

Multigenerational Transmission Process in Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County* (2008)
(Proses Transmisi Berbilang Generasi dalam *August: Osage County* (2008) Karya Tracy Letts)

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ABSTRACT

August: Osage County (2008) is a Pulitzer Prize-winning American drama by Tracy Letts that offers a deep portrayal of family dynamics within the contemporary American cultural milieu. The literary criticism currently existing in analysing the play generally engages the themes of family deterioration, incest, trauma, child abuse, and social decay. This study, alternatively, contributes a distinct interpretive perspective of dysfunctional family patterns through the lens of American psychiatrist Dr Murray Bowen's family system theory (FST). By situating the play within debates on the evolution of the American family drama in late postmodern literature, it employed Bowen's concept of the multigenerational transmission process to manifest how the parental anxiety, impaired selfhood, and relational conflict are passed down through generations instead of confined to the conventional focuses of psychoanalysis. Using a qualitative approach based on close reading and the interpretive method, the analysis examines three generations of the fictional Weston family from present-day Oklahoma. FST is thus operationalised as an analytic framework to interpret different actions and expressions of the individuals in the family. The concepts of anxiety, togetherness, differentiation of self, marital conflict, and undifferentiated marriage are used comparatively to explore the multigenerational patterns within the family, shedding light on the declining family bonds in the play. This approach thus reveals how *August: Osage County* (2008) dramatises the complexities of life, which can lead to the erosion of family relationships marked by social instability and cultural shifts.

Keywords: anxiety; FST; marital conflict; projected child; undifferentiated marriage

ABSTRAK

August: Osage County (2008) merupakan drama Amerika pemenang Hadiah Pulitzer karya Tracy Letts yang menawarkan gambaran mendalam tentang dinamik keluarga dalam persekitaran budaya Amerika kontemporari. Kritikan sastera sedia ada dalam menganalisis naskah ini secara umumnya menyentuh tema kemerosotan keluarga, sumbang mahram, trauma, penderaan kanak-kanak, dan kerosakan sosial. Sebagai alternatif, kajian ini menyumbangkan perspektif interpretatif yang berbeza mengenai corak keluarga disfungsi melalui lensa Teori Sistem Keluarga (FST) oleh pakar psikiatri Amerika, Dr. Murray Bowen. Dengan meletakkan drama ini dalam perdebatan mengenai evolusi drama keluarga Amerika dalam sastera pascamoden lewat, kajian ini menggunakan konsep proses transmisi berbilang generasi oleh Bowen untuk menunjukkan bagaimana kebimbangan ibu bapa, sendiri yang terjejas, dan konflik perhubungan diwariskan merentas generasi, berbanding hanya terhadap kepada fokus psikoanalisis konvensional. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berasaskan pembacaan rapi dan kaedah interpretatif, analisis ini meneliti tiga generasi keluarga fiksyen Weston dari Oklahoma era moden. FST dioperasikan sebagai kerangka analitik untuk mentafsir pelbagai tindakan dan ekspresi individu dalam keluarga tersebut. Konsep kebimbangan, kebersamaan, pembezaan sendiri (*differentiation of self*), konflik perkahwinan, dan perkahwinan tidak terbeza (*undifferentiated marriage*) digunakan secara perbandingan untuk meneroka corak berbilang generasi dalam

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keluarga tersebut, seterusnya menjelaskan tentang kemerosotan ikatan kekeluargaan dalam drama ini. Pendekatan ini mendedahkan bagaimana August: Osage County (2008) mendramatisasikan kerumitan hidup yang boleh membawa kepada penghakisan hubungan kekeluargaan yang ditandai oleh ketidakstabilan sosial dan anjakan budaya.

Kata Kunci: kebimbangan; FST; konflik perkahwinan; unjuran anak (projected child); perkahwinan tidak terbeza (undifferentiated marriage)

INTRODUCTION

The concept of social construction has undergone significant transformation in the late postmodern period, particularly after World War II. Individuals and families have become increasingly susceptible within a rapidly shifting cultural landscape, and the stress generated by this social context is evident in modern cultural artefacts. Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County* (2008) illustrates this condition. This study posits that the play is deeply situated within the late postmodern American cultural milieu and engages with the deterioration of familial relationships. It therefore raises critical questions: does the play reflect what generates an unbearable burden on individuals, what social development intensifies emotional issues within the family, and how the interaction patterns are transmitted throughout the generations? Hence, to address the literary portrayal of a dysfunctional family, this study examines Bowen's concept of the multigenerational transmission process in Family Systems Theory (FST). The paradigm has been widely recognised for its holistic and interdisciplinary applicability and has increasingly been employed in literary analysis beyond its psychotherapeutic origins. This analysis engages it to understand the relationship between anxiety, differentiation of self, family projection, and intergenerational transmission of emotional patterns in the fictional Weston family in Tracy Letts.

The existing literature in analysing *August: Osage County* (2008) largely employed Freudian psychoanalytic frameworks that emphasise individual behaviour distinctly, rather than holistically. Bowen's FST resolves the limitations and allows for reading the dynamics, situating the family as an organism, and broadening the view that individual behaviour cannot be understood in isolation. Consequently, Bowen's assertion allows this study to foreground the multigenerational transmission process as a productive approach for interpreting the illustration of the late postmodern American family.

Nevertheless, FST is adopted as an additional interpretive lens that facilitates a theoretical reading of the text. Within literary studies, psychological theories do not yield empirical or clinical conclusions; instead, they function as investigative tools that extend interpretive scope. Accordingly, the paradigm is applied analytically and metaphorically to examine the movement of roles, conflicts, and anxiety in individuals across generations, without construing the dramatic characters as clinical subjects. This analysis thus enhances the literary interpretations, demonstrating how family deterioration in *August: Osage County* (2008) emerges as a three-tier interrelated system—individual, family, and the society that shapes the multigenerational pattern—thereby offering an interactive perspective that remains underdeveloped in current scholarship.

August: Osage County (2008) may also be situated within the broader societal tradition of postmodern American drama that illustrates the instability of family as a social unit, the decline of authority, and the collapse of conventional values.

Building on the legacy of the American play dealing with family themes, the playwright portrays domestic life through a novel lens by engaging familiar components with postmodern

elements—hyper-realism, incisive dialogue, and morally ambiguous scenarios. Tracy Letts thus combine earlier dramatic tradition focusing on family deterioration when the social unit has become a site of constant anxiety shaped by the late capitalist cultural development that diminishes generational continuity. Reading the play within this literary and cultural perspective clarifies how familial anxiety in *August: Osage County* (2008) functions not merely as an individualistic psychological state but as a broader cultural milieu rooted in late postmodern American life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County* (2008) is classified as a family drama and received the Pulitzer Prize in 2008. This study identified several notable analyses of this drama, including Konstantinos Blatanis's (2014) work titled 'The Value of Tragic in Contemporary American Drama: Richard Greenberg's *Three Days of Rain*, Sam Shepard's *The Late Henry Moss*, Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County*.' The document introduces three plays for a comparative analysis. Blatanis asserted that the socio-cultural context of postmodernity exhibits significant resistance to the genre of tragedy; his study posits that the aforementioned plays would underscore the importance of revitalising tragedy as a genre in postmodernity.

Blatanis (2014) examined tragic elements within a postmodern socio-cultural framework, wherein no overarching narratives or incontrovertible cultural doctrines sufficiently address the issues portrayed in contemporary American tragedies. She argues that these plays, addressing the pervasive social and political crisis on the American stage, highlighted the distinction between individual and collective reactions, utilising investigative approaches to engage with the crisis, which was neither comfortably dismissed nor conventional. Blatanis's study is a comparative analysis of the utilisation of tragic elements and the representation of postmodernity in dramas that lack dilemmas in depicting reality. This study, however, fails to consider the intricacies of interpersonal relationships, the interplay between the American cultural context, identity development, and familial dynamics.

In contrast to Blatanis (2014), the research article by Dova Yovenescha and Desvalini Anwar (2019) entitled *In Drama August: Osage County* (2008) by Tracy Letts associates the Freudian notion of neurosis with the protagonist, who is purportedly afflicted by Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), exhibiting symptoms of severely destructive behaviours and inappropriate emotional responses. The scholars contended that the family's influence on a child's personality development, the significance of early education, and the necessity of a joyful and typical childhood experience are paramount factors in shaping an individual's advancement. Individuals possessing robust familial foundations and proficient social skills are inclined to adhere to societal norms. Without such support, an individual may have a mental illness, as exemplified by the protagonist Violet Weston.

Yovenescha and Anwar (2019) analysed various symptoms of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) in the protagonist, including frequent mood swings manifesting as rudeness in interpersonal interactions, judgemental behaviour, hyperactivity, an aversion to acknowledging mistakes, inner turmoil, substance addiction or heavy smoking, and a perception of universal hostility rather than love or compassion. The scholars asserted that the protagonist's childhood trauma, her husband's and sister's infidelity, and her negligent daughters induced profound sorrow, which she expressed inappropriately through yelling, blaming, and neglecting others. Their conclusion indicates that the protagonist's emotional reaction is markedly inconsistent with their

character, thereby suggesting borderline personality disorder. Nonetheless, their research exclusively concentrates on analysing the protagonist's anguish and that of others within the American social framework. These investigations are insufficient for forecasting familial dynamics as an emotional unit, as they are constrained by an individualistic perspective rooted in Freudian theory rather than a holistic approach.

In contrast to the aforementioned works, Imola Bulgozdi's (2016) research article, "Myth of Youth and Gendered Ageing in *August: Osage County* (2008) by Tracy Letts," focused on two dimensions to analyse this play. The myth of youth is initially characterised as the societal perception of youth and the sexual allure of both genders; Letts' interpretation of gendered ageing in contemporary American society is conveyed in the end. Bulgozdi pertains to older women, akin to Violet Weston, who perceives a decline in female sexual allure with age, which contrasts with the prevailing perception of men. Thus, Bulgozdi has examined two aspects of youth: youth as a source of trouble and youth as a source of enjoyment.

The second characterises young individuals as consumers and revellers, while the first delineates the societal perception of youth and the sexual allure of both genders, which is asserted to jeopardise conventions, social norms, criminal involvement, and violence. She contended that the protagonist, Violet, embodies the myth of youth, as she advises her daughter Barbara against competing with a younger woman for her husband's affection, highlighting that women do not possess equal opportunities for success in life, irrespective of their age. Bulgozdi contends that Jean's aunt's fiancé is similarly drawn to her "youthful and appealing" physique. She articulates that while older women lack sexual appeal, older men possessing power, wealth, and physical fitness are deemed desirable. Ultimately, Bulgozdi asserts that Tracy Letts illustrates society's neglect of male sexual deviance and child predators while highlighting the perils of alcohol consumption. Bulgozdi's analysis of gender issues in Letts's play is undoubtedly robust. While it has interacted with several contemporary studies on youth, gender, ageing, and social ideology, the examination of family dynamics in the quest for identities is inadequate. The consumer culture specific to youth exhibits an overly simplistic connection with identity. Conversely, our research will investigate the formation of multigenerational patterns within the family unit.

This study highlights a performance review featured in an editorial by E. Teresa Choate in 2009, which asserts the dysfunctional dynamics within contemporary American families and contends that Letts's charisma is manifest in this play. Choate is confident that this play is one of merely six to have received three esteemed awards. Furthermore, Choate associates the playwright's biographical influence with this work. She commends the playwright's adeptness in depicting familial dynamics, stating, "There was something for everyone in that arc" (Choate, 2009). The play has attracted attention for its portrayal of disordered American families and their emotional turmoil. Choate asserts that in *August: Osage County* (2008), the Americans would uncover a shared connection. This review, while depicting social reality, is constrained in its analysis of plot and performance beyond the textual viewpoint. Nonetheless, Choate's review does not encompass any research, as this study aims to investigate.

This review indicates that the protagonist's gender and ageing have garnered more focus than a fragile familial relationship. The perspective of Violet Weston is employed when analysing the other characters. In addition to the family as an emotional unit, protagonist-centric psychoanalysis has been advanced through research. This study employs a psychoanalytic approach to examine the development of stress in individuals within a family context that results in a multigenerational transmission of anxiety in a family tree.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design based on close reading as its methodological approach. Close reading is employed as the primary analytical method to examine Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County* (2008) as a dramatic text, with particular emphasis on dialogue, interaction patterns among the individuals, dramatic structure, and recurring family situations. The textual features are analysed through the interdisciplinary framework of Dr Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory (FST), with a specific focus on the multigenerational transmission process.

Rather than treating Bowenian concepts as purely psychological terms, this study operationalises them as analytical tools for interpreting behavioural aspects, relationships, and conflicts within the play. The concepts such as differentiation of self, anxiety, togetherness, marital conflict, undifferentiated marriage, and multigenerational transmission are defined theoretically and then applied to read the specific textual moments. This framework thus allows the study to bridge psychology and literary criticism, retaining the characteristics of drama.

First, differentiation of self is explored by investigating how individuals in the play demonstrate emotional autonomy during intense familial interactions. Through close reading of dialogue and confrontational scenes, this paper analyses whether the individuals respond thoughtfully or reactively under pressure. For instance, repeated patterns of emotional outbursts, withdrawal, or over-dependence are read as indicators of low differentiation. These behaviours are traced across generations to identify inherited emotional patterns. Second, when anxiety is the central focus of Bowen theory, this study traces the pattern through recurring conflict, aggression, silence, withdrawal, and verbal abuse within marital dyads and parent-child dyads as represented in dramatic exchanges.

Third, undifferentiated marriage is examined by concentrating on blame or accusation, unresolved conflicts, and avoidance—the structural elements through which marital anxiety manifests. It further analyses how the partners express their disputes and absence of individuality through their interactions. Fourth, to identify the child most susceptible to parental anxiety, this study applied the concept of the family projection process. It follows the child through recurrent mentions in parental conversations, criticism or excessive inspection, and the responsibility of emotional problems to the child.

Finally, the multigenerational transmission process is established by identifying emotional patterns across three generations of the Weston family. Identifying the dyads, it investigates how low differentiation, relational conflict, and anxiety are passed down through generations. The methodology thus established a step-by-step analytical process, such as progressing from marital conflict to projected child and finally to intergenerational repetition. As a result, the findings emerge from a distinct interpretive framework rather than an elementary textual observation.

FINDINGS

August: Osage County (2008), a contemporary drama set in present-day Oklahoma, depicts familial interactions against the backdrop of a swiftly evolving globalised American social context. Thus, the research examined family dynamics through the lens of the Bowenian multigenerational transmission process, given that the Weston family comprises three generations of extended relatives, demonstrating the transmission of parental psychological issues to the grandchildren.

MULTIGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION PROCESS IN *AUGUST* (2008)

The multigenerational process involves various problems or conflicts within marital dyads, including anxiety experienced by the couples. It also involves projecting anxiety onto a child, which is passed down from the first generation to the third, thereby completing the process. The level of self-differentiation in both mothers and fathers significantly shapes the intergenerational transmission of emotional and psychological patterns, as represented within family narratives, directly influencing their children's self-differentiation and subsequent psychological adjustment (Józefczyk, 2023; Ha & Chung, 2008). Alternatively, Bowen suggests that anxiety in one of the three previously mentioned forms (distance, illness, or projection) is passed down through generations. Within the dramatic framework of the play, anxiety-related issues and conflicts in relationships no longer only affect the family unit but also affect subsequent generations. Parents directly influence their child's level of differentiation. As the child ages, an individual tends to choose a mate with a level of differentiation similar to his own, making this transmission possible (Morgan, 2008). The following discussion details it further.

This analysis indicates that spouses in problematic marriages tend to exhibit lower levels of differentiation, a pattern that the play repeatedly stages through sustained marital discord, a factor closely associated with diminished marital adjustment and sustained emotional dependency within the relationship. It aligns with Bowen theory, which posits that individual emotional functioning is intricately linked to relational dynamics, whereby undifferentiated individuals continue cycles of emotional fusion and dependency in marital contexts (Greene & Mabee, 1993; Burnett & Reiter, 2013). Therefore, this analysis advances with the argument that the process is dramatised as originating in the conflicts in the grandparental dyad, which were transmitted to the next generations as a projection of the problem onto a child.

This study finds another concept essential for interpreting the narrative structure of the play: 'undifferentiated marriage'. Bowen suggests a 'differentiated marriage' can break the multigenerational transmission of anxiety. Within the text, this distinction functions as a literary contrast rather than a clinical resolution, showing how emotional patterns persist or shift throughout generations. It occurs when a well-differentiated individual finds a similarly differentiated spouse who is free from parental projection. A well-differentiated person is less affected by the transmission pattern of parental problems over generations because they possess a more profound understanding of reasoning and emotional guidance systems.

The system enables the individual to differentiate between reality and patterned functioning inside the family system. Bowen suggests that a well-differentiated person chooses a partner with similar differentiation. When two well-differentiated individuals marry, that is addressed as a differentiated marriage. Subsequently, they raise a child with a similar level of differentiation. It temporarily impedes the chain of multigenerational transmission of undifferentiation (Morgan, 2008; Schiff, 2004). Thus, in the family lines, the children have become more differentiated than their parents. The highly differentiated children result in increasingly higher levels of differentiation in future generations (Burnett & Reiter, 2013), which hinders the multigenerational transmission process.

The process operates differently in the case of the projected child. It begins with an undifferentiated marriage in the grandparental dyad, which is then read within the play's multigenerational family structure. The family projection process implies that one or more children inherit the parental problem. In the dramatic context, the projected child grows up as a poorly differentiated one who marries a person with like-differentiation. Therefore, it becomes an undifferentiated marriage. Among the children in this generation, one or more are supposed to be

the victims of family projection. It continues to the subsequent generations as a multigenerational pattern. This study examines the undifferentiated individuals and undifferentiated marriages in the grandparental and parental dyads in the Weston family, leading to the affected grandchild in the text.

This study identified three generations of the Weston family in *August: Osage County* (2008), such as Beverly-Violet as parents, Barbara, Ivy, and Karen as the second generation, and Jean Fordham as the third generation. As the second generation, it analysed the marital dyad of Barbara and Bill Fordham because the couple exhibits recurrent conflict that the play foregrounds as emotionally consequential, which is transmitted to Jean Fordham. Ivy and Karen are excluded because they have neither married nor had children, which means they cannot be explored through the multigenerational process as constructed within Bowenian theory. Additionally, this study asserts that Barbara is represented as a victim of parental projection when Ivy and Karen are not involved.

Therefore, it explored the following features in the play. It first identifies the problems and conflicts in the Beverly-Violet dyad that cause the impairment of one or more children. Textually, in other words, the way the parental dyad projects their problems onto Barbara represents the projection of issues onto a child. Second, Barbara reveals the features of a projected child. Third, as members of the second generation, Barbara and Bill reveal anxiety within their relationship. Finally, the analysis establishes how Jean Fordham, as the third generation of the Weston family, becomes a victim of parental projection, which completes the multigenerational transmission process. Hence, the analysis involves the Bowenian concepts of individuals' anxiety, differentiation of self, undifferentiated marriage, and projection of problems onto a child to illuminate the family's emotional structure as dramatised in the play.

The following figure illustrates the Weston family tree, demonstrating the multigenerational transmission among the generations:

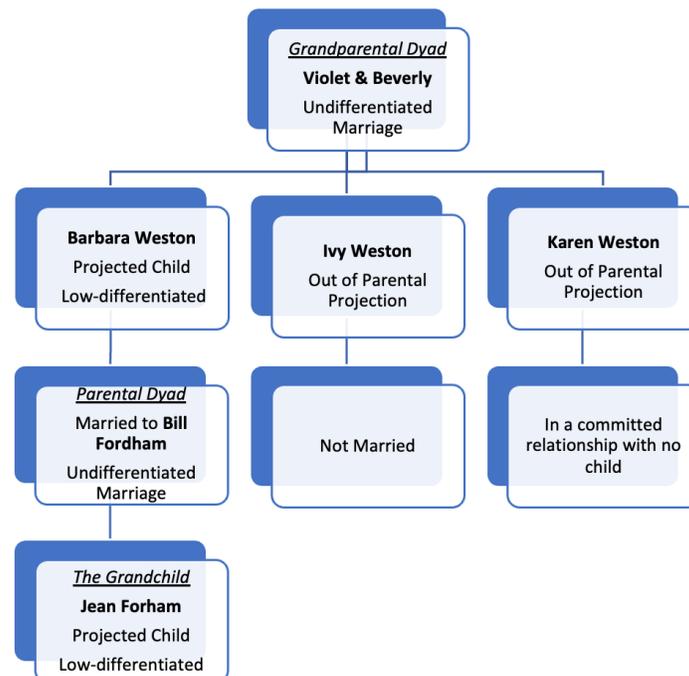


FIGURE1. Multigenerational Transmission Process in the Weston Family

THE UNDIFFERENTIATED MARRIAGE OF BEVERLY AND VIOLET

Before analysing three generations of the Weston family, this study identifies Violet Weston as a figure who functions, within the dramatic economy of the play, as an undifferentiated individual emerging from the grandparental generation, the grandmother of Jean Fordham. This analysis reads her characterisation as dramatising the consequences of low differentiation, which contributes to the emotionally fused marriage between Violet and Beverly. The following discussion examines how the play narrativises Violet's formative experiences, the dynamics of their marriage, and the projection of marital stress onto a child. When parental anxiety and undifferentiation are transferred across generations (Hall, 2013; Morgan, 2007; Schiff, 2004), this analysis posits that Violet Weston, Barbara Weston, and Jean Fordham occupy the dramatic positions of projected children across subsequent generations of the Weston family, thereby completing the multigenerational pattern.

This research suggests that Violet's poor differentiation, as represented through her recollections of childhood, is inherited from her mother, leading her daughters to be targeted by her 'many gentlemen friends'. Violet states the incident at her husband's funeral, pointing to Mattie Fae: "This woman came to my rescue when one of my dear mother's many gentlemen friends was attacking me, with a claw hammer!" (Letts, 2008, 3.1, p. 168). The play thus frames her neglect and cruelty as narrative indicators of a family environment marked by emotional instability. Moreover, the ironic gift of a torn, dirty pair of cowboy boots underscores a symbolic pattern of maternal indifference and ridicule. Such actions—unawareness, cruelty, and emotional inconsistency—function in the play as markers of impaired differentiation, which, according to Bowenian theory, may be transmitted intergenerationally. As Violet herself remarks, "My momma was a nasty, mean old lady. I suppose that's where I get it from" (Letts, 2008, 3.1, p. 189).

Consequently, this paper upholds the view that Violet's undifferentiated self is derived from her mother. Although the playwright does not provide any insight into her parents' marriage, they might not be a happy couple, as Violet's mother's "many gentleman friends" invite a literary inference of marital instability. When both mothers' and fathers' self-differentiation has a direct impact on their children's self-differentiation (Ha & Chung, 2008), Violet's upbringing can be read as emerging from an undifferentiated marital context, which the play retrospectively reconstructs through memory and dialogue.

Beverly, Violet's husband, is highly disturbed by the psychopathic behaviour of his wife; as Yovenescha and Anwar (2019) state, she has a personality disorder, or BPD. In contrast, this research implies that her sudden changes of mood and overreactions refer to her low level of differentiation. It is evident when Beverly suggests that she take a rest, to which she responds, "Why don't you go fuck a fucking sow's ass?" (Letts, 2008, p. 26). Just after uttering this sentence, she is found trying to please her husband: "I'm sorry. I'll be sickly sweet. I'm soooooooooooooo sweet. In-el-abrially sweet." (2008, p. 26). This study thus posits that Violet's words refer to sudden emotional changes, suggesting feeling-orientated actions. It is identified that Violet behaves awkwardly and cannot differentiate between feeling and thinking. Violet's language and behaviour underscore the play's thematic concern with emotional fusion.

In analysing the multigenerational pattern, this work offers the perspective that a marital dyad with high stress is represented in the play as generating cycles of conflict and emotional distancing. As Bowen suggests:

Bowen opined that we usually marry people of similar differentiation level. When a person (second generation) who was focused by his parents (and thus has less differentiation than his parents) marries, the family subsequently created by this new couple will have greater anxiety than his parents' family. This new family will undergo more intense and active emotional processes (e.g., reactive distance, marital conflict, and family projection process) with greater anxiety focusing on a particular child (ISS Family Institute, n.d.).

This study also identified these Bowenian dynamics as interpretive tools to read the Beverly-Violet marital stress. Violet's low differentiation further contributes to the symptoms described in the Bowenian concept, which involves projecting problems onto a child. Violet's poor differentiation also contributes to generating the symptoms of marital conflict in her marital dyad, which is evident in the abovementioned conversation. The play's prologue—one of the few scenes featuring Beverly and Violet together—condenses years of marital strain into a brief but telling exchange, signalling the depth of conflict within the dyad.

Additionally, Violet has little trust in Beverly's character, and she portrays him as a lustful man to others: "Your father tore himself up over it for thirty-some-odd years, but Beverly wouldn't have been Beverly if he didn't have plenty to brood about" (Letts, 2008, 3.4, p. 240). Such accusations function rhetorically within the play to dramatise mistrust and resentment, reinforcing the interpretation of the Weston marriage as emotionally undifferentiated. The following section analyses how these dynamics shape Barbara as a victim of family projection.

BARBARA'S POOR DIFFERENTIATION AS A PROJECTED CHILD

This study suggests that Barbara is positioned within the play as a projected child, shaped by parental anxiety. Violet's frequent mention of Barbara reflects that Barbara becomes the focus of parental projection, unlike her sisters Karen and Ivy. The two other sisters were out of parental projection, which allowed them to demonstrate greater differentiation and enjoy more freedom than Barbara did—a distinction that the play repeatedly foregrounds through dialogue. Violet claims, "He just told me he's disappointed in you because you settled" (Letts, 2008, 1.2, p. 73). However, Ivy corrects it later, revealing Violet as the true source of disappointment:

BARBARA: She said Dad was heartbroken when we moved to Boulder—

IVY: Mom was heartbroken, not Dad. She was convinced you left to get away from her

(Letts, 2008, 3.1, p. 183)

Barbara's limited self-differentiation is thus read as the narrative outcome of parental projection, and her marriage to Bill is regarded as an undifferentiated marriage when she picks another similarly differentiated person as a husband. The playwright depicts the couple's overall relationship, detailed in the following.

Barbara's interactions with Bill, Violet, and Jean reinforce this reading. Bill's assessment—"You're thoughtful, Barbara, but you're not open. You're passionate, but you're hard. You're a good, decent, funny, wonderful woman, and I love you, but you're a pain in the ass" (Letts, 2008, Act 2, p. 138)—serves as a dramatic commentary on Barbara's emotional inflexibility. Karen's criticism of Barbara's moral authoritarianism (3.2, p. 215) also shows how hard it is for Barbara to deal with insecurity, which is a main theme of the play's exploration of family dysfunction. When Barbara blames Steve for seducing a fourteen-year-old girl, Karen replies to her:

KAREN: I know Steve should know better than Jean, that she's only fourteen. My point is, it's not cut and dried, black and white, good and bad. It lives where everything lives: somewhere in the middle. Where everything lives, where all the rest of us live, everyone but you.

(Letts, 2008, 3.2, p. 215)

Therefore, the portrayal of Barbara, her words, actions, and view of life indicate her priorities of feeling over rational thought. It signifies her difficulty in navigating ambiguity, a thematic concern central to the play's exploration of family conflict.

Bill's extramarital affair, on the other hand, reflects his poor differentiation—the source of anxiety in Bill and Barbara. Bill's identity as a father and a husband becomes problematic when he is involved with Cindy, his 19-year-old student. A sign of Bill's prioritising feeling over rational thinking, as Barbara responds to her husband's adultery:

BILL: What does that have to do—why are you bringing that up?

BARBARA: They're all symptoms of your male menopause, whether it's you struggling with the "creative question," or screwing a girl who still wears a retainer.

BILL: All right, look. I'm here for you. Because I want to be with you, in a difficult time. But I'm not going to be held hostage in this room so you can attack me—

BARBARA: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hold you hostage. You really should go then.

(Letts, 2008, 1.3, p. 87)

The marital tension between Barbara and Bill, exacerbated by Bill's affair, is framed here as a dramatic source of anxiety that propels the family projection process forward, eventually positioning Jean as the next projected child. Barbara's exaggerated responses to Jean—particularly during Beverly's funeral: "And you were so very distraught over the start time of your grandpa's funeral. Was this your concern? Getting back here in time to watch the Phantom of the Fucking Opera?" (Letts, 2008, Act 2, p. 122)—underscore how unresolved marital strain is displaced onto the child, a pattern the play presents as cyclical and culturally embedded.

THE UNDIFFERENTIATED MARRIAGE OF BARBARA AND BILL FORDHAM

Bowen suggests that a low-differentiated individual selects a partner with similar differentiation (Morgan, 2007; Schiff, 2004). Therefore, this study suggests that Barbara and Bill from the second generation of the family have a similar level of differentiation that shapes marital conflict and the projection of problems onto a child in this dyad. As aforesaid, the most crucial reason for generating stress in the Barbara-Bill dyad is Bill's affair with a nineteen-year-old, Cindy. Within the dramatic narrative, Bill's affair functions as a catalyst for marital tension. When Barbara's poor differentiation is foregrounded in her interactions with her husband, Bill's affair with a teenager risks his marriage. The affair with a student of his daughter's age also symbolically reflects Bill's poor differentiation. It further intensifies the conflict, intensifying the anxiety in the dyad.

The stress further involves marital conflict and the impairment of one or more children, since marital conflict refers to specific behavioural patterns. Marital conflict implies "being critical, blaming, and accusatory of each other; focusing on the other person's faults/shortcomings (other-focused) rather than focusing on one's part in the problem (self-focused); being rigid and insistent on one's viewpoint; and behaving abusively towards each other" (ISS Family Institute, n. d.); these patterns are dramatised in the dyad. Barbara's frequent complaining to Bill illustrates the symptoms of it:

BILL: Barbara, please, we have enough on our hands with your parents right now. Let's not revisit all this.

BARBARA: Revisit, when did we visit this to begin with? You pulled the rug out from under me. I still don't know what happened. Do I bore you, intimidate you, disgust you? Is this just about the pleasures of young flesh, teenage pussy? I really need to know.

BILL: You need to know now? You want to have this discussion with Beverly missing, and your mother as crazy as a loon, and our daughter twenty feet away? Do you really want to do this now?
(Letts, 2008, 1.3, p. 90)

The conversation foregrounds Barbara's poor differentiation prominently. However, Bill's adultery with a nineteen-year-old girl is presented as the primary source of marital strain within the play. The following evidence further supports the claim of marital conflict, as Bill repeatedly refuses to engage in arguments with Barb. Nevertheless, she continues. This exchange reinforces the volatile dynamics of the marital relationship.

BILL: You want to argue? Is that what you need to do? Well, pick a subject, all right, and let me know what it is, so I can have a fighting chance—

BARBARA: The subject is me! I am the subject, you narcissistic motherfucker! I am in pain! I need help!

(2008, 1.3, p. 88)

It is evident within the dramatic context that Bill could not help since he is in an intimate relationship with Cindy. However, this research advances with the argument that Bill's performed expressions of love and care do not satisfy Barbara. Their words and actions must not lead them to reach a solution. Thus, the conflict continues, and parental problems are narratively displaced onto one or more children. It positions Jean as a projected child and the third generation of the Weston family. This paper further contends that both Barb and Bill are represented as poorly differentiated individuals. Thus, the undifferentiated individual is shown to gravitate toward another undifferentiated person, which results in the depiction of an undifferentiated marriage.

Therefore, this study substantiated the claim that Barbara's differentiation can be read as an outcome of the Bowenian impairment of one or more children as a result of the marital conflict or anxiety in her parental dyad. It suggests that Barbara is portrayed as a projected child, as her low differentiation emerges from the transmission of anxiety from her parents during the Beverly-Violet dyad's severe marital complications. When the child's incredible difficulty in separating feelings from thinking (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), as dramatised through Barbara's responses, generates further anxiety in her marital dyad, Jean becomes narratively positioned as a projected child, perpetuating a cycle that continues through the generations.

MULTIGENERATIONAL PATTERN IN JEAN FORDHAM

This analysis upholds the view that Jean's poor differentiation is represented as emerging from the undifferentiated marriage in the grandparental family, primarily through the play's portrayal of her mother, Barbara, as a projected child. Being a focus of family projection, Barbara chose a partner with similar differentiation. It further results in the dramatisation of another undifferentiated marriage between Bill and Barbara in the second generation. Their child, Jean, is depicted as a victim of parental projection when an undifferentiated marriage narratively positions one or more children as impaired, thus completing the Bowenian multigenerational transmission process within the dramatic structure of the play. Therefore, when Barbara becomes a projected child of parental anxiety in the Beverly-Violet dyad, Jean becomes the projected child of the Barbara-Bill parental

dyad. Parental anxiety is shown to be transmitted from the first to the third generation. This paper thus frames the analysis by reading Jean primarily as a projected child.

Jean's treatment of her parents reflects patterns of limited differentiation as staged in the text, which stem from the emotional impairment caused by parental conflict. Her father's extramarital affair with Cindy, a mere five years her senior, functions as a destabilising influence within the family narrative, shaping Jean's responses as a low-differentiated child. This study maintains that Bill's affair with Cindy symbolises his poor differentiation, which intensifies the family's emotional instability. Alternatively, Barbara's overactivity and attitude towards Jean are portrayed as manifestations of her own limited differentiation. Jean explains to Johnna, "What sucks now is that Mom's watching me like a hawk..." (Letts, 2008, 1.2, p. 79). The dialogue illustrates heightened parental surveillance. However, Jean's involvement with her aunt's fiancé, Steve, is narratively positioned as a consequence of unresolved parental tension rather than an isolated moral failure. She is drawn to Steve because he echoes characteristics associated with her father, who engaged in an affair with a teenager close to Jean's age.

Jean is found addicted to marijuana; this study reads this behaviour as a dramatic marker of family projection rather than a medical condition. This situation is also related to her low differentiation, as Bowen suggests that the focus on the child can result in long-term impairment (Schiff, 2004). Within the play, substance use functions as a symbolic response to familial anxiety, rather than a diagnostic symptom. The family projection process is thus interpreted as producing a child who lacks differentiation. The following dialogue underscores Jean's attitude toward her parents' permissiveness rather than establishing clinical addiction:

JEAN: I just mean they don't mind that I smoke pot. Dad doesn't. Mom kind of does. She thinks it's bad for me. I think the real reason it bugs her is 'cause Dad smokes pot, too, and she wishes he didn't. Dad's much cooler than Mom, really. Well, that's not true. He's just cooler in that way, I guess.

(pp. 78–80)

Consequently, this study posits that Jean's substance use operates as a narrative indicator of emotional neglect and projection, contributing to her limited differentiation. This study relates Jean to her grandmother, Violet, because Violet exhibits parallel behavioural patterns within the play's symbolic economy. Violet's reliance on pills—"These are my best fucking friends..." (Letts, 2008, Act 2, p. 172)—serves as a dramatic motif of emotional dependency, linking grandmother and grandchild across generations. Rather than diagnosing either character, the analysis interprets substance reliance as a recurring signifier of unresolved familial anxiety.

Jean's parents create a highly stressful emotional climate, which the play represents as being displaced onto her behaviour. Parental anxiety is externalised through Jean's reactions, particularly when she is confronted about her relationship with Steve. Her statement—"You can't tell the difference between the good guys and the bad guys..." (Letts, 2008, 3.2, p. 213)—articulates generational confusion and moral disorientation rather than psychological disorder. When Steve is discovered with Jean, the confrontation dramatises the eruption of long-suppressed familial tension. When Jean references her father's affair, defending Steve, she says:

JEAN: He didn't do anything! Even if he did, what's the big deal?
BILL: The big deal, Jean, is that you're fourteen years old.
JEAN: Which is only a few years younger than you like 'em.

(2008, 3.2, p. 213)

When Jean made this comment, Barbara slapped her severely, as Jean referred to her father's affair with a nineteen-year-old girl, justifying the occurrence with Steve. Barbara's violent response marks the culmination of intergenerational anxiety within the dramatic arc. This study suggests that Jean's actions are framed by the play as consequences of parental projection, rooted in earlier generational conflicts. The situation is not presented as individual deviance but as the outcome of inherited emotional instability, thereby reinforcing the multigenerational transmission process.

As a projected child, Jean is depicted as exhibiting patterns of limited differentiation. She consistently defies parental authority and considers herself prematurely independent, participating in risky activities with Steve. Her indifference to guidance, particularly her refusal to conform to her mother's directions, highlights her reactive position within the familial structure. Jean's actions are interpreted as representative of Bowenian dysfunction within a literary context, where emotional patterns are inherited across generations. The transmission of anxiety from grandparents and parents to Jean exemplifies the multigenerational transmission process illustrated in the play substantially.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that *August: Osage County* (2008) effectively dramatises Bowen's multigenerational transmission process by illustrating the recurrent dynamics of anxiety, differentiation of self, and familial projection across three generations of the Weston family. Utilising Bowenian theory as a literary framework instead of a psychiatric model, the analysis illustrates how emotional conflicts arising from the Beverly–Violet marital dyad are conveyed to Barbara as a projected child and subsequently replicated in her undifferentiated marriage with Bill, ultimately establishing Jean as the third-generation recipient of familial anxiety. The results indicate that marital conflict, emotional fusion, and limitations in self-differentiation are not merely individual characteristics but relational patterns perpetuated within the family system. This analysis thus highlights the importance of thoroughly understanding individual behaviour as an integral part of the family as an organism. The analysis reveals productive opportunities for further research on the playwright's oeuvre, engaging Bowen's concepts, i.e., sibling position, and societal emotional process, to read the late postmodern American social mobility, cultural shifts, and other anxiety-provoking challenges to the family institution from the broader social milieu. Therefore, the subsequent analysis may yield substantial insights into the prevailing tensions and conflicts within society that contribute to the disintegration of the family unit in contemporary contexts, as Tracy Letts aims to illuminate the factors disrupting the harmony of American families.

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