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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Searching for Meaning in a Chaotic World: An Analysis of Tina Howe's *Birth and After Birth*

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with Tina Howe's play *Birth and After Birth* as an absurd work. The aim is to harbor on meaning out of the chaotic life of the characters in the play. Topics like motherhood, archetypes, domestic abuse and social bias are discussed in this paper. The implementations of these topics help in shedding light on the motives behind the characters' actions and consequently reach out to a better understanding of their behaviors and those of the American people in general.

Howe's work reflects the traditional life of a stereotypical American family during the 1970s, a life that is characterized by deterioration and lack of communication, social and personal dilemmas complicit to create a pessimistic and disintegrated world. Howe proposes two possible remedies to the shattered American life. One is the necessity and importance of keeping good familial ties, and second is love, for one's self and others. By the end of the play, order is restored by the gathering of the loving family members.

Keywords: Absurd, Drama, Psychosocial, Chaos, Meaning

Introduction

Birth and After Birth (1973) is a two-act play. The play opens on the fourth birthday of Nicky, the son of a married couple, the Apples, Bill and Sandy who are in their mid-thirties. The parents are preparing for the celebration of Nicky's fourth birthday. They are expecting a visit from their relatives the Freeds, Jeffrey and Mia, who are a couple of married anthropologists (White, 1996, p. 224). Nicky wakes up early in the morning as he is excited about his birthday party. He joins his parents, who receive him well and engage with him in some children's games. They instruct him to behave well, and Sandy insists that he should open his birthday presents after he reads his birthday cards.

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The play holds a kind of reproach for American parenting methods (White, 1996, p. 224). Howe's surrealist voice in dealing with the Apples installs her as a social reformer. She describes the play as her "most original work" (Vatain, 2013, p. 2). Howe freely expresses her voice aside from precautions for outside judgement.

The play was highly experimental, that producers were reluctant to stage it due to two reasons, first Howe's gender, and second, the surrealism with which it handles its subject. Brantly (2006) comments on the experimental nature of *Birth and After Birth*, describing it as a "choreographic exercise, something you do to limber up and find your feet before you do your own dance" (2006). Howe, however, confirmed this viewpoint:

I thought somebody has to write about that ghastly dance of death between the fertile woman and the woman who either can't or don't want to have children. And nobody was doing that kind of work, and it took me a long time to figure it out, and nobody would touch it for 23 years, because it was, you know, an unexplored territory, and by then I had enough theatre experience to realize, Oh, I get it, I am a woman and as a woman I can't misbehave. (OralHistoryProjectPS, 2016)

In writing *Birth and After Birth*, Howe was influenced by the dawn of the Theatre of The Absurd during the 1950s and 1960s. The playwrights of the era were seeking untraditional settings and subject matter (Saeed, 2015, p. 315). A tendency that Howe followed in writing, is that the play presents multiple settings and disharmonious dialogue.

One of the major elements that Howe used in *Birth and After Birth* was the comic element, especially when the mother, Sandy, refers to her little son as "getting so big" (Howe, 2010, p. 28). A boy who is acted by a grown-up actor, that one would only expect to invoke laughter into the audience. Nicky insists on having grape juice. He deliberately annoys his mother and father. The first act culminated with a threat from Bill and Sandy that Nicky's birthday party would be cancelled as repayment for his misbehaving (Cuomo, 1999, p. 97).

There is an overlapping dialogue pervading the scenes of *Birth and After Birth*. Nicky, Sandy and Bill's speech with each other is incoherent and jumbled:

Bill: Will you look at that kid go! Don't tell me my son isn't football material!

Nicky: More presents, more, more, more!

Sandy: My breath smells. (Howe, 2010, p. 8)

This speech reflects the familial disintegration that conventional American families had during the 1970s. Influenced by "the 1973 oil crisis and the two-year recession that followed" (Korducki, 2024). And that "the nuclear family has crumbled piece by piece" (Korducki, 2024). The outcome was that women became more involved in the workplace as a major breadwinner, which consequently led them to be less in contact with their family members.

The arrival of the Freeds, Mia and Jeffrey (friends to the Apples) sets the scene for the second act where the disharmonious tone becomes less intense and the characters become more logical and approachable. The Apples behave themselves with the advent of the Freeds as a way to be socially acceptable. Jeffrey and Mia narrate a number of exotic rituals adopted by the indigenous tribes that they study, while Nicky tries to get everyone's attention by putting on masks and playing a fine piece of Bach music on a cello (Brantly, 2006).

Birth and After Birth is a play about motherhood and childbearing, Howe presents two conflicting viewpoints towards childbearing; Sandy is having one child and wishing for another which she cannot have. She tries to convince Mia of having a child of her own

(Cuomo, 1999, p. 98). Sandy tries to convince Mia of having a baby of her own, asserting that having a baby is worth all the sacrifices associated with childbearing. Still, she says “I guess some women just can’t have children” (Howe, 2010, p. 58).

Howe tries to expose the negative and positive sides of family life, where the Apples who lead a traditional life try to convince a professional couple, The Freeds, to embrace a conventional lifestyle like theirs (O’rourke, 1988, p. 65). The implicit irony is that the Apples are not satisfied with their life while the Freeds have a sense of fulfillment.

The play also has an autobiographical element, Howe says:

Yes, we were living in Columbia County [New York] at the time. I had just had my second child and was eager to get back to writing a few hours a day; so my friends would babysit. I was part of this circle of women whose situations were similar to mine because we all had small children—but they didn’t share my need to try and make sense of it all. They were much more besieged. Young mothers inhabit rather wild territory. Their emotions range all over the place. (Betsko & Koenig, 1987, p. 224)

Sandy is a mirror of Howe herself, who is split between the chores of motherhood and playwrighting. Sandy too, is caught between the demands of a liberating society that perceives a successful woman as a one who holds at least an occupation outside home, and the chores of motherhood. Howe provides a clue about her personality which resembles Sandy’s to some extent. She adds “I was also afraid that with the whole Women’s Movement exploding, everyone would come down on me—the men, the feminists, the nonfeminists—so I held off” (Betsko & Koenig, 1987, p. 224). Howe is optimistic and hopeful about her situation and therefore she tries to make sense of it. A merit that is traceable in Sandy, who tries to make sense of her life, a purpose that she feels can only be achieved through motherhood.

The Apples as an Archetype

The name of the family “the Apples” holds an archetypal indication. According to Hans Biedermann in his book *Dictionary of Symbolism* (1989), symbolic manifestations for the apples appear “In ancient myth the god of intoxication Dionysus was the creator of the apple, which he presented to Aphrodite, goddess of love” (p. 16). In some narrations of the story of the fall, Eve gave Adam an apple, as a forbidden fruit. In Celtic legends, the divine joy is symbolized by the apple. The apples represent feminine beauty (Jeffrey, 2018). In a secular sense; they represent a perfect circle, which has the shape of the cosmos. In Greek mythology, the apple is often associated with beauty and sin. The Trojan prince, Paris, ordered by god Zeus, gave a golden apple to Aphrodite, goddess of love, marked by the sentence ‘to the fairest’. Paris’s reward was Helen, but his abduction of Helen led to the Trojan war (Tresidder, 2004, p. 40).

In the Bible, the apple is often associated with the first sin and the fall of man. Eve was tempted by Satan, disguised as a serpent “And the woman said to the serpent, we may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, you shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.” (Bible, 2022, 3:2). The type of fruit mentioned in the Bible is not identified. Still, the Latin translation of the Bible brought about such association with the apple, since the word *malus* in Latin means both *evil* and *apple* (Martyris, 2017). From religion to literature, the apple received its negative connotation and continued to hold such negative value. In his poem “Paradise Lost”, John Milton writes:

Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit
 Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste
 Brought Death into the World, and all our woe
 With loss of Eden, till one greater Man, restore us.

In *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (Jung, 1959), Carl Jung mentions the Balkan fairytale of a sterile woman who receives a magical apple from an old man to restore her fertility, yet, the boy she begets grows to be cruel and troublesome who bullies other children and slaughters the cattle (p. 228). The significance of the apple, therefore, lies in its relation to sin and temptation, so long as man falls to passion and impulses, he will not find peace and rest in life.

The significance of motherhood

The play closely investigates the topic of motherhood. Cuomo (1999) states that “Birth and After Birth deconstructs the “Mommy Myth” and looks at the process of delivery and labor as a societally constructed event” (p. 94). According to Biedermann (1992) the mother is a symbol of protection and settlement. The archetypal image of the mother keeps with human beings through all their lives, as a source of creation. From her, they came and to her, they shall return. The image of the mother can be regarded both physically and spiritually (p. 227).

The archetypal image of the mother is deeply rooted in the memory of humanity that “in a higher or figurative sense, [she is] the goddess, especially the Mother of God, the VIRGIN (Biedermann, 1992, p. 227). She is often associated with mother earth as a source of creation. Rowland (2018) a psychology specialist, says:

Earth herself was worshipped as divine, the source of all life. ‘She’ was a goddess and a mother, yet not feminine, as opposed to masculine, for she was prior to all divisions that set up binaries and lead to atomized knowing. Depth psychologists today understand such a being as the pre-Oedipal Mother, the source of being that is not yet knowing, for consciousness has not yet occurred through the infant dividing from Her. (p. 253)

Women are still affected by their collective and genetic memory of the past and sometimes act according to that memory. The play implies that women, regardless of their choices regarding marriage and children, continue both to define and to judge themselves according to the myths of motherhood and family life. The conception of motherhood is often shaped out after social norms. That “The mother-child relationship is certainly crucial in the development of female self” (Muhsen, 2018, p. 147). The marital status is also pivotal in constructing the women’s identity. These social factors remain effective in the process of female development.

Sandy’s crave for autonomy is driven by the fact that she is a mother living under the umbrella of women’s liberation movement, where American society advocates that women should have at least one job outside home. According to feminist Humphrey (2013) during the era of the 1960s and 1970s, American women gained significant progress in their pursuit of justice and equality, the congress issued laws that promoted equal opportunities in workplace (p. 11).

Prejudiced viewpoints towards women continued throughout the 1970s that “women reported gender discrimination and harassment in several domains, including health care,

wages and education” (SteelFisher et al., 2019). However, towards the 1980s, such discrimination began to diminish. But this was not enough for feminist advocates at the time, for they sought to accomplish better results. That led them to pursue changing the constitution through their campaigns for more of justice and equality. Najdat Kadhim Moosa states:

In fact the period of 1970s of America was marked by many significant events including humiliating retreat from Vietnam and the resignation of an American president in addition to the decline in national economic productivity causing a jobless rate not seen since the end of World War II. (Moosa, 2018, p. 92)

American women were unhappy, dissatisfied and powerless. So “many of them felt that they were being treated like second-class citizens” (Bergerson, 2015). Nevertheless, psychologists, doctors and the media were searching for solutions. Women were abiding to their familial roles as wives and mothers. The traditional voice was guided by conventional psychology which maintained that women should embrace their role of femininity as their right destiny (Treanor, 2002, p. 84).

Motherhood is instinctively associated with the female, as the leading gender in ancient and in modern time, especially within American society after the rise of the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s. The woman acts as the constructor of the family. Sjo (1987) state that “Life is a female environment in which the male appears, often periodically, and created by the female, to perform highly specialized tasks related to species reproduction and a more complex evolution.” (p. 6)

Parenthood as a socially constructed commitment

The Apples are subject to societal bound perspectives. They perceive family life within the parameters already set by society. A man provides livelihood and a woman’s sole role is to nurture children. Wascura (2014) argues that “The play raises a controversial question: Is having a child worth sacrificing one’s autonomy?” (p. 50).

In *Birth and After Birth*, Howe sheds light on the parents’ behaviors. The Apples are having a reciprocating nostalgia where they crave attention and are often insecure as little children (Brantly, 2006). Erikson describes such an experience as “a significant moment in old age reaches back through a man’s unresolved adulthood to the dim beginnings of his awareness as a child” (Adulthood Essays, p. 1). The following speech clarifies their behavior:

Bill: God I love tambourines!

Sandy: Sssssssssshhhhhhhhhh!

Bill: They kill me!

Sandy: Not so loud.

Bill: What is it about tambourines?

Sandy: Bill ...

Bill (Shaking it with rising enthusiasm): They bring out the gypsy in me!

Sandy: You’ll wake him up. How often does your only child turn four? (Howe, 2010, p. 5)

Bill on the other hand seems more optimistic about it. He focuses on the positive sides of growing old. He imagines his son's future as a merry one, where Nicky would be an old man celebrating the reminiscence of his fourth birthday with the company of old ladies in a nursing house "Have you seen Mr. Apple's videos of his fourth birthday party?" the little old ladies will say, crowding into your room with their wheelchairs" (Howe, 2010, P. 11).

Howe was influenced by her father in the construction of Bill's character. He was a source of inspiration and a model she looked up to, Bill is also a figure of perfection and a model to follow, Howe comments "In my plays the husband always saves the day. It's the man who brings solace and hope." (Howe, 2010, P. xii). Sandy also wonders what she would do if she encountered a critical situation without Bill being around. She fears that she would not be able to resolve the problem. When Nicky faints, Sandy says "What would I do if this ever happened when you weren't here? (Howe, 2010, P. 17).

Nicky is another version of his father. He experiences what the latter experienced and probably would meet his futuristic contemplations too. Howe highlights the cyclic nature of life, as if it is a closed loop that everyone takes part in (Gaidash, 2014, p. 14). In his book *Insight and Responsibility* (1964) Erikson states:

while a deep identity confusion in adolescence always leads back to the infantile beginnings of "recognition," unresolved identity problems—(. .)—can reach into old age where they may become part of that despair which begrudges to the old person his own recognition of the worthwhileness of his life (p. 95)

The action of the parent towards his child is a reaction to his parents, who might be overprotective or abusive. Nicky could be considered as a symbolic figure of Sandy's father, who was a dominant, probably stubborn and unresponsive man (Backes, 2000, p. 32). She misinterprets Nicky's anger and annoyance as rejection, while it is a kind of protest for the lack of love he receives from her at certain intervals.

The play examines the status of women living within the context of the American dream where they were supposed to have happy families. Nevertheless, in a post WWII society, women were under the patriarchal prejudiced judgement that they should assume the role of mothers only. The writing of the play, on the other hand, coincided with the rise of women's movement in the US during the 1970s. Therefore, it sheds light on the conflicting status of women as they divided between accepting motherhood as a destined fate or denying it as unnecessary accessory.

Early in the play, Sandy expresses her need for independence. After being invited to dance with Bill, she replies "Just a minute, buster! What if I want to dance alone" (Howe, 2010, p. 6). This situation also reflects the dichotomy that American women feel about the rise of women's new liberating era. One side chooses the family life represented by Sandy, and the other side who find themselves obliged to choose rejuvenation are fascinated by independence and autonomy represented by Mia (Torkamannejad & Ramin, 2021b, p. 139).

Mia and Jeffrey find solace for their childless life through their visit to the Apples. The gift that they give to Nicky is a collection of slides displaying children from different cultures. Mia's imaginary birth scene performed by the Apples provided extra comfort for her, as she is too, capable of reproduction. Still, she chooses not to go down this trail. The Freed's satisfaction is fulfilled by their work domain, their company with children from various foreign cultures (Lamont, 1993, p. 33). Even their name "Freed's" suggests that they favor a free life, free of restrictions and obligations associated with the role of parenthood.

The Freeds have a wider perspective. This stems from the fact that they are familiar with a lot of cultures other than their own. They are able to create a sense of grand perspective which leads them to perceive familial life as a liability. Mia and Jeffrey are anthropologists, who are able to effectively analyze the culture of the indigenous people of various cultures and explore the motives behind many of their ceremonies.

The Freeds' major study is concerned with children's life in exotic cultures, one of the cases of their study is the Whan See tribe and their birth rituals. When a baby is born, other women help and contribute to a process where they have to bring the baby out and back to the mother's womb seventeen times. Most babies die in the process. This ritual highlights the strong attachment between the mother and her baby, and her longing to maintain her connection with the baby (Backes, 2000, p. 34). This ritual is an archetypal memory deeply rooted in the tribe's culture.

The Apples long for another child, while The Freeds prefer a childless life. Neither of the viewpoints are totally correct or wrong, for there are advantages and disadvantages with both. A better resolution would be to find an equilibrium between these two perspectives.

Nicky: The paragon of children abuse

In *Birth and After Birth*, Nicky is in the process of identity construction. He finds independence in opposing his mother. He starts to fulfill his daily needs by himself by asking for grape juice and opening birthday presents (Backes, 2000, p. 34). Nicky is abused physically by his parents. It negatively affects his identity development, bringing about psychological failures like deficient self-esteem, masking, and regressive social interaction. He strives to gain control over himself and his surroundings, but with the presence of his controlling parents his mission seems difficult (Ennis-Chambers, 1995, p. 44). This is clear through his action when he messes up his mother's decoration work while wearing a mask. His intention is to gain his parents' approval over his action. Sandy's reaction to Nicky's behavior is violent:

Nicky: I want grape juice, I want grape juice, I want grape juice!

Sandy: Mommy said no grape juice.

Nicky (Hurtling into the middle of her cleaning): Grape juice!

Sandy (Shaking him with each word): Mommy. Said. No!

(Silence. Nicky makes a strangled sound.)

Oh God!

(Nicky faints flat on the floor.)

Oh God, oh God, oh God! (Howe, 2010, p. 15)

Nicky's age corresponds with a decisive stage of self-development, that is of Industry vs Shame and Doubt, Erikson advocates that it "becomes decisive for the ratio of love and hate, cooperation and willfulness, freedom of self-expression and its suppression. From a sense of self-control without loss of self-esteem comes a lasting sense of good will and pride" (Erikson, 1950, p. 254). Carole Widick, a professor of psychology, argues that by the time the child acquires such basic skills as walking and utterance, he is driven towards exploring his environment. This inclination towards exploration is eventually tamed by social restrictions that tend to conform him to certain social obligations, especially those imposed by the parents (Widick, Parker, & Knefelkamp, 1978, p. 3).

The second case of physical violence happens shortly after the first one, yet, this time the father is involved. After smashing his glass of grape juice, Nicky keeps moving by, while Bill drags him back forcefully:

Bill (Pulling him back): Mommy said look out!

Nicky (Starting to cry): Daddy hurt me. Daddy hurt me.

Sandy (Frantically vacuuming): It's all over the floor. Don't anybody go near there until I clean it up!

Bill: I didn't hurt him, for Christ's sake, I was just pulling him away from the glass!

Nicky: You did so hurt me, you stupid idiot! (Nicky kicks Bill in the shins.)

Bill (Shaking Nicky with each word): Don't. You. Ever. Hit. Your. Father!

(Nicky wails as Sandy keeps vacuuming). (Howe, 2010, p. 26)

Psychological abuse is also present in the play, Sandy and Bill threaten him to cancel Nicky's birthday party, he runs upstairs crying:

Bill: You can spend the rest of the day up in your room.

Nicky: What about my wish?

Sandy: The child has to be punished.

Bill: It's your own fault.

Sandy: We warned you.

Nicky: You mean, I won't have any party at all?

Bill: We tried.

Sandy: We gave you every chance.

Bill: Maybe next time you'll listen.

Sandy: It hurts us more than it hurts you.

Bill: Maybe next year you'll be a better boy. (Howe, 2010, p. 27)

Nicky's psychic pain is reflected throughout his speech after his conscious-regaining. When Sandy hit him, he fell unconscious, by the time he wakes up, he exclaims "It hurts being born" (Howe, 2010, p. 17).

The controlling behavior of the Apples is not effective in their pursuit to discipline Nicky. Sandy exclaims "I don't understand you. One minute you're the sweet baby Mommy brought home from the hospital and the next, you're a savage!" (Howe, 2010, p. 15).

When Nicky plays a piece of Bach's music, everyone gets surprised (White, 1996, p. 224). Mia recognizes his talent and says, "I had no idea Nicky could play the cello so well!" (Howe, 2010, p. 50). Nicky is able to assume the characters of previous American presidents and deliver some of their speeches like Lincoln, Roosevelt, Kennedy, Nixon, Reagan and Clinton. As Kennedy, he says:

Nicky (As Lincoln): "Fourscore and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal . . ."

...

Nicky (As Kennedy): “And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” (Howe, 2010, p. 38–39).

In doing so, Nicky is seeking recognition from his parents and their guests. He feels a kind of impulse which Erikson describes as “sudden violent wish to have a choice, to appropriate demandingly, and to eliminate stubbornly” (Erikson, 1950, p. 252). He seeks appreciation from his family, because “If people are taken care of, their psychological and biological systems seem to be protected against becoming overwhelmed” (Siddiq, 2024, p. 10). It is a defense mechanism through which he tries to win his parents’ approval. Still, he fails to receive that appreciation.

Nicky’s involvement in the game of “Rabbit Says” is another sign of his search for control and independence. He asks his parents to play the game, claiming that fur grows over his hands and that he becomes a Rabbit Boy:

Nicky: Rabbit says, “Raise your hands!”

(They raise their hands.)

Rabbit says, “Scratch your nose.”

(They scratch their noses.)

Rabbit says, “Lift your right leg.”

(They do. Then Sandy and Bill do everything he says.) (Howe, 2010, p. 19)

Being so young and inexperienced, Nicky interprets his parents’ actions as an indication of his control (Ennis-Chambers, 1995, p. 44).

Sandy as stereotypical mother

Howe is a mother of two children. *Birth and After Birth* can be seen as a reconstruction of a maternal quest to secure her female identity (Backes, 2000, p. 31). There is a bipolar relation between the two sides of Howe, as a mother and as a playwright. She says, “I love being pregnant” (Ingecenter, 2014). This reflects her similarity to Sandy’s frame of mind, as she too, longs to have another child. Sandy, in this regard, represents Howe herself, with all her motherhood tensions, aspirations, love, sentimentality and rivalry.

Sandy is subject to a social bias case, where mothers who have children are considered less liberal than those who are childless. In presenting the mother-child relationship as complex and unstable one, Howe is stepping into the forbidden (Wascura, 2014, p. 121). She comments on Sandy’s situation as facing “the difficulties of being left at home with a small child” (Porter, 1999, p. 209).

There is little known about Sandy’s past. She was not on good terms with her mother. She used to suck her thumb until she became a mother “I didn’t stop sucking it until Nicky was born.” (Howe, 2010, p. 10), and she used to work for an insurance company. Sandy is a devoted mother who holds her family together. She has self-abnegation when it comes for the wellbeing and prosperity of her family (Moriarty, 2019, p. 50).

On the surface, Sandy is a happy mother, yet she is exhausted. As a grown-up woman, she longs for a successful life outside home “What if I want to turn a few heads of my own?” (Howe, 2010, p. 6). Being a daring female as Howe herself, she tries not to conform herself with the standards of her society.

Sandy is regressing both physically and psychologically in the process of conceiving and nurturing Nicky (Backes, 2000, p. 33). Dr. Ernest Jones, a psychologist, advocates that “the death instinct [is] supposed to be not only a human thing, but a concept that applied to all living matter. There [is] an inherent tendency toward self-destruction, not only in all animals, but in vegetables as well”.

One of the main features that the play orchestrates is the process of growing old. Birth and death are inevitable contrary states of everyone’s life. In the play, with each death there is a new birth and vice versa. Sandy associates herself totally with her son’s life, being consumed by his needs and longings. From the beginning of the play, she is involved in decorating the house for the birthday party. Whenever she combs her hair, sand falls down, indicating that she is degenerating into dust “my brains are drying up and leaking” (Howe, 2010, P. 11). Sandy’s behavior mirrors her name. She “psychosomatically expresses the stresses of her life as a mother and wife by regularly scratching her head, spilling piles of sand onto the floor” (Moriarty, 2019, p. 62).

Bill and Sandy perceive their effectiveness as parents according to their age, Sandy’s psychological age is far older than her physiological one. Being vulnerable, she says “Look at me! And now my hair is falling out. Poor Mommy’s going bald.” (Howe, 2010, P. 11).

The more Nicky grows into himself the more Sandy loses hers. This is a natural sacrifice each and every woman is doing through her children (Backes, 2000, p. 34). Having premature hair despair, Sandy comments “Poor old leaking Mommy ... Bald as an egg.” (Howe, 2010, p. 11). She repeats the statement again and again, referring to herself as ‘old woman’, and she finds comfort in looking in the mirror.

Sandy undergoes a series of emotional swings, with Bill and Nicky (Wascura, 2014, p. 121). There is a conflict between the associations and responsibilities of being a wife and a mother. She seeks to achieve perfection as an ideal mother and wife but it is an unreachable end (Moriarty, 2019, p. 64). This prolongs her stress and discomfort.

The psychological state of Sandy is subject to her attachment to Nicky, she thinks that she will no longer be able to conceive another child. After the birth of Nicky, she feels that she is becoming old; she maintains “When I looked into the mirror this morning, I saw an old lady. Not old old, just used up” (Howe, 2010, p. 11). Backes (2000) argues that “As her son is growing and developing, she no longer has him on her own terms, but rather on his. This is consuming her” (p. 33). Nicky becomes independent, Sandy feels that she is being detached from her son, and consequently she loses her role as a mother. She is exhausted due to Nicky’s increasing demands. She cannot fulfill these demands as she perceives herself as an old woman.

In her relationship with Nicky, Sandy is having ambivalent behavior. She sees him as an infant and as an ageing child. She plays baby games with him but at the same time she expects him to obey her instructions concerning his birthday presents. Bill on the other hand, favors playing games that are more suitable for adults with Nicky, like wrestling (White, 1996, p. 224). Sandy is in a state of predisposition to affect and be affected by her social surroundings, and that leads to a conclusion that she undertakes a healthy psychosocial development.

The Freed’s had to leave the scene eventually to catch a flight for their next business journey. The Apples are left alone to end the scene with a hopeful gesture. They gather around each other, Sandy tells Nicky “Four years ago today, you made us the happiest family in the world!” (Howe, 2010, p. 67). The end provides the audience with a hint that there is hope within the chaos of the modern world.

Conclusion

Tina Howe represents a unique propensity in the American theatre. Her plays showcase the nuclear American family in a comedic landscape. Howe borrowed the anarchic tendency of the European theatre of the absurd and embellished it with the optimistic spirit of American theatre. Her use of comedy is her way of revolting against the shortcomings of life. The more chaotic the life of her characters, the more they are brought into order and peace. Family life is her recurrent medium, wherein the dilemma of each member is recovered by the power of the family's unity. In Howe's plays no one is left behind, because the power of love always overcomes life's negativity.

In *Birth and After Birth*, the familial ties are shattered. The Apples are bound to societal norms. Sandy Apple struggles to fit with the requirements of motherhood because she perceives herself as lacking due to her infertility. Her relationship with Nicky, her son, is ambivalent. One moment she is a caring mother, another moment, she is an abusive parent. Nicky has to grapple with his controlling parents, in a family on the brink of bankruptcy. Meaning is absent in the life of individuals, but when they act as collective, meaning is restored within the family life.

In the first act of the play, the dialogue is jumbled and incoherent. The Apples are presented as separate members living in one house. But with the visit of the Freeds in the second act, their life turns out to be more stable and unified. This shows the significance of social interaction as a power that restores meaning into the individual's and family life. By bringing families together, Howe achieved her goal, which is the restoration of meaning into the chaotic life of individuals.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contribution

The first author wrote the research details, including its methodology, procedures, results, and conclusions, while the second author (the supervisor) provided supervision and guidance.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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البحث عن المعنى في عالم فوضوي: تحليل مسرحية الولادة و ما بعد الولادة لتينا هاو

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المستخلص

تتناول هذه الورقة مسرحية "الولادة وما بعد الولادة" لتينا هاو كعمل عبثي. الهدف هو استكشاف المعنى من الحياة الفوضوية للشخصيات في المسرحية. يتم مناقشة مواضيع مثل الأمومة، والنماذج الأولية، وسوء المعاملة الأسرية، والتحيز الاجتماعي في هذه الورقة. تساعد تطبيقات هذه المواضيع في تسليط الضوء على الدوافع وراء أفعال الشخصيات وبالتالي الوصول إلى فهم أفضل لسلوكياتهم وسلوكيات الشعب الأمريكي بشكل عام. تعكس أعمال هاو الحياة التقليدية لعائلة أمريكية نمطية خلال السبعينيات، وهي حياة تنسم بالتدهور وغياب التواصل، والمآزق الاجتماعية والشخصية التي تتضافر لخلق عالم متشائم ومفكك. تقترح هاو علاجين محتملين للحياة الأمريكية الممزقة. الأول هو ضرورة وأهمية الحفاظ على الروابط الأسرية الجيدة، والثاني هو الحب للذات وللآخرين. بنهاية المسرحية، يتم استعادة النظام من خلال تجمع أفراد الأسرة المحبين

الكلمات المفتاحية: عبثي، دراما، نفسي-اجتماعي، فوضوي، المعنى