Nuclear Family Emotional System and Family Projection Process in Tennessee Williams's Period of Adjustment

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This article explores the nuclear family dynamics in Williams's play *Period of Adjustment* (1960) through Bowen Family Systems Theory: nuclear family emotional system and family projection process. *Period of Adjustment* is considered one of Williams's most Southern plays where marriage and family values are comprehensively accentuated. However, on an emotional level, *Period of Adjustment* connects Williams's familial works with Bowen's views on the American family in the mid-twentieth century. The play is mostly neglected by many Williams scholars, and it is described thematically as shallow and superficial. Bowen's theory provides a perceptive reading of the play that adds a novel interpretation to Williams's emotional capability of producing a family systems-oriented drama. Furthermore, *Period of Adjustment* illustrates Dr. Murray Bowen's concept of a family projection process and the four patterns of the nuclear family emotional system: emotional distance, dysfunction of one spouse, marital conflict, and impairment of one or more children.

1 Tennessee Williams is considered one of the most prominent American playwrights of the mid-twentieth century. Williams explores the often tense relationship between the American individual, family, and society in the context of his dramatic works. Williams is usually compared with the American playwright Arthur Miller, and their plays of the 1940s and 1950s are considered as the "golden age" of American Broadway theater. Both dramatists' first theatrical successes, Williams's *Glass Menagerie* (1945) and *Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and Miller's *All My Sons* (1947) and *Death of a Salesman* (1949), explore excruciating family conflicts in post-World War II America. But while Miller generally portrays political and economic situations, Williams tends to employ his poetic language to depict emotionally and spiritually wounded people unable to cope with the burdens of daily life. Murray Bowen's theories have gained a significant place in family therapy since the 1950s because of their ability to define the family as an emotional system. Bowen decided to shift from surgery to psychiatry during the war, and in 1946 his psychiatric work began at the Menninger Foundation in Topeka, where he developed ideas about schizophrenic patients and the relations to their family and he continued this work between 1954 and 1959 at the National Institute of Mental Health, Bethesda, Maryland. Bowen worked on developing his theory for over two decades until, by 1975, it reached its final frame of reference with eight interlocking concepts that span emotional relationships among family members: differentiation of self, triangles, nuclear family emotional system, family projection process, multigenerational emotional process, sibling position, societal emotional process (societal regression), and emotional cutoff. Bowen added his name to the theory, which became known as "Bowen Theory" or "Bowen Family Systems Theory" in order to differentiate it from the Family Systems Theory and Family Systems Therapy that covered broad therapeutic approaches in the 1960s and 1970s. Bowen theory understands the family to be an emotionally interrelated system: a change in the functioning of one part

of the system is directly followed by changes in the whole system. Members of the family do not function or behave separately, but within the circle of the system that shapes their feelings, thoughts, and functions. The theory provides a new paradigm for understanding individuals in the emotional context of the family. Bowen finds that essential relationships between family members can be defined in "*every* family" despite the differences in each family's attitudes, personalities, and values (Kerr and Bowen 10). Further, and more purposefully, family according to Bowen "is a system in that each member of the system, on cue, says his assigned lines, takes his assigned posture, and plays his assigned role in the family drama as it repeats hour by hour and day by day" (Bowen 298). Bowen depicts the family system as a play system in which each actor has a role to perform, through which he analyzes the family conflicts and dilemmas in a scientific style. Defining the family in this way, and using the drama analogy to address family members' relationships, enables us to think sensibly that the families of Williams's drama correspond and coincide with the families of Bowen's clinical analysis. Tennessee Williams as a playwright and Murray Bowen as a psychiatrist were contemporaries who contributed to an understanding of the dynamics of the family systems in twentieth-century American society. Both Bowen and Williams explore the state of American families during and after World War II, but the cultural specifics are much more apparent in Williams's plays than in Bowen's more abstract model of family systems. Bowen contributes through his theories (informed by his psychiatric training) and Williams by means of his drama, encompassing literary themes and the acting out of family situations through the performance of his plays. The relationship between Williams's drama and Bowen's theories is productive because of the number of characters in his plays who have mental disorders and appear to be emotionally disturbed. There is a broad range of these characters: Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), Mrs Winemiller in *Summer and Smoke* (1948), Brick Pollitt in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), Catharine Holly in *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), Chance Wayne in *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), George Haverstick in *Period of Adjustment* (1960), the Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon in *The Night of the Iguana* (1962), and Violet in *Small Craft Warnings* (1972). Although Bowen theory has not been unanimously accepted as a theory that can be applied to fiction, a number of scholars have applied it to fiction. For example, Sarah Eden Schiff (2004) relates Bowen Family Systems Theory to American novels, particularly to Philip Roth. Schiff tests Bowen's concepts on five of Roth's earliest novels that portray the development of the self in the context of the family. Benjamin Roger Opipari's study (2006) is a significant reading that applies Bowen theory to analyze Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956). Opipari highlights the efficiency of Bowen theory in examining the Tyrone family's alcoholism in O'Neill's major play *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956) and how each member participates in the dysfunction of the whole family. C. M. Gill (2010) uses family systems theory to reassess the American film *Mildred Pierce* (1945), adapted from James M. Cain's novel of the same name published in 1941. Thus, Bowen's concepts of the nuclear family emotional system and family projection process can also be applied to Williams's *Period of Adjustment* in this article. *Period of Adjustment* was first published by New Directions and *Esquire* magazine in 1960 and subtitled "A High Point Over a Cavern," focusing on the setting of the play in "a Spanish-style bungalow" in the ficticious Memphis suburb of High Point. It has not always been well received by critics and audiences. Jim O'Quinn comments that Williams confessed in later years that he wrote the play in "a rush

of activity partly induced by drugs," and "it ran on Broadway for an underwhelming 132 performances" (22). In this connection, Francis Donahue observes that such characters as Stanley Kowalski, Blanche DuBois, and Maggie the cat in Williams's early plays (*Street Car Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*) attract the playgoers' attention more than any other characters presented in *Period of Adjustment* (135). This might be one of the reasons why *Adjustment* was no as well received as its predecessors. However, in a more optimistic reading of the play Bruce Smith comments that *Adjustment* "enjoyed some major critical success" (Smith, qtd. in Saddik, 34). Smith clarifies that although the play does not reflect Williams at his "top form," he nevertheless managed to write what could be considered "a light comedy" (34). Heintzelman and Smith-Howard point out that the shallowness of the play "is a dramatic device that serves as a critical commentary on modern American society" (Heintzelman and Smith-Howard, 207). These are valid points because *Adjustment* could also be read as a criticism of the norm of the Golden Age of the 1950s American family. Although many critics comment that the play is a trivial, superficial, underwhelming, and "heavy-handed light comedy" (Gerald Weales qtd. in Stanton 62) while some find it satisfactory, *Adjustment* offers a profound study of emotional marital conflict. The key point to emphasize here is that whether or not the play was recognized as a critical success, Bowen theory provides a useful methodology to examine the dynamics of marital relationships in the play. The following section will explain the theoretical framework of Bowen concepts of the nuclear family emotional system and the family projection process.

Nuclear Family Emotional System

8 The nuclear family was the most common pattern of family organization in the United States during the 1950s and consists of two adults and one or more children. It is an emotional system that includes at least a two-person relationship in addition to a third person to form the emotional triangle, which is the essential building unit in any emotional system. Bowen does not exactly mention what the nuclear family is, but rather defines its emotional functioning. He mentions that the "beginning of a nuclear family, in the average situation, is a marriage. There are some exceptions to this, just as there have always been exceptions, which is all part of the total theory" (376). Bowen also points out that "the term *family ego mass* refers to the nuclear family which includes the father, mother, and children of the present and future generations" (161). Within Bowen's broader theory, the nuclear family emotional system is defined as a concept that "describes the patterns of emotional functioning in a family in a single generation" between parents and children (308, 376). The undifferentiation of self (the inability to differentiate between thoughts and feelings) among the individuals in the nuclear family (father, mother, and children) produce four patterns or mechanisms of emotional functioning: emotional distance, dysfunction in one spouse, marital conflicts, and impairment of one or more children. These patterns can manifest themselves separately in one family or all of the traits could occur together, especially because the nuclear family emotional patterns are, to a certain degree, governed by the spouses' level of differentiation of self and anxiety. The differentiation of self is the basic concept of Bowen theory, and it refers to one's ability to differentiate between his/her thoughts and feelings.

Emotional Distance

10 Michael E. Kerr and Murray Bowen find that emotional distance is the "most universal mechanism" between spouses in order to avoid the intensity of the emotional relationship. It is maintained either by "physical avoidance" or by "internal withdrawal" (Bowen 377; Kerr and Bowen 173) and "is intertwined with all the patterns of emotional functioning in a nuclear family" (Kerr and Bowen 168). Accordingly, Kerr and Bowen do not classify it as a major pattern of dysfunction in the nuclear family; rather it is a spontaneous mechanism that is noticed in all close relationships to some extent. It could also be added that this mechanism not only occurs between spouses but also between other people inside and outside the family circle. Daniel V. Papero mentions that "[a]lthough distancing is automatic, it usually produces more distance than people want" (53). In Papero's opinion, such distancing may create a kind of discomfort that triggers both or one of the spouses' anxiety to triangulate other people or react irrationally. As emotional distance can have a positive effect on the partners, it can also have negative results on the other extreme side of the marital equation. In this regard, Peter Titelman argues that Bowen "offers many descriptions of *emotional divorce* or emotional distancing (which involve some of the reactive behaviors such as withdrawal and isolation that would be a part of the later developed concept of emotional cutoff)" (12). Likewise, Roberta M. Gilbert suggests that it can be one of the most corrosive forces within Bowen's eight main concepts (17).

Dysfunction in One Spouse

12 Dysfunction in one spouse is a mechanism "in which one spouse becomes the adaptive or the submissive one, and the other spouse becomes the dominant one" (Bowen 204). In this scenario one of the spouses is dominant or overfunctioning, and the other is the adaptive, subordinate, or underfunctioning spouse. The overfunctioning spouse makes decisions on behalf of the other spouse and "becomes responsible for the twosome" (204), while the underfunctioning spouse may become "a no-self, dependent on the other to think and act and be for the twosome" (204) and vulnerable to the extent that he or she is not confident and incapable of making a decision. Kerr and Bowen clarify that

> [w]hile a dominant-subordinate or overfunctioning-underfunctioning reciprocity in a relationship is an mechanism for binding anxiety and stabilizing the functioning of both people, an increase in the levels of chronic anxiety can exaggerate this pattern to the point that one person's functioning is so impaired that symptoms develop. (172)

From this perspective, this mechanism balances the functioning between spouses by reducing anxiety. However, chronic anxiety stimulates this mechanism negatively to the extent that symptoms develop. The spouse who mostly adjusts his or her behavior, feelings, and thoughts to keep the harmony of the relationship is more susceptible to symptoms. At this point, it is helpful to use Stella and Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* as an example, because they can be seen to resemble the underfunctioning-overfunctioning or the adaptive-dominant mutuality. Stella adapts herself to the dominant Stanley and often yields to him to avoid conflict. But their relationship can still be considered stable, and both manage to emotionally function without developing symptoms.

Marital Conflicts

13 Marital conflict is the third mechanism of the nuclear family emotional system in which

"neither [of the spouses] gives in to the other or in which neither is capable of an adaptive role" (Bowen 377). In contrast to the previous mechanism (dysfunction in one spouse) most marital conflicts have no adaptive-dominant spouse, but rather each spouse's energy is focused upon the other. Moreover, in this mechanism children are apt to be triangulated or gravitated to the conflict in order to decrease emotional intensity. The spouses' energy in marital conflicts could "be thinking or action energy, either positive or negative" (Bowen 378). This is because inasmuch as the relationship of spouses in the conflictual marriage is intensely negative to the extent of "destructive fighting," it is also characterized sometimes by periods of intense positive emotional closeness. While each of the spouses refuses to be in the adaptive functioning, both "are generally 'stuck' to one another" (Kerr and Bowen 187). Thus, chronic anxiety and low levels of differentiation of self play an important role in increasing the intensity of marital conflict mechanism. On this pattern, marital conflict develops through three sequential phases: first, periods of intense togetherness or closeness; second, periods of emotional distance after a conflict; and third, another period of intense emotional closeness (Bowen 204, 378).

Family Projection Process (Impairment of One or More Children)

14 The previous three mechanisms of the nuclear family emotional system focus on the relationship between spouses. However, the projection process concentrates on the parent-child relationship. Bowen states that the family projection process "is so universal it is present to some degree in all families" (379). He also defines this process as "the pattern in which parents operate as a we-ness to project the undifferentiation to one or more children" (379). Papero explains that this concept "describes the basic process by which parental problems can be projected onto a child or children" (58). The family projection process implies a social, physical, or emotional impairment of a child in the mother-father-child triangle. It is primarily a mother-child-centred process, because the mother is always considered the first caretaker of the child. These ideas relating to nuclear family emotional mechanisms will be explained by illustrating marital cases in Williams's comedy *Adjustment*. A focal point to emphasize is that, according to Bowen theory, and as will be noticed in this play, the amount of undifferentiation in the nuclear family "may be focused largely in one area or mostly in one area and less in others or distributed evenly in all three areas" (Bowen 203).

The Nuclear Family Emotional System in *Period of Adjustment*

16 In *Adjustment* Williams explores marital relationships that signify the foundation of ideal family life in 1950s America. It explores the situations of two newlywed couples: Ralph and Dorothea Bates and George and Isabel Haverstick. Both marriages in the play focus largely on one or more mechanisms: the Haversticks focus on emotional distance and marital conflicts, and the Bateses' amount of differentiation leads variously to dysfunction in one spouse, impairment of their child (family projection process), and emotional distance. Although the play is set in the American South, it differs from the two-storey building in Williams's *Streetcar Named Desire* and the Wingfields' apartment in Williams's *Glass Menagerie*. However, *Adjustment* still focuses on a Southern setting, rather than the big postwar suburban developments in the North East and Midwest. Foster Hirsch observes that "*Adjustment* is Williams's only play with a conventional middle-class setting. Nowhere

else in the canon is there so much interior decoration, household appliances, jobs and children's toys" (64). The Tennessee bungalow consists of a soft bedroom and a living room that contains a sofa, TV, fireplace, and decorated Christmas tree with toys and a woman's coat underneath. Nonetheless, and in comparison with the settings of *Glass Menagerie*, *Streetcar*, and *Summer and Smoke*, *Adjustment* reflects Williams's sense of a diminishing Southern myth.

Ralph and Dorothea Bates

17 The play is set during the festive season, which is emotionally supposed to be a familial occasion, but Ralph Bates, a man in his thirties with a "boyish-looking" face, appears alone with a dog in the living room watching TV. He "is one of those rare people that have the capacity of heart to truly care, and care deeply, about other people" (130; 1). He is left by his wife Dorothea because he quit his job in her father's company. The arrival of the other newlywed couple, George and Isabel Haverstick, to Ralph's cottage and his conversation with Isabel reveal his emotional capacity that enables him to keep the integrity of a six-year dull marriage. The Bateses' nuclear family consists of Ralph and Dorothea 'Dotty' Bates and their son. Their marital relationship could be diagnosed as dysfunction in one spouse. Ralph reveals his emotions towards his wife Dorothea through a long conversation with Isabel in Act One. Ralph is characterized as "detached, considering, thinking, and over his face comes that characteristic look of a gentle gravity which is the heart of Ralph." He believes that "marriage is an economic arrangement in many ways" (143; 1), which he confirms to George:

> I done a despicable thing. I married a girl that had no attraction for me excepting I felt sorry for her and her old man's money! I got what I should have gotten: nothing! Just a goddam desk job at Regal Dairy Products, one of her daddy's business operations in Memphis, at eighty-five lousy rutten dollars a week! (174; 2)

19 Ralph's speech combines his thoughts that marriage is an economic transaction and his feelings of sorrow about the millionaire's daughter. He even confesses to Isabel that he sacrificed his youth for the sake of his father-in-law's wealth rather than as a matter of attraction to Dorothea, who is offered to him rather than chosen by him. Nancy Tischler compares his "cool understanding and mechanical talent" to Jim O'Connor, the gentleman caller in *Glass Menagerie* (283). By marrying the only daughter of a millionaire, Ralph "has sold his life for security" (283). As Jim positions himself as Laura's psychoanalyst, Ralph also does as Dorothea's psychiatrist. Ralph understands Dorothea's case more than the psychiatrist, who misdiagnoses her shakes as "psychological frigidity" (145; 1) and who charges her father fifty dollars a session. Dorothea's buck teeth and shaking body make her feel that she is unattractive, but Ralph's emotional aptitude helps her to build up her self-confidence and calms down her shivers. It is apparent that Ralph's and Dorothea's levels of differentiation of self vary. According to Bowen Theory, a person tends to choose a spouse with an equal level of differentiation. It could be contended that although Ralph's interest in Dorothea is economic, he unconsciously or unwittingly has chosen a partner with the same level of differentiation of self. However, it could be similarly debated that they are more likely to have different levels of differentiation of self because Ralph is interested in his father-in-law's money rather than Dorothea's personality. As such, Ralph could be

classified within a high level range of the scale of differentiation of self, specifically 50–60 [1]. He realizes emotionally that he *likes* Dorothea rather than *loves* her. He admits to George that although the bedroom seems sweet and tender, he does not feel that tenderness with her. Although Ralph realizes the difference between his thoughts and emotions, he still responds to his wife. This corresponds with Bowen's idea that people in the 50–75 range of the scale "are sufficiently free of the control of the feeling system to have a choice between intimate emotional closeness and goal directed activity, and they can derive satisfaction and pleasure from either" (Bowen 202). Accordingly, by marrying an unattractive girl for purely economic reasons, Ralph *chooses* the "goal directed activity" that he *thinks* will give him pleasure. However, as an ambitious person, Ralph gives the impression that he is unsatisfied by the "goal directed" choice of his marital situation, and he confesses to George that his life is an "affliction" because he dreams of being "*the first man in a moon rocket*" (199; 2). The fact that he lives a routine life in a sinking Spanish-type cottage does not please his ambitious thoughts. Hirsch demonstrates that Ralph and George do not feel comfortable with "the masculine roles their society expects them to fulfil"; therefore, they both "plan for a rural life far removed from the plastic suburbia" (65). The conventional masculine role in the South demands of them to have "pretty wives, important jobs, and impressive houses" (64). Although he has a job, house, and wife, Ralph seems to pursue the wrong dream. By feeling guilty about Dorothea, Ralph is still responsive to her emotionally, and his goal-directed choice does not please him emotionally. This indicates that the Bateses still function within the family emotional system, which guides them to behave in particular ways towards each other. Dorothea's basic level of differentiation of self before she marries Ralph could be very low (0–25), before her functional improving to a higher level of differentiation in the 25–50 range. In this way, she is reminiscent of Laura Wingfield in *Glass Menagerie* in the sense that they both suffer from emotional dysfunction due to their physical appearance. Dorothea's shakes can also be compared with George's shakes because their cause is emotional rather than physical. They are both recommended to see a psychiatrist. Isabel tells Ralph that "no physical basis for the tremor, perfect physical health, suggested—a psychiatry to him [George]!" (139; 1). The usual psychiatric procedure towards people in the lowest part of the scale (0–25) is to connect them to another family member or friend whose level of differentiation is higher than theirs. It is likely that Ralph tries and succeeds in improving his wife's level of differentiation of self by making her feel that she is attractive: "Dotty, you used to be homely but you improved in appearance" (245; 3). Moreover, most of Dorothea's energy is spent merely in "loving" Ralph and their son, and "being loved" by Ralph. All that she has achieved in six years of marriage is to have a nose job and her front teeth extracted, and throughout she remains homely. However, the familial emotional functioning improves by her overcoming her shakes and by building a stronger self-image. When Isabel uses Dorothea's "Pepto-Bismol," Ralph tells her that Dorothea used to get acid stomach but he cured her of it. Isabel explains Dorothea's medical case as "the human stomach is an emotional barometer with some people. Some get headaches, others get upset stomachs" (179; 2). This could be seen to show how Dorothea's dysfunction is emotional rather than physical before her marriage. In his speech with Dorothea's parents, Ralph reveals that her psychological problems stem from her parents' attitude towards her, as a result of impairment of a child or family projection process. In Ralph and Dorothea's nuclear family, two mechanisms appear in their relationship: emotional distance and a

dysfunction in one spouse, because it seems that Ralph is the dominant overfunctioning spouse and Dorothea is the submissive or adaptive underfunctioning one, mainly due to their level of differentiation. In this case, the self of the submissive partner fuses and integrates into the self of the responsible dominant one, and to a degree that both selves adapt to each other. Likewise, Thomas P. Adler demonstrates that the Bateses' problem is "with maintaining one's self-image and independence as two attempt to become one" (164). This union (what Bowen names the "we-ness") is not only the Bateses' problem but that of any other married couple, and it is particularly relevant for the Bateses because Ralph functions for the twosome. Louise Blackwell categorizes Dorothea, Stella Kowalski, and Heavenly Finely as Williams's women "*who have subordinated themselves to a domineering and often inferior person in an effort to attain reality and meaning through communication with another person*" (11, emphasis in original). However, Blackwell's classification of subordinate-dominant is based on superior-inferior social class rather than a matter of emotional functioning in the nuclear family. In the emotional system, being dominant or subordinate is not a matter of social class, economic state or even gender, but rather emotional interaction that depends on the partners' level of differentiation and anxiety. Kerr and Bowen argue that higher levels of differentiation of self indicate less emotional fusion; therefore, the conjugal relationship "is reinforced by elements such as trust, integrity, and mutual respect" (170). Accordingly, the Bateses' marriage is enhanced by respect and trust due to Ralph's emotional maturity. In his argument with his father-in-law, Mr McGillicuddy, Ralph asserts that he respects Dorothea and sympathizes with her. When the McGillicuddys come to clear up Dorothea's belongings after they have heard that Ralph intends "to make a quick cash sale of everything in the house and skip out of Dixon" (218; 3), Ralph is sure that Dorothea would "never agree to a piece of cheapness like this" (219; 3). On this point, it is useful to keep in mind that the "counterbalancing reciprocal functioning" and "emotional complementarity" can improve the functioning of the spouses and contribute to the harmony of the relationship, therefore reducing the family's opportunities of emotional disintegration. The reciprocal functioning between Ralph and Dorothea indicates that Ralph is ambitious, responsible, and full of energy, while Dorothea is dependant with limited energy that is spent on her house and family. Consequently, the dysfunction in the underfunctioning wife is compensated by the overfunctioning husband, who assumes responsibility for the pair. The overfunctioning-underfunctioning mechanism in times of calmness stabilizes the relationship between spouses. Conversely, in times of stress, chronic anxiety destabilizes this dynamic and leads to the development of dysfunctionality in the more adaptive spouse. At first glance, it seems that Dorothea is apt to develop symptoms, especially that she feels "VIOLENTLY SICK AT HER STOMACH" (219; 3), as her mother dramatically states. On the contrary, Ralph is more likely to develop physical, emotional, or social symptoms in this situation for several reasons. First, Kerr and Bowen state that it can be either the underfunctioning or the overfunctioning spouse who develops symptoms (186). Second, Ralph adapts himself the most in order to live with an unattractive woman, thus tying himself to a plain desk job after a long glorious history of flying in two wars with over "seventy bombing missions" in Korea "and responds to Dorothea's emotional needs by having two separate beds for 'His' and 'Hers.'" Consequently, and although he occupies the responsible overfunctioning position, he develops social symptoms, corresponding with Kerr and Bowen's view that the "spouse who develops social symptoms is the one who has adapted the most to the togetherness

pressure of the family" (186). Ralph's particular social dysfunction might be said to be irresponsible financial conduct because he sacrifices his youth to marry a millionaire's daughter that he chooses for economic reasons. Further, he quits his job with Dorothea's father, clears up his savings account, and decides overnight to sell some household appliances at the wrong time when their "savings account is at a very low ebb" (231; 3). The relationship between Ralph and Dorothea is interspersed by periods of emotional distance. Although they have been living with each other for six years, they seem to experience a long phase of emotional distance, as summarized by Ralph:

> Isabel: There is such a tender atmosphere in this sweet house, especially this little bedroom […].
>
> Ralph [*in a slow, sad drawl*]: The colour scheme in this bedroom is battleship gray. And will you notice the cute inscriptions on the twin beds? "His" on this one, "Hers" on that one? The linen's marked his and hers, too. Well. The space between the two beds was no-man's land for a while. (180; 2)

Two main points can be concluded from this scene. First, the tender ambience of Ralph's house can be interpreted to be the familial emotional responses that both Ralph and Dorothea try to manage by the dominant-subordinate mechanism. Kerr and Bowen comment that values, attitudes, beliefs, and emotional reactions in the nuclear family together create the "emotional atmosphere" (194). Second, because the emotional distance intertwines with the emotional functioning of the nuclear family, it appears clearly from Ralph's description that there is a physical and an emotional distance between them. In fact, the grey color of their bedroom indicates that their emotional relationship is neither black nor white, but rather in-between. This in-between zone corresponds to Ralph liking Dorothea, rather than loving or hating her, as well as the physical and emotional distance between their separate beds.

George and Isabel Haverstick

28 The second nuclear family is the Haversticks. Isabel appears on the stage as "small and white-faced with fatigue, eyes dark-circled, manner dazed and uncertain" (131; 1). Isabel is one of Williams's genteel sensitive Southern characters, like Blanche in *Streetcar*, although not as emotionally unstable. Her way of talking contrasts with her "*pretty, childlike appearance*." She talks "*quickly, shrilly*" like "*an outraged spinster*" (137; 1). In this connection, Isabel could be compared with the Puritanical Alma in *Smoke*, in that both of them have a spinster's manner, and Isabel "has a prim, severe manner that disguises her prettiness" (137). Michael Hooper calls attention to the fact that in *Smoke* Williams explores the theme of repressed desires and the role that is sharply assigned to women in small Southern communities in the early twentieth century (177). Hooper also adds that Williams's recurring theme of sexual repression is also portrayed in *Adjustment* through the two conflictual marriages (177). Isabel is a very tender character who clings emotionally to her very "strict but devoted" (152; 1) father who objects to her becoming a nurse, but her wish to pursue nursing as a profession is more important to her than obeying her father. She admits to Ralph, her husband's army buddy, that her experience in life is very limited because she is the "too protected" (151; 1) only child, who grew up in a small town and

was not allowed to date until her last year of high school. Moreover, her father's strict rules govern her lifestyle: for example, if he smells liquor on the breath of any boy with whom she goes out, he does not allow the boy to enter the home (151; 1). Tischler states that Williams's characterization of Isabel is derived from his interest in the Electra complex (284). This is because Isabel's morals and thoughts about men are centered on her father's idealism, and she touches that warmth and gentility in Ralph's character rather than her husband. In her quarrel with George, he mentions that "I didn't expect to marry a girl in love with her father" (188; 2). From a Bowenian view, this is because her father affects her level of differentiation of self, and Isabel's love of her father stems from the unresolved emotional attachment between the generations. Her conversation with Ralph reveals how she met George at Barnes Hospital in Saint Louis where she was a student nurse and George a neurological patient. She admits to Ralph that she was very touched by George and has a "romantic commitment" (158; 1) to him. Isabel's choice for her husband arises from feelings of sympathy towards him. When she mentions that there is "timidity" (158; 1) between them, she implicitly points to the interchangeable shyness and hesitation in their relationship. This is also an implication of a similar level of differentiation of self. Although George later accuses her of temptation, they both extend the emotional gap between themselves, lack the ability to understand the other, and neither of them absorbs the anxiety of the other. Thus, "in a conflictual marriage each spouse is convinced that it is the other spouse who needs to do the changing" (Kerr and Bowen 187). Isabel believes that it is George who should start to change because she makes her "inhibitions" clear to him and thinks that an understanding husband should treat her gently rather than spending the wedding night in a cold "tourist cabin, after a *long—silent—ride*!" (161; 1). George, in turn, is convinced that Isabel should respond to his anxious and disappointing intimacy because she knows his neurological profile. Isabel is wounded emotionally on her wedding night. Her husband tells her that he has quit his job as a ground mechanic at Lambert's Airfield in Saint Louis just one hour after their marriage. He accompanies her in a heaterless funeral-like Cadillac limousine in a snowstorm. He ignores her the whole way from Saint Louis to Dixon, drinking and listening to the radio as if she is not present while she cries and pretends to look out the window. Then they spend the night in the "Old Man River Motel, as dreary a place as [one] could find on this earth! The electric heater in [their] cabin lit up but gave no heat!" (160; 1). Furthermore, when they arrive at Ralph's bungalow, George leaves his wife without saying a word. Later, when he returns to Ralph's bungalow, he does not acknowledge Isabel's existence and speaks with Ralph as if there is no-one else there, which increases Isabel's anxiety. This could be seen as the first phase of marital conflict. They begin their life with an automatic physical and emotional distance that increases their anxiety and simultaneously gives them a chance to listen to Ralph who gradually succeeds in absorbing their tension and explains to both of them that couples go through a usual period of adjustment to each other. Ralph tells Isabel that he has known George since they both were in the Sisters of Mercy Orphans' Home in Mobile, Alabama, and that they have "been through two wars together, took basic training together and officer's training together" (137; 1). This sense of togetherness between Ralph and George represents the male bonds that were forged amongst many in the American armed forces during World War II and the Korean War. These bonds border on homoeroticism in the play, even though Ralph and George are not noticeably homosexual. In Ralph's opinion, "George is a high-strung boy" (139; 1), and he "always bluffs about his ferocious treatment of women" (159;

1). Ralph adds that when they were both in Korea, Tokyo, and Hong Kong, George "didn't come on as strong with those dolls […] as he liked to pretend to" (159; 1). Hirsch points out that George "is a self-advertised ladies' man who is really afraid of women, being much more comfortable in masculine company, where he can boast of his conquests" (Hirsch 64). Ralph finds a sensible excuse for George, and he tries to influence and convince Isabel emotionally that although George mistreats her, he is a "wonderful" (155; 1) person who supposedly values love and family life more than any other person because he grew up in an orphanage. When Isabel asks him if orphans value love more, Ralph responds by saying that orphans "get it [love] less easy. To get it, they have to give it" (152; 1). Ralph believes that an orphan does not find love easily in order to give it: this is to say that the deprived has nothing to offer, or a man can do no more than he can. Growing up in an orphanage raises the question about Ralph and George's levels of differentiation of self. Bowen supposes that children have similar levels of differentiation of self similar to those of their parents. Thus, orphans function in a relationship system that consists of surrogate parents and families that either enhance or undermine their basic level of differentiation of self. Because Ralph and George grew up as brothers within the same family (the orphanage), and because Ralph's level of differentiation of self is higher than that of George, it could be deduced that George is the projected child, who develops emotional and social symptoms. The conflict that develops between the Haversticks centers around who is responsible for the conflict, and neither of them gives in to the other. This conflict continues until the end of the play. In marital conflict both spouses are highly reactive to each other. Papero explains that "the thoughts of one or both are focused on the 'obstinate, uncaring unreasonable' qualities of the other" (53). In the Haversticks' case they both focus on each other's negative traits: she puts him down, and he hates and tortures her. As the marital conflict has degrees of conflict from moderate to severe, in some cases the problem expands to triangulate a third member. This can be a child, a member of the extended family, or a friend. During the confrontation between Isabel and George, Ralph sits in the adjacent living room. As a third corner of the triangle, Ralph's role is to mitigate the couple's tension by encouraging Isabel to "get that cross look off [her] face and give [George] a loving expression" (171; 2) "that boy [George] isn't well. Make some allowances for him"; and "you're both nice kids, both of you, wonderful people" (185; 2). The tension between Isabel and George ebbs and flows in the second phase of their marital conflict and emotional distance. Isabel and George discover that they are "opposite types" (187; 2) and when Isabel asserts this to George he agrees. By reference to Bowen theory, spouses choose partners with the same level of differentiation. In the emotional system, being "opposite types" does not indicate different levels of differentiation of self. However, this can take the form of emotional complementarity. As such, low-energy people often marry high-energy people, calm people often marry active people, and so on. In the Haversticks' situation, Isabel is romantic and "naturally gentle" (186; 2) and George is apparently violent, but, in reality, both are very vulnerable and highly sensitive. She is dismissed politely from her job because she fainted when the doctor made an incision in a patient, whilst he quits his job as a ground mechanic because his shakes get "worse than ever" (185; 2) so that he cannot hold the necessary tools. George is scared of women, and Isabel "is a sheltered daddy's girl who is also terrified of sex" (Hirsch 64). They both reflect each other's emotional images. George desperately confesses to Ralph that the "shakes" are symptoms of a deep affliction that affects his work and intimate relationship. This is an implication

that George's level of differentiation of self is very low; first, because he developed this tremor perhaps even before his marriage to Isabel, and second because people with a high level of differentiation of self can develop symptoms but they recover quickly. In George's case, his emotional reactivity to the tremor is exaggerated in his mind. He tells Ralph that even his "voice is got the shakes too" (212; 3). Ralph plays the role of psychiatrist who understands George's case. He analyzes it as a fear of impotence that increases his anxiety and shakes, while Isabel's anxiety is related to George's "sexual violence" towards her (211; 3). There is a similar case in *Summer and Smoke*, when John tells Alma "I'm more afraid of your soul than you're afraid of my body" (624; sc. 8). In George and Isabel's situation, there is no underfunctioning-overfunctioning or dominant-subordinate spouse. In other words, it is not a dysfunction in one spouse but rather a two-way marital conflict. Neither one of them would like to give in to the other one, or confess his or her fault, or adjust in order to avoid conflict. Kerr and Bowen argue that such issues as money, children, and sex do not cause marital conflicts, but rather that such tensions are caused by the "emotional immaturity" that stimulates different reactions to a specific issue (188). They also add that "[w]hile both [husband and wife] believe that for the marriage to improve it is the other that needs to change, in reality each contributes to the problem equally" (189). As a matter of fact, Isabel and George's emotional reactivity to their problem and their undifferentiation participate correspondingly to increase the conflict. Consequently, it could be claimed that they both have a similar level of differentiation of self, less than 50, and therefore the very thing that increases chronic anxiety also decreases the family's flexibility to change. The Haversticks' marital conflict develops in three stages: firstly, George and Isabel were emotionally close before getting married. Then, secondly, they have a period of emotional distance in which each one tries to avoid a conflict, corresponding with Bowen's model. Whilst each one of them believes that the other should start to change, they increase the emotional distance and the emotional gap between themselves. George has a moderate ability to differentiate between his thoughts and feelings, but he does not want to confess his fears. He understands that his tremor comes to him only when he feels anxious; he even feels that this tremor will disappear if he sets up a new business raising cattle in Texas. The third phase in their two-day marriage comes when Isabel hears Ralph confront George with the fact that the latter is sexually violent and has never touched women although he always pretends to be experienced. Isabel "sits down on the bed again, raises her hands to either side of her face, slowly shaking her head with a gradual comprehension" (211; 3). By the end of the play, they try to get on with each other and seem to regain a sense of emotional closeness, and Isabel starts to call George "baby" and "sweetheart":

> George: … I wish I had that—little electric buzzer I—had at—Barnes [Hospital].
>
> Isabel: You don't need a buzzer. I'm not way down at the end of the corridor, baby. If you call me, I will hear you. (245; 3)

Isabel makes it clear that she has the ability to absorb her husband's anxiety and become the responsible spouse. At this point, the marital conflict cycle could repeat itself in their relationship because the "intensity of the anger and negative feeling in the conflict is as the positive feeling" (Bowen 378). Throughout George and Isabel's marriage, Williams

dramatically portrays these three stages of marital conflict in order to give his characters several chances to function in a systematic way, thereby adding a practical example to Bowen's model of marital conflict.

39 Williams's *Adjustment* portrays two similar social marriages that have different nuclear family emotional mechanisms. It could be argued that the cavern appearance symbolizes the couples' emotional cases. Although everything looks very sweet on the surface, there are some emotional cracks or tremors that keep them in a state of emotional distance. Moreover, the play represents two familial emotional cases in which the couples try to adjust themselves to each other. In spite of the fact that the play is supposed to be a comedy, it is a challenging drama that evaluates real marital relationships within the family system. Hirsch points out that "Williams has always tried to write emotionally complex plays in which he placed his characters within a cosmic frame" (4). Thereby, in addition to the fact that Williams's *Adjustment* deals with two cases of shaky marriages, the play clarifies and facilitates the understanding of two complex emotional systems. Isabel summarizes that "cosmic frame" and tells George "[i]nside or outside, they've all got a nervous tremor of some kind, […] The world's a big neurological ward and I am a student nurse in it" (Act III 244). Francis Donahue comments that by dramatizing the neurological ward in the hospital, Williams suggests that "the world is a hospital in which all of us are attempting to work out an adjustment to the roles assigned" (133). Isabel's words suggest that not only do spouses pass through a period of adjustment, but also other people outside the emotional systems are assigned to their social roles.

Family Projection Process in *Period of Adjustment*

40 In *Adjustment* two cases of the family projection process are evident. The first one is the projection of Dorothea in the McGillicuddys' emotional process, and the second is the projection of Ralph Jr. in the Bateses' emotional system. As has been discussed earlier, the amount of undifferentiation that is absorbed in the nuclear family appears through four main mechanisms, including the family projection process. Although Williams does not provide information about the conjugal relationship between Mr. and Mrs. McGillicuddy, enough information can be inferred from Dorothea's emotional impairment. Mr. McGillicuddy is "an old millionaire with diabetes and gallstones and one kidney" (Act I 144). He suggests that if Ralph marries his lonely daughter, then he will inherit the McGillicuddys' wealth. Consequently, Ralph describes him as "mean-minded, small-hearted, and CHEAP!" (Act III 227). Mrs. McGillicuddy seems to follow her husband in treating Ralph in an inferior manner, but she does not listen to her husband. As a millionaire and the owner of several companies—one of them being Regal Dairy Products where Ralph works—Mr. McGillicuddy thinks that his son-in-law, Ralph, is offered "a splendid chance in the world which [he] spit on by [his] disrespect," and his superior attitudes towards his father-in-law (224). There is not enough background about Mr. and Mrs. McGillicuddy to examine the mechanism that guides their functioning in the nuclear family emotional system. But, according to Bowen theory, it is simple enough to say that the amount of the McGillicuddys' lack of differentiation could be absorbed either by marital conflict or a dysfunction in one spouse, with the anxiety most often projected onto Dorothea as the only child. Ralph confirms that his parents-in-law weaken Dorothea's functioning in the family system:

> Ralph: […] You don't love Dotty. She let you down by having psychological problems that you brought on her, that you an' Mrs Mac gave her by pushing her socially past her endowments. […] Dotty was never cut out to boost your social position in this city. Which you expected her to. You made her feel inferior all her life. (224; 3)

In this argument Ralph outlines the negative emotional effect Dorothea's parents have had on her and provides essential facets of Dorothea's projection process. First, the McGillicuddys think that they are doing Ralph a favor by providing him with a job when he marries their only daughter. Correspondingly, and according to what Ralph argues, he does them a favor by marrying Dorothea who is not a nice-looking woman and is a half-year older than him. Second, Ralph believes that his parents-in-law do not care about or love their daughter because she has "psychological problems" that decrease their social position in Dixon. Third, and most importantly, Ralph believes that his parents-in-law cause Dorothea's psychological problems. This is a valid point because the McGillicuddys' social and emotional anxieties of having an unattractive daughter with psychological problems transmit to Dorothea. According to the family projection process, not only does the psychiatrist misunderstand Dorothea's problem, but her parents push her to fulfil the role of a millionaire's daughter. Instead of building up her self-confidence, they impair her functioning to the degree that she develops an inferiority complex.

42 In spite of the fact that Dorothea gets married, has a child, and despises her father's attitude, she remains emotionally involved in her parents' emotional system, which defines her dysfunction in her married life. Her anxiety is transferred to her three-year-old son who, in Ralph's opinion, has turned into a sissy as a result of Dorothea's overprotective behavior:

> Ralph: […] and provided her with an—offspring. Maybe not much of an offspring, but an offspring, a male one, at least it started a male one. I can't help it if she's turnin' him into a sissy. (225; 3)

Dorothea's excessive care of her son is reminiscent of Philip Wylie's "momism" that is mentioned in his book *Generation of Vipers*. Dorothea's mothering anxiety is directed towards the son, and Ralph is sensitive to his wife's anxiety but he is incapable of helping. According to the family projection process, Ralph's role is either to support Dorothea's emotional attachment to their son or to withdraw from it. It looks as if Ralph likely withdraws and will interfere at a suitable time to help his son as he mentions to George:

> *I* like the kid, I mean I—would suffer worse than he would if the neighborhood gang called him "Sissy!" I'm tolerant. By nature. But if I git partial custody of the kid, even one month in summer, I will correct the sissy tendency in him. (178; 2, emphasis in original)

43 Dorothea has an emotional grasp on the child and Ralph waits until he has a chance to reinforce his son's masculine attitude. In this connection, Papero clarifies that the "dysfunction of the parents as a unit leads to the inclusion of the child in the emotional process between them" (Papero 58). In other words, Ralph and Dorothea project their anxiety and emotional dysfunction upon their son and, thereby, impair him. Ralph and Dorothea have different points of view on how to react to the emotional and actual needs of their child, and each one of them believes that he or she has the right idea. Consequently, their parental dysfunction as one unit prevents their son from understanding his role in the

family system. Accordingly, both Dorothea and Ralph are equally responsible for the “sissy” tendency in their child.

Conclusion

44 *Adjustment* explores the structures and tensions of family life in the early and middle twentieth century. *Adjustment* is an emotional marital drama that reflects and helps to develop Bowen’s theories of the nuclear family emotional system and its mechanisms. These mechanisms also explain the ways in which the Bateses and the Haversticks deal unconsciously with their emotional anxieties and undifferentiation that save their marriage solidarity. Emotional distance, therefore, enables partners to think of each other positively. Marital conflict, in its three aforementioned stages, qualifies the partners emotionally to appreciate being close or distanced from each other. What seems like dysfunction within a spousal pattern can also play an affirmative role by maintaining family integrity by reducing anxiety and balancing functioning between spouses. The key point is that although these mechanisms on the surface seem dysfunctional, conflicted, or impaired, they can also have a reasonable effect on the emotional integrity of the family. In *Adjustment*, the mechanisms of the nuclear family mitigate each of the two couples’ anxieties and permit a period of modification towards a family system and a sense of togetherness. Although in both couples there is a variance in levels of differentiation of the self, the emotional complementarity between each couple enables them to preserve a sense of emotional harmony and integrity. The overall point is that the emotional dynamic of Williams’s play can be seen to pivot on Bowen’s two concepts of the nuclear family emotional system and family projection process. Bowen theory helps to explain the family structures in Williams’s *Period of Adjustment* from a new theoretical perspective.

Notes

[1] The 0–100 scale of differentiation of self is Bowen’s distinctive contribution to an understanding of basic human traits. It is designed to clarify the “adaptiveness” of an individual to stress, in addition to analyzing to what extent people can differentiate between feelings and rational thought. This scale aims to rate levels of people functioning from 0 to a 100, or from the lowest level to the highest level of differentiation of self, or from “undifferentiation” to “differentiation”. Bowen subdivides the scale of differentiation of self to *profile of low levels of differentiation* (0–25), *profile of moderate levels of differentiation* (25–50), *profile of moderate to good differentiation* (50–75), and the *hypothetical* profile (75–100). In these ranges, Bowen defines the qualities that characterise individuals in each range and the functioning differences within the range from less to more differentiated person.

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