The Need for Compromise in Neil Simon's *Barefoot in the Park*

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Abstract

In the twentieth century, the United States of America witnessed changeable attitudes toward marriage and the collapse of what was commonly known as a traditional marriage; with the wife as a lesser partner and the husband as the leader and the essential figure in the household. It has changed to be based on the idea that man and woman are united together in response to emotions and love, and they are equivalent and that divorce will take place if they cannot tolerate each other. The research aims at discussing the hardships which invade marital relationships in Neil Simon's ***Barefoot in the Park***.

Keywords: Compromise – divorce – love – motherhood – control – dreams and future.

From the first play till the newest one, marital and family relationships are the centre of Simon' plays. Compromise is a basic rule that binds everybody in harmony. Human's life would be in a state of complete confusion and disorder if he/she does not compromise. While in marriage, compromise is much more significant and essential. Both spouses should compromise and leave aside their individual differences. Paul and Corie have different backgrounds. Each individual has different family background, beliefs, systems, needs, education levels, and ethical standards.

In ***Barefoot in the Park***, Simon presents the theme of the need for compromise. He begins the play by giving a plain description of the apartment in which the newlywed couple has just moved into it. It is "[a] large one-room on the top floor of an old brownstone on East Forty-eighth Street off Third Avenue. The room is barren." After a long dull description of the apartment, Simon gives such a hope, "[f]or all the room's drabness and

coldness, there is great promise here. Someone with taste, imagination, and personality can make this that perfect love nest we all dream about."[1]

Corie Bratter is one of the most influential characters in the play. Simon presents a character that is "lovely, young, full of hope for the future." One can anticipate that she is the soul of the apartment; she creates and gives life to this bleak and empty apartment carrying "a bouquet of flowers" (1.1.105) which is "[t]he first bit of color in the room." (1.1.106) She is energetic, romantic, dreamer, communicative, eager, funny, optimistic, and free. She has a creative spirit, feels passionate about little things and loves chaos. She is motivated by her deep feelings.

While Paul is "twenty-six but breathes and dresses like fifty-six. He carries a heavy suitcase and an atthaché case and all the dignity he can bear" (1.1.112). He, the aspiring lawyer, is one of the conservative characters presented in the play. He is a realist, self-controlled, and ordinary person. He is the antithesis of Corie, and thus has a different look on things that happen in life. He is traditional, conformist and his goal in life is to become a successful lawyer to take care of Corie. He is motivated by logic and loves order in his life. Susan Koprince, in her book ***Understanding Neil Simon***, explains:

> Although Corie and Paul obviously love each other, they appear to be complete opposite in personality. Corie is a thorough romantic, a young woman who would like to prolong her honeymoon as much as possible. Eccentric, adventuresome . . . Corie enjoys walking barefoot in the park in the winter, eating exotic food . . . Paul, on the other hand, is conventional, conservative, and practical—a no-nonsense lawyer who has just been given his first case.[2]

In addition to the main obstacle, that is, the wide difference in their personalities, there is another one which is the apartment's condition. The apartment's condition increases the burden of the conflict. It is situated on

the fifth floor of an old building. It has a long climb and it is the first time for Paul to see the apartment. The apartment's temperature, bathroom and the hole in the upper window all annoy Paul. It is awfully cold. It is February and the apartment's heating system is not working. In fact, Corie is the main force behind getting the apartment that she and Paul live in, and she does not care of all the negatives of their place. For example, climbing the six flight of stairs does not tire and slow her down, and neither does the hole in the ceiling or the small living space. Also, Paul complains to Corie about the lack of a bath tub and the small bedroom. Contrary to Corie, climbing the stairs tires Paul out, and it takes an effect on him.

Corie's decision to take an apartment on the sixth floor leads to a conflict with her husband:

> Paul (Breathing with great difficulty, he looks back down the stairs) It's six flights . . . Did you know it's six flights?
> Corie It isn't. It's five.
> Paul (Staggers up the step into the room, and collapses on the suitcase) What about that big thing hanging outside the building?
> Corie That's not a flight. It's a stoop. (1.1.113)

Corei's mother's, Mrs. Banks, decision to visit suddenly the newlyweds increases the tension between Paul and Corie:

> Mother Well, I really had no intention of coming up, but I had a luncheon in Westchester and I thought, since it's on my way home, I might as well drop in for a few minutes . . .
> Mother . . . I know you must be busy.
> Paul Well, as a matter of fact . . .
> Corie (Stopping him.) No, we're not, are we, Paul?
> (He kills her with a glance.) (1.1.125-126)

The conservative Paul becomes annoyed when he learns that Corie arranges a blind date for her widowed mother with Victor Velasco, a strange resident in their building. Her decision to set her mother up with Velasco without the mother's knowledge also creates a conflict:

> Corie: Well, if I told you it was a blind date with Mr. Velasco upstairs, I couldn't have blasted you out of the house.
> Mother: A blind date . . . (She doesn't quite get it yet.) With Mr. Velasco . . . (Then the dawn.) The one that . . . ? (She points up, then panics.) Good God! (She takes a big gulp of her martini.)
> Paul (To Corie) You didn't even tell your mother?
> Corie I was going to tell her the truth. (1.1.155)

In fact, Corie's mother is the other conservative character in the play. Mrs. Banks' main motive is doing what is wrong and right in her life. Since she is a widow, she has unwillingness to proceed in life. She is a person that has to have control over everything in life. She feels this way so much that she sleeps on a board. Mrs. Banks also carries pills around with her to calm her stomach.

Barefoot in the Park clarifies motherhood. Mrs. Banks is a very motherly figure though, and proves it by giving daily gifts to the newly married couple.

> Corie Mother, you're an absolute angel. But you've to stop buying things for me. It's getting embarrassing. . . .
> Mother It's my pleasure, Corie. It's a mother's greatest joy to be able to buy gifts for her daughter when she gets married. You'll see someday. I just hope your child doesn't deprive you of that pleasure. (1.1.132-133)

Until the very end, she is wearing a fancy dress and is very concerned about the little things about her. Finding love is not her concern. She considers herself an aged woman and cannot entertain herself anymore.

> Corie . . . I think you should spend the money on yourself . . .
> Mother Myself? What does a woman like me need? Living all alone. . . .
> Corie . . . [Y]ou've got to start living for yourself now . . . Mother, the whole world has just opened up to you. Why don't you travel?

> Mother Travel! . . . You think it's so easy for a woman of my age to travel alone? (1.1.133).

She just concerns for her daughter and likes to become a grandmother as soon as possible, but Corie advises her to find someone to love and takes adventure.[3] Like Paul, Corie's mother too climbs the stairs with difficulty in her visit to the newlywed couple. She is cautious and conservative.

In Contrast, Velasco is "fifty-eight and not breathing very hard . . . He just doesn't think about getting tired. There are too many things to do in the world. He wears no topcoat. Just a sport jacket, an ascot, and a Tyrolean hat" (1.137-38). He is the second of the more liberal characters in the play. Velasco is motivated by temptation. He loves change in his life. His ways are looked at in foreign ways throughout the play, whether by climbing to his room through the Bratter's bedroom, or his housing situation. In this regard Layman remarks: "Ethel Banks (Corie's mother) and Victor Velasco (a flamboyant neighbor), . . . serve as reflector characters to the newlywed couple."[4] Mrs. Banks and Paul are alike. They are both cautious and "look first." Velasco and Corie are similar too. Both of them are daring and "jump into life." (1.131) In other words, Paul is not good at all for the blind date which Corie had arranged for her mother. Moreover, Ethel is completely different from Velasco and has a very different view of life. He sees them not suitable for each other and Paul considers the blind date a failure describing it as "fiasco," (2.1.148) since he thinks that his mother-in-law is neat and formal while Velasco is very odd as it appears from his style and the mess of his apartment. As a matter of fact, Velasco is a photocopy of Corie. He shares Corie's adventuresome nature, enjoying exotic food, skiing, and mountain climbing, though he is a man at the end of his fifties and well-known as "The Bluebeard of Forty-eighth Street" (1.137).

For instance, Corie loves the idea of going to a foreign restaurant and has many servings of the different foods. Ethel and Paul are not so excited about the idea of eating something new. She dances, sings with Velasco and enjoys her time. Although Mr. Velasco can be seen as weird and outlandish, he proves himself a caring individual especially to Ethel. Paul scolds Corie after the shameful dinner:

> Corie: . . . What's the matter darling...? Don't you feel well?
> Paul: What a rotten thing to do...To your own mother.
> Corie: What?
> Paul: Do you have any idea how she felt just now? Do you know what kind of night this was for her? . . . Well, she was miserable? Her face was longer than that trip we took tonight. (2.2.173)

The tension between them is intensified since Velasco after the dinner takes her mother to give her a lift to her apartment. Paul accuses Corie of being irresponsible, immature, and careless because of what she has done with her mother, saying:

> Paul: I don't understand how you can be so unconcerned about this. [He goes into the bedroom]
> Corie: [Moving to the stairs] Unconcerned . . . I'm plenty concerned. Do you think I'm going to get one wink of sleep until that phone rings tomorrow? I'm scared to death for my mother. But I'm grateful there's finally the opportunity for something to be scared about . . . [She moves right, then turns back] What I'm really concerned about is you!

In return she accuses him of being dull, lifeless, boring, uninspiring, self-centred, and just observing what she is achieving. He is formal and always correct and respectable. He shows his comment as follows:

> Corie . . . there isn't the least bit of adventure in you. Do you know what you are? You're a Watcher. There are Watchers in this world and there are Do-ers. And the Watchers sit around watching the Do-ers do. Well, tonight you watched and I did. . . . You are always dressed right, you always look right, you

> always say the right things. You're very close to being perfect. (2.2.176)

After a continuous verbal exchange, Corie comes up with the shocking news of divorce claiming that she and Paul are no longer suitable for each other. "It's suddenly very clear that you and I have absolutely nothing in common" (2.2.178). Summing up the main problem, Paul remarks:

> And I will now say something I will soon regret. . . . Okay, Corie, maybe you're right. Maybe we have nothing in common. Maybe we have rushed into this marriage a little too fast. Maybe Love isn't enough. Maybe two people should have to take more than a blood test. Maybe they should be checked for common sense, understanding, and emotional maturity (2.2.179).

In Corie's view, her husband is too proper and dignified and has no spirit of adventure to enjoy himself. Paul is so excited about his job, while Corie is so excited about her marriage. Robert K. Johnson explains the problem clearly by stating, "[e]ager to have the honeymoon mood pervade the rest of their married lives, Corie tries to convince Paul, a lawyer, to forget about his job the moment he comes home from the office."[5] Johnson believes that the intense war which breaks out the couple's life springs from Corie's uncertain picture of Paul's personality, which is asserted by the divergent pictures viewed by both Corie and her mother about Paul.[18] Corie, speaking early in the play about her mother, tells Paul that "[s]he [Corie's mother] has a different set of values. She's practical. She's not young like us" (1.123). Afterward, Mrs. Banks says to Corie, "I worry about you two. You're so impulsive. You jump into life. Paul is like me. He looks first" (1.131). Right now Corie tends to agree with her mother's description.

Despite Paul's controlling behaviour, he is willing to change to make his marriage work. When faced with the prospect of divorce, Paul loses

control by becoming drunk. In fact, Corie's selflessness influences Paul's change. As an illustration of his resolve to change, he acts on Corie's whimsy, regardless of its foolishness. He comes back awfully drunk, without his coat and socks; he has been walking barefoot in the park. He is no longer that dull and old fashioned person.

> Paul Hey! Hey, Corie . . . Let's do that thing you said before . . . Let's wake up the police and see if all the rooms come out of the crazy neighbors. . . . I want to be a nut like everyone else in this building. (3.210)

Mrs. Banks comforts Corie who is emotionally worried over the outcome of the previous night's mishaps:

> Mother: It couldn't have been all your fault.
> Corie: No . . . ? No?? Because of me you're running around without your clothes and Paul is out there on the streets with a cold looking for a place to sleep. Whose fault is that?
> Mother: Yours! . . . But do you want to know something that may shock you...? I still love you.
> Corie: You do...?
> Mother: Yes, and Paul loves you too. (3.207)

Worrying about Paul's health and state of mind and regretting the troubles she has made with Paul, Corie becomes the mature, dependable and practical wife. She admits that she needs that old Paul back, and puts Paul's interest in the initiative and will always do what is best for him:

> Corie: . . . I want the old Paul back.
> Paul: That fuddy duddy?
> Corie: He's not a fuddy duddy. He's dependable and he's strong and he takes care of me and tells me how much I can spend and protects me from people like you. . . . And I just want him to know how much I love him. . . . And that I'm going to make everything here exactly the way he wants it. . . . I'm going to fix the hole in the skylight . . . (3.212)

After Paul walks out, Corie realizes the problem she has caused. She becomes aware that she was wrong in her decisions and Paul was seeing the

right thing. She is interested in obtaining Paul's love and attention. After asking her mother for advice, Corie understands a way to make Paul happy:

> Corie: And I love him . . . Only I don't know what he wants. I don't know how to make him happy . . . Oh, Mom, what am I going to do?
> Mother: That's the first time you've asked my advice since you were ten. It's very simple. You've just got to give up a little of you for him. Don't make everything a game. Just late at night in that little room upstairs. But take care of him. And make him feel important. And if you can do that, you'll have a happy and wonderful marriage. (3.207)

Though Corie becomes aware that her strength of mind is wrong, she succeeds in making her mother and Velasco be attracted toward each other. The mother slept at Velasco's apartment the night before without her board and pills. Velasco as he carries Mrs. Banks falls down and breaks his toe.

By the end, Paul becomes carefree without turning out to be irresponsible; Corie comes to be mature without getting too serious; Ethel Banks becomes happy without being dependent on her daughter; Victor turns sensible without losing his charm:

> Velasco: You know something, Ethel . . . I don't think I'm as young as I think I am.
> Mother: Why do you say that?
> Velasco: Isn't is obvious? Last night I couldn't carry you up the stairs. I can't eat rich foods any more . . . (Very confidentially) . . . and I dye my.
> Mother: Oh . . . Well, it looks very nice. (3.202-203)

Accordingly, all the characters have changed toward a life-style featuring moderation. In this regard, Edythe M. McGovern remarks:

> In a very real sense each of the four characters has altered his behavior so that it has become less polarized, less radical, less extreme. Each person has gravitated toward a moderation which seems to be the playwright's ideal.[7]

Simon suggests that any prosperous relationship is based on give-and-take process. Moreover, Simon wants his audience to learn about the right way to live their lives, through showing the absurd life they live.

From the psychological perspective, Corie and Paul's decision to end up their marriage and get through divorce can be seen as an individualistic choice. When Corie finds herself that she is no longer similar to Paul, she asks for divorce. Equally, Paul accepts Corie's decision when he finds that Corie no longer wants him as husband and lover. When they reach a point that they cannot understand each other, they approach divorce easily.[8]

The message to be conveyed is the need for compromise; the need for accepting others as they are, to look at the positive sides of the people one lives with, and ignores the negative sides. Any successful relationship should be based on self-denial, forgiveness, love and tolerance. What is more, Simon tries to communicate a point which indicates that in order to live pleasurably without boredom, you have to follow a middle course, but with a sensible regard for responsibility.[9] Both Paul and Corie have to be tolerant. Since marriage is full of compromises, both spouses must respect and recognize individual sacrifices.

Similarly, Robert K. Johnson points out:

> All works out in the end. Ethel Banks feels her physical troubles are inconsequential compared to her having had one of the most exciting nights in her life. . . . Velasco acknowledges that he is too old for late-night carousing and becomes genuinely interested in Mrs. Banks. Corie and Paul recognize the worth of the traits they have in common and the traits that only the other possesses.[10]

Simon's message for Corie and Paul as well as any spouses is that Corie must never think that her honeymoon will last forever and for Paul the honeymoon atmosphere will not affect the practical side of his life. He can

take care of her to some degree. According to Simon, to make marriage succeed, both spouses have to change their ways of thinking to understand each other better. He comments on Corie and Paul's situation by saying that "[t]hey were hardly nice to each other for a moment in the play until he realizes how much he needs and misses her at the end."[11] Both Corie and Paul have learned something new and made up their minds to have a harmonious life together.

In his play, Simon presents a problem and then gives a solution for it. He also displays that men and women are independent. Both Corie and Paul have made up their mind to be committed toward each other emotionally. As a result, life will be full of love and understanding.[12] Furthermore, McGovern has faith that Simon's comedy has expressed philosophical perspectives; it is "about the ways life can and should be lived."[13] Simon clarifies the habits and behaviours that had better to be followed.

Ruby Cohn, in her article entitled "Funny Money in New York and London: Neil Simon and Alan Aykbourn," sums up the play by saying:

> Simon's comedy bubbles up primarily from petty crises of the temperamentally opposed newlyweds and, secondarily, from different life styles of an older couple. During the Act I exposition most of the humor arises from the small, unfurnished fifth-floor walkup apartment. In Act II the four characters on a double date pop exotic knichi [a kind of food] into their mouths—with diverse degrees of dexterity and pleasure. When the foursome return from an Albanian Island, alcohol has fertilized their wits. Simon then interweaves the quarrel of the newlyweds with their anxiety about the bride's mother, before the comedy's final high tone, when the once proper young husband drunkenly sings an Albanian folk song while precariously balanced on a skylight. He can be as Bohemian as his wife, who walks 'Barefoot in the Park.'[14]

Control is illustrated in this play in several ways. Paul has an expectation that Corie will control herself in public places, and makes his disapproval clear when she does not want to:

> Paul (Corie jumps on him and flings her arms around his neck. He winces in pain.) Do you have to carry on--a whole personal conversation with me—on the stairs?
> Corie Well, there's so much I wanted to tell you . . . and I haven't seen you all day . . . and it takes you so long to get up.
> Paul Everyone knows the intimate details of our life . . . I ring the bell and suddenly we're on the air. (2.1.146)

In order to have a happy marriage, Paul realizes he must stop his controlling behaviour. Paul changes his conservative ways and his happy marriage is restored: "What do you think I've been doing? I've been walking barefoot in the goddamn park" (3.209).

Ethel Banks controls herself to the extent of sleeping on a board, but she is surprised to discover she can abandon any control: "I just realized. I slept without a board . . . For the first time in years I slept without a board" (3.205).

Mrs. Banks also loses control by fainting and falling down the front stairs. Victor takes care of her, which leads to her change of heart; While Victor is carrying Mrs. Banks he falls down the stairs, breaking his big toe. He makes a trip to the doctor's where he undergoes a complete medical examination that indicates he must modify his outrageous lifestyle.

At the end of the play, both Corie and Paul transform into a part of the other. At the beginning, Corie is too much controlled by her emotions but starts to control her emotions and works her brain in the end. Corie grows and changes in her behaviour; Paul gives up little of his logic and starts to give more of his feelings and work his heart.

Dreams and future are also explained in this play. Paul dreams of a successful law career which entails preparation at home, thus creating a conflict with Corie:

> Paul Oh, Corie, baby, I'm going to be a lawyer . . . I guess I'm pretty excited. You want me to be rich and famous don't you?
> Corie During the day. At night I want you to be here.(1.117)

Mrs. Banks also dreams of being a grandmother instead of exploring her new-found independence:

> Mother (Considers.) I'd like to be a grandmother. I think that would be nice.
>
> Corie A grandmother??? . . . What's your rush? You know, underneath that Army uniform, you're still a young, vital woman . . . (1.134)

If Paul and Corie do not patch up their differences, their marriage and future will dissolve, and with it the chance for marital bliss and many offspring. Her mother wishes that her daughter will be pregnant "I'd like to be a grandmother." And the telephone man also wishes the same thing "[h]ave a nice marriage . . . And may you soon have many extensions" (1.111). And if Ethel Banks does not take a chance on opening herself up to a man (Victor) and new adventures, her future will be lonely and bleak.

In conclusion, the central idea the play communicates is that through love and compromise anyone can survive. Koprince believes that:

> Simon supports not only moderation and compromise but also the institution of marriage itself. His faith in marriage is revealed by the reconciliation that takes place between Corie and Paul at the end of the play and by the rapprochement between Ethel Banks and Victor Velasco that brings these characters into the same sphere of social harmony.[15]

Corie is passionate by nature whereas Paul is more reasonable as he thinks of his future career. Gradually, both change to end up having a happy marriage based on that balance of passion and reason. It seems that Simon says that men and women have to find a moderate way of living and mix their love and logic in order to get a happy and prosperous marriage.

Paul must understand that his past with Corie and the memories it has created demonstrate the utmost importance of his marriage; Corie must come to the understanding that Paul's career ambitions are important and necessary for him to attend to in order to take care of her. Ethel Banks must learn to accept Victor's eccentricities and appreciate his kindness; Victor must understand that modifying his behavior does not mean he has to lose his sense of humor.

One of the lessons learned by the end of the play is that fixed attitudes in life can cause relationships to sour. The characters at the end of the play have more noticeable differences than the characters at the beginning of it. In the end, the characters go from one end of the conservative-liberal spectrum to somewhere in the middle. In their compromises, every one finds happiness in each other.

Notes

[1]Neil Simon, ***The Comedy of Neil Simon*** (New York: Nancy Enterprises, Inc., 1971), 105. All subsequent textual references of this edition will be taken from this book and indicated by parenthetical notes in the body of this research.

[2]Susan Koprince, ***Understanding Neil Simon*** (Columbia: University of South California Press, 2002), 23.

[3]"Barefoot in the Park," ***Masterplots II: Drama***, rev. ed., Ed., Christian H. Moe, Salem Press, Inc., 2003, eNotes.com, accessed 29 Nov., 2011, available on <http://www.enotes.com/barefoot-park-salem/>, 1.

[4]Bruccoli Clark Layman, ***Dictionary of Literary Biography*** (New York: The Gale Group, Inc., 2004), 274.

[5]Robert K. Johnson, ***Neil Simon*** (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 9.

[6]Ibid., 12.

[7]Edythe M. McGovern, ***Not-So-Simple Neil Simon: A Critical Study*** (New York: Perivale Press, 1978), 45.

[8]This information is based on an oral consultation conducted with assistant Prof. Dr. Laith Al-Samaraee, College of Education, University of Dyala.

[9]McGovern, 45.

[10] Johnson, 10.

[11]Neil Simon, ***Neil Simon A Memoir: The Play Goes On*** (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1999), 152.

[12]"Barefoot in the Park," ***Masterplots II: Drama***, 2.

[13]McGovern, 39.

[14]Ruby Cohn, "Funny Money in New York and London: Neil Simon and Alan Ayckbourn," in ***Modern Dramatists: A Casebook of Major British, Irish, and American Playwrights,*** ed. Kimball King (London: Routledge, 2001), 281.

[15]Koprince, 26.

الحاجة الى حل وسط في مسرحية نيل سايمون *حافي القدمين في المنتزه*

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الخُلاصة

في القرن العشرين شهدت الولايات المتحدة الاميركية مواقف متغيرة تجاه الزواج وانهيار ماكان يعرف عادة بالزواج التقليدي؛ مع الزوجة كشريك أقل والزوج كالزعيم و الشخص الأساسي في الأسرة. لقد تغير ليكون مستند على فكرة ان المرأة والرجل يتحدون معا استجابة الى العواطف والحب, وانهما متكافأن وان الطلاق سيحدث اذا كانوا لايستطيعون تحمل بعضهم البعض. يهدف هذا البحث الى دراسة الصعوبات التي تغزو العلاقات الزوجية في مسرحية نيل سايمون ***حافي القدمين في المنتزه***.

كلمات رئيسية: التسوية – الطلاق – الحب – الامومة – السيطرة – الاحلام والمستقبل