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Revisiting paternal absence in America in 20th century

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Abstract

The word father is a very simple word in its spelling but it holds startlingly many different meanings in its real role. Father is the protector provides security and counselor as a source of guidance and inspiration, he occupies physical and emotional space among the family, no one can fill or achieve his role. George Herbert the British Poet once said, "One father is more than a hundred schoolmasters." In other words, father's absence means the absence of security, guidance, and love from the family and destroying one of its pillars. In any way, this paper exposes the problem of the absence of the role of fathers in American Family. It also points out to what are the consequences of their being absent and how they cause disorder and chaos in society in general and produce a dysfunctional family in particular.

Keywords: Paternal, Fatherhood, Anne Tyler, Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant

Introduction

One of the problems that face American family in the 20th century is fathers' absence, this sort of behavior constitutes a "bad father" and conjures images of prolonged absence, domestic violence, drunkenness and/or fathers' failure to provide financial support. David Blankenhorn refers that American family on its way to a Fatherless family. To expose the absent role of fathers in the twentieth century, the reader should know how is a father on previous centuries and how does he become. There is the difference between what fathers are supposed to be for their families and what they are actually doing. In 17th and 18th century to the early of 19th century, fathers were seen as morally superior to women and more suitable to the demands of family needs which makes them the primary parents in families, their primary responsibility was teaching children a set of religious and ethical values, in addition, to ensure developing strong moral character for children. What enabled the fathers of achieving such task and influencing their children's behaviors, was that their place of work in the farms in their home, they were together all the time. Father's power extended to major life issues as where children should live and who will marry.

It is only during and after the second part of 19th and early 20th century the difficulty of fathers to be continually involved with their children increased. Some factors played a significant role in creating a new vision of fatherhood; such as changing the economy from the farm and changing the family from producer to consumer and changing the natural roles of men and women in families. As well changing the place of work as fathers were either in War effort or taken away by industrialization out of the household into businesses, factories and some other workplaces. The new ideal of fathers makes them display masculine domesticity in which they are strong authority figures show more interest in teaching and playing with children when they are at home only.

The traditional image and social role of father from an early culture known as the breadwinner, disciplinarian and role model for the boys, for punishment and developing the morality of children, he works hard, demanding respect and obedience from his children. His part of responsibility contained tasks such as war, building, business and progress that flourished during the century and busy him to be having no time for mundane and his family albeit necessary like emotions and feelings.

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Moreover, the period of the 20th century can be described as a period of change and enormous growth when the institutions that compose American society such as family, religion, education, government and economy are all interwoven effecting each other. American society in 20th century passed through several social movements as civil rights, the anti-war and feminist movements causing sever changes in familial and social relationships but the economic change is the most influential.

Several other social movements in the 20th century encouraged the problem of absent fathers; these movements affected the family stability by making some change in some cultural norms as well as in some fathers' behaviors. Previously, fatherlessness was more common than it is in the 20th century but because of death not anything else as out-of wedlock births, divorce and desertion; however, even in unhappy marriages divorce was uncommon. During the second part of 20th century, the rate of divorce skyrocketed, this increase in divorce percentage is one of the causes of father's absence. In most of the 20th century divorce fathers no longer lived with their families and in many cases, they lost contact with them, a survey in 1980 has been done indicating that in each five divorced fathers, one has not seen his children in the past year. Unmarried fathers and Children born outside of wedlock was invisible phenomenon for most of the century, but in the last 30 years of the 20th century the number of unmarried fathers and mothers, and children born to single mothers increased among black women and whites, with belief of some men that having children by several women a sign of manliness. Marriage and the family-father, mother and children are the most social institutions in existence. The birth of children out of wedlock in no society has been as a cultural norm. However, at the end of 20th century, births out of wedlock are expected to exceed divorce to come to 30 percent of all births and all these births have no legal fathers, an unmarried father is even seen worse for a child than having a divorced father. African American families suffered growing number of fatherless households after World War II, from 1949 to 1964, about 19 to 23 percent, of African American families, were headed by mothers, in the middle of 1960 about 25 percent of marriages ended in divorce and 25 percent of black births were to unmarried mothers. Marilyn in *Family Life in 20th-Century America* comments on some other causes saying:

Poverty, cultural beliefs about the primary role of fathers as breadwinners, gender socialization and fathers' beliefs about gender and parenting, fathers' self-confidence and personal skills, interpersonal constraints, and institutional policies and practices (particularly workplace rules that served as barriers to participation) all contributed. In fact, many of these same factors were at work in the lives of all fathers to varying degrees. (Coleman, 199)

Fathers always have been seen as important figures for their families, but throughout the 20th century, there is a lack in their role. It was very difficult for poor fathers as poor urban factory workers and immigrant fathers during the 20th century to spend a lot of time with their families, their low income makes them continuously working to support their families, children sometimes in poor families had to be employed which reduced their interact time with fathers.

The cultural belief also, that fathers are the main wage earners in their families, makes some men find it difficult to be fathers, when they are unemployed and see themselves as failures. Even fathers in two-earner families and some wealthy fathers have had to be periodically absent from their families' lives because they are mostly busy having no time for childrearing.

The 1930s is the hard time of fathers when many of them lost their jobs during the Great Depression and lost their primary family role as breadwinner, during the Depression families lost farms, homes and possessions, most fathers left their families to find work and help their families and to return home when their finance improve. Some of them disappeared out of shame from their failure, they were not able to watch their families suffer; many of men deserted their families as "poor man's divorce". Departing a family was not new to the 1930s in the United States, during World War I and the Second World War, some African American fathers left their families in the rural South to the north, until they find work and few of them started new families ignoring the previous families. The Second World War causes disorder of American family by taking fathers away from their families; many of them were taken to join the armed forces for long periods of time, Fathers who did not share in the military were supporting the war effort by following their work in some industries. In addition, the largest migration in U.S. history happened between 1941 and 1945, when about 20 percent of Americans migrated and multiply the problem

After the war, the economy was booming and Americans continued in achieving their economic rather than military goals, the dramatical change of economy after 1950 makes too many jobs available to men with a few places for women, father's involvement in the family life had shrunk by at that time to weekend interaction at best. In many cases, father's role becomes an insurance policy, a paycheck and an unknown parent. He was mostly on his way out of the household. Talcott Parsons indicates to the wide gap between mother and father in the 1950s, the role of mother is expressive offering emotional security for children, while the father is instrumental, leaving the family to work not doing much parenting. During the 15 years following the Second World War, fathers and mothers began to be seen as living in separate worlds as result of the plentiful economic opportunities were existed after the war. Fathers were almost solely responsible for family income production and mothers for childrearing, this condition of the absence of fathers portrayed by media as an inept and clownish figure as (*in nice-guy airplane riveter Chester Riley never could get ahead, in the Life of Riley and in his life or in his family*). It portrays poor fathers who had less ability to head their households, another image introduced of fathers who were heads of the family in name only.

Increasing families' material needs and wants make it difficult for fathers to meet expectations of families, especially when the family needs become larger and newer. Family disturbed between increasing financial and physical need from fathers and fathers' failure to achieve their role, family members' lives during this time became more disturbance, fathers spend a long time busy, women were in growing unease and feeling trapped in their homes and children alone or involved in some activities outside the home. Some experts in childrearing felt worried about the absent role of fathers in their families when mothers became

mostly responsible for children, it may cause some effects for family, children may be influenced by women and led them to antisocial behaviors, juvenile delinquency and homosexuality particularly for boys, Kenneth Keniston wrote in 1960:

American boys are increasingly brought up by women—mothers and school teachers—who have the greatest power and authority over them. This matriarchal situation tends to encourage identification with women, their functions, and activities. Yet as adults, the same boys must have a relatively firm sense of their own maleness. (Coleman 169)

There is also worry about girls growing up in the absence of their fathers being around much, how they can become good mothers and wives. The absence of fathers becomes one of the most unexpected influential social trends of the 20th century, as one statistic of three decades from 1960 to 1990 refers that children living away from their fathers about 36 percent. Consequently, it is considered a major force creating many of the most disturbing problems in American society as deteriorating educational achievement, premature sexuality and out-of-wedlock births to teenagers, crime and delinquency; substance abuse and depression and alienation among adolescents.

Fatherlessness is the most harmful demographic trend of this generation. It is the leading cause of declining child well-being in our society. It is also the engine driving our most urgent social problems, from crime to adolescent pregnancy to child sexual abuse, to domestic violence against women. (Blankenhorn, 1).

Another immediate and tangible consequence of fatherlessness for children is the growing number of families in poverty by the loss of economic resources. It produces a generation of children and youth psychologically, socially, economically, and morally are worse than before.

Fatherhood problematic in literature

The absence or bad father is a recurrent theme in twentieth-century American literature, The field of fiction exhibits fathers who are disturbing their families by their bad and cruel behavior or those who are either completely separated and absent from their children because of family breakdown or overwork, or those who leave the family unit for some other reasons. Particularly striking examples is the novel *Tender is the Night* (1934) by F. Scott Fitzgerald, he introduces Devereux Warren a bad father of Nicole, he sexually abused Nicole and then placed her in a mental clinic. Dick also divorces Nicole, after the divorce he does not call or write, and he does not ask his children to visit. Leverenz has concluded that his willful separation from his father and his children reveals “Dick’s narcissistic inability to love” (Armengol, 213). Like Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway also represents fatherhood in “*Cross-Country Snow*,” one of his stories in *In Our Time* (1925) as a threat to friendships between Nick Adams and his friend George. Nick and George Rather than feeling happy of the coming baby they lament the end of their pleasure. Our problem the absent fathers appear in well-known novels as *Naked Lunch* (1966) by William S. Burroughs and *Going Native* (1995)^[12] by Stephen Wright. Wylie is the central character in

Going Native and father leaves his wife and children one night during a party which makes his wife asks “What is happening here?” and the narrative replies, “Daddy was gone gone” (Wright, 34). In *The House on Mango Street* (1991), by Sandra Cisneros, father is absent and not seen by children so Esperanza says that he is a hard-working man “wakes up tired in the dark, who combs his hair with water, drinks his coffee, and is gone before [the children] wake” (57). Similarly, Junot Díaz’s novel *Drown* describes the growing up of children in the absence of their father with feelings of insecurity and tendency in their behavior to crimes and drugs as result of his absence. Equally, absent father in Nicholasa Mohr’s short stories, “I Never Even Seen My Father,” is destructive power destroys a young woman to become addicted to the drug and suffers psychological problems.

Absent Fatherhood in Anne Tyler’s *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*

The family is a primary and vital unit of society provides balance in emotional, intellectual, sexual, and social needs. but over the 20th century, the American family has witnessed a major transformation, vanishing the traditional nuclear family, skyrocket rate of the divorce, the decision of some mothers to give up marriage, abandonment of some fathers or mothers when they feel failure or unsatisfied with marriage, which produced a big number of single-parent families with children. Anne Tyler (1941) is one of the masterful and most creative American writers of 20th century. Tyler in most of her novels tries to refer to disturbed relationships in modern families as absent fathers, mothers, husbands, wives and neglected children. Her most significant theme interest in home and family relationship. Her novel, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982), examines many sides of family relationships particularly social and psychology side with reference to the resulted interpersonal trauma and great impact on the children and wives as result of neglect and absence of fathers. The novel expresses the problem of the dysfunctional and disturbed family as result of the absence of a father and its effect on all the characters and the desire of stable home from all. The absence of father occurs when the male breadwinner or the father who is responsible for the family denies the physical or emotional role that others need or expect him to fulfill. Through the novel, Tyler shows the atmosphere of the home becomes full of bewilderment and depression, the mother agonizes because of the unexplained absence of her husband and her desire keep her children safe from the evil of the world. On the other hand, the children appear emotionally hurt and in need of support and protection of the absent father, the novel explores some of effect and consequences of the absence of fathers on the mother and children. The absence of father results in social maladjustment aggressiveness, depression and affectionless psychopathy. Tyler’s novel portrays absent familial relationship as result of the absent of father that become sources of loneliness and frustration for all family members. In most of the novels of Anne Tyler, the father is often absent, however, of all her novels, the story of Beck Tull in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982), is the most moving story of an absent father

The novel deals with the story of the Tull family in which Beck Tull abandons his wife Pearl Tull with her three children to raise them alone. She becomes blind but

remembers their meeting and marriage, she is thirty years old and he is 24 years old. They leave away for his job and have their three children Cody, Ezra and Jenny. Suddenly, Beck abandons them to the next job alone. Pearl has to get a job and struggles to raise her children, she becomes often both verbally and physically abusive to them. The novel reflects the condition of the family is abandoned by the breadwinner and becomes in a state of disturbance, all characters not feeling connected, they become in crisis, the most affected one by the absence of a father is Cody; he becomes furious and jealous of Ezra his brother. Ezra becomes family healer through his work in a restaurant. Jenny is another victim of her father absence; she does not follow her mother instruction. During the story, the children try to build family and home that satisfies their need, Ezra inherits the Homesick Restaurant and love girl her name Ruth but Cody seduces her then he marries her. Ezra after the loss of Ruth abandons the pleasure of music and devotes himself to the development of his restaurant. He struggles with depression, but he enjoys his closeness with his mother until her death. Cody's life inspired by his father's, Frequently he moves with his children and wife in pursuit of jobs not getting comfortable in a stable home, he avoids contact with his mother. Jenny studies in medical school and marries three times, the first is very controlling like her mother, the second abandons her with an infant daughter and the third husband a man with many children. The novel ends with the funeral of Pearl and Ezra trying to gather the family, their father comes back but too late.

The traumatic crisis of the family begins with the beginning of the abrupt absence of Beck of his wife and three children. Pearl has to become the breadwinner and to take a job as a cashier, she becomes under the stress of raising her children alone. Violent domestic atmosphere prevails the family with hurtful sibling betrayals and some instances of child mistreatment. Pearl Tull does not want to end the marriage and tries to save it, a catastrophic family style develops with a rigidity. She does not give chance for anyone to visit her or her children. Her wish to protect and keep the family safe and her worry that her children will leave her make her "For years in her stubborn pride, she refuses to admit to her children that their father has left them – the abandonment was simply never mentioned during the time they were growing up" (Rainwater and Scheick, 126). Anne Tyler exposes the psychological, social and physical effects of the absence of father on the family by introducing Beck Tull as representative of all fathers abandon their families and the suffering of Pearl and her children reveal the magnitude of the tragedy that afflicts the family. The pain of abandonment makes Pearl sometimes unable to control her frustration shedding tears in some innocent and unexpected of circumstances. Despite her love of her children, in some moments of anger, the children face physical, emotional, and verbal abuse. The absence of Beck Tull affects Pearl and consequently distresses her treatment towards her children and their childhood's memories, her frustrated behaviors make her son Cody On the day of her funeral describes her as

Raving, shrieking, unpredictable witch": "She slammed us against the wall and called us scum and vipers, said she wished us dead, shook us till our teeth rattled, screamed in our faces. We never knew from one day to the next, was she all right? Was she not? The tiniest

thing could set her off. 'I'm going to throw you through that window,' she used to tell me. 'I'll look out that window and laugh at your brains splashed all over the pavement.' (294)

The oldest son, Cody is the one who suffers the most by the end of the novel as result of the absence. He is jealous of his mother's favoritism for his younger brother Ezra and his doubt that his father leaves for something he did, which motivate behavior in Cody that his mother is difficult and mean. It seems that maltreatment of Cody by his strained mother in his father absence resulted in long-lasting negative effects. Pearl's preference for Ezra and her physical and verbal abuse make him a troublemaker and naughty child. These attitudes created also some conflict among family members and competence between Ezra and Cody. Cody is always jealous of Ezra; he resents and despises him trying to win his mother's affection. Critics attribute the cause of this disturbance of the family to Beck as responsible for his wife's mistreatment of the children and Cody's behavior by his absence. Paula Gallant Eskard refers that "Cody has been similarly hurt by his mother's rejection and his father's abandonment" (41), Cody confusion and disturbance portrayed as follow:

It troubled him to realize that he couldn't picture his father's most recent time with them. Trying to find some scene that would explain Beck's leaving, he could only come up with general scenes, blended from a dozen repetitions: meals shattered by quarrels, other meals disrupted when Ezra spilled his milk, drives in the country where his father lost the way and his mother snapped out pained and exasperated directions (Tyler 40).

The novel shows how the absent father and his role created what can be called by psychologists "interpersonal trauma". Cody as a boy in a family abandoned by the father, hunger for appreciation of his father and wishes that his father knows everything about him "what I've accomplished"...where I've got to, how far I've come without you" (Tyler 48). The condition of Cody exposes the condition of all children who grow up in the absence of their fathers. Anne Tyler uses Cody to tell the reader about his mother's condition, and how his father's absence makes a profound influence on his mother character as an image of all deserted mothers suffering in their husbands' absence and become victims of abandonment. Pearl isolates herself from society round her neglecting her appearance with disturbed soul, her son Cody explains that she "never shown the faintest interest in her community but dwelt in it like a visitor from a superior neighborhood...keeping her door shut tightly when at home." (Tyler 284). He compares between their family and mother with his friend's families and mothers to find that his mother has no friends and not enjoying their lives as others who "went to the movies together; their mothers talked on the telephone" (285). Pearl with her children always in their "suffocating house" (59), he wishes to see his mother "gossiping with a little gang of women in the kitchen, letting them roll her hair in pin curls, trading beauty secrets, playing cards" (Tyler 60) Cody feels that he does not belong to a particular home because of the continual abuse of his mother and the absence of his father; it means that his father's absence and

his mother's abuse result in Failure parent-child relationship and change the home to a hell. The disturbed familial atmosphere created unseen jealousy and conflict between the two brothers appears on the surface when Cody marries to Ruth Ezra's beloved. Cody remembers physical abuses by his mother of her children and the bad times and escapes away. After Pearl's funeral, at the end of the novel, Cody summarizes the suffering, the anger, the hurt, and the injuries of his father absence in some questions

How could you do that? ...How could you just dump us on our mother's mercy? ...We were kids, we were only kids, we had no way of protecting ourselves. We looked to you for help. We listened for your step at the door so we'd be safe, but you just turned your back on us. You didn't lift a finger to defend us. (Homesick Restaurant 300).

Conclusion

To conclude, fathers play a powerful and significant role in the stability of the family, and the negative impact of their absence upon the development and psychology of children and wives cannot be ignored. The phenomenon of absent fathers produces families of a single parent or alone mothers mostly are suffering from depression, stress and other psychological and emotional problems reflect negatively on the family in general and children in particular. In Anne Tyler's novel *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, Beck Tull is absent father disintegrates his family and causes disorder for all family members. His absence is the source of hostility and aggression between the two brothers as result of the emotional lack they need from their father or what can be called hunger of father. His being away influenced their attitudes completely and this is evident in Cody's case, he grows up aggressive and cruel to any one, not only to Ezra his brother when he takes his beloved but also to his own family, wife and son. The novel contributes in discussing one of the significant social issues concerning the daily family life in the modern American society. It carefully developed to display the problem of the absence of the father from the family by appealing characters seem very near to the reality indicating to social problem disturbs the family with mention to what extent the absence of fathers is sharing in the dysfunction of an American family in the twentieth-century.

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