jake and Sally seemed to be indifferent. Jake and Frankie were two different men. Jake was brutal and cruel, while Frankie was a gentleman. At the beginning of the play, Frankie tried to comfort and helped Jake out. Frankie consoled Jake:

JAKE: No! Don't leave.

FRANKIE: (Stops.) All right. (Pause.) You okay?

JAKE: Yeah. Just sit with me for a while. Stay here.

FRANKIE: Okay

JAKE: Don't leave.

FRANKIE: I won't. (Ibid., p.15)

### 3. BETH'S FAMILY IS DYSFUNCTIONAL

"For boys and men, both individuation and dependency issues become tied up with the sense of masculinity, or masculine identity." (Chodorow, 1989, p.46) There are similarities and differences between Maylor and Mike. Maylor was a typical cow boy. He yearned for free and adventurous life of the west. So he liked hunting dears and regarded it as an art. He regards such behaviors as masculine:

Yeah! Yeah! That's exactly the way it is. You got that right. I could be up in the wild country huntin' antelope. I could be raising a string a' pack mules back up in there. Doin' somethin' useful. But no, I gotta play nursemaid to a bunch a' feeble-minded women down here in civilization who can't take care a' themselves. I gotta waste my days away makin' sure they eat and have a roof over their heads and a nice warm place to go crazy in. (Shepard, 1987, p.106)

Baylor hunted because he could stay alone. As Meg said: "Maybe you just wanna be alone. Maybe that's it. Maybe it's got nothing to do with hunting. You just don't want to be a part of us anymore" (Ibid.). Maylor tried to seek self-identification, but he doesn't know how to do. He didn't have explicit pursuit and plans, and he lost in a dilemma of reality and pursuit.

In Beth's family, Maylor was the authoritative patriarch. While Mike, he began to hunting like his father, and he talked billingsgate. Meg always reminded him of his language. However, lived in a modern society, he was not as brutal as Jake. He was a patronal big brother. When Beth was damaged, he looked after her in the hospital, protected her and made Jake to apologize to Beth.

The relationship between Maylor and Beth is twisted: Baylor was an authoritative father, and Beth was a fragile daughter. "The common fact in all socialization situations I have mentioned is that women are the primary socializers. Men may also help in child care, but their 'work' is elsewhere" (Ibid., p.34). Baylor never listened to Beth. In the family, Beth didn't have a voice. Baylor thought it was waste of time to listen to Beth's talk.

Baylor was the authoritative patriarch and Meg was a submissive and obedient wife.

Specifically, I shall propose that, in any given society, feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does. (In psychoanalytic terms, women are less individuated than men; they have more flexible ego boundaries. (Ibid., p.46)

Baylor always pushed Meg around and pushed her away. Meg is like a maidservant, but she had female consciousness.

BAYLOR: Your mother was a basket case.

MEG: She was a female.

BAYLOR: Meg, do you ever think about the things you say or do you just say 'em?

MEG: She was pure female. There wasn't any trace of male in her. Like Beth—Beth's got male in her. I can see that.

MEG: The female—the female one needs—the other.

BAYLOR: What other?

MEG: The male. The male one.

BAYLOR: Oh.

MEG: But the male one—doesn't really need the other. Not the same way. (Ibid., p.104, 105)

On the other hand, they loved each other. At last of the play, there was some subtle change in their relationship.

Meg: I believe that's the first time you've kissed me in twenty years.

BAYLOR: Aw, come on, it ain't been that long. Let's go on up to bed now. (Ibid., p.130)

The relationship between Meg and Beth: "Female 'nurses' in the high school performed mainly menial functions cleaned buildings and bathrooms, cleaned and repaired clothing. They took care of children only when they were sick" (Chodorow, 1989, p.35). Meg was a loving mother. "You—you a love. You—you are only that. Only. You don't know. Only love. Good. You. Mother. You Always love. Always." (Shepard, 1987, p.130). She was a careful mother. When Beth's brain was damaged, she took care of and warried about Beth. "Baylor, could you please come upstairs and talk to Beth? She's got

me worried sick...I know, but now she's just scaring me really bad" (Ibid., p.99). Beth was insubordinate daughter. She didn't want to be a woman like her mother.

---

## CONCLUSION

---

The two dysfunctional families in the play actually reflected the relationship between man and woman. In Virginia Woolf's book, *A Room of One's Own*, she came up with Androgynous Vision. In the book, she agreed to Coleridge's idea that great minds are Androgynous. Besides, she explained her point that in everyone's mind, there are two dominant forces, one is male factor, female factor is another; in a man's mind, male factor overwhelmed female factor; while in a woman's mind, female factor overwhelmed the male factor. Normal and comfortable living condition is that these two factors are in harmony, the harmony of spirit...a sheer and onefold male and female is incurable; a person must be masculine woman, or a feminine man. The normal and harmonious family needs the men and women with androgyny, not the "opposite animals"—the male and female, Just as Beth said to Frankie: "It's all right. Once we're together, the whole world will change. You'll see. We'll be in a

whole new world" (Ibid., p.114). Frankie was a woman-man and Beth was a woman with male in her. They were androgyny.

Sam Shepard wanted to find a balanced and ideal family form through describing the dysfunctional families which are made up of men and women. And the men must be feminine men and the women must be masculine woman, so that their living conditions are in harmony, spiritual harmony.

---

## REFERENCES

---

- Chodorow, N. (1978). *The reproduction of mothering: Psychoanalysis and the sociology of gender*. University of California Press.
- Chodorow, N. (1989). *Feminism and psychoanalytic theory*. Yale University Press.
- Freud, S. (1913). *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the mental lives of savages and neurotics*. Beacon.
- Gallop, J. (1982). *The daughter's seduction: Feminism and psychoanalysis*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Shepard, S. (1987). *A lie of the mind*. Great Britain.
- Woolf, V. (2000). *A room of one's own*. Penguin.