

Females' Journey into Finding the Self
in
Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*

رحلة نسوية لايجاد الذات في مسرحية
"جرائم القلب" للكاتبة بيث هينلي

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Abstract

Writing as a female playwright in theatre gives a deeper depiction of woman's real- self. Beth Henley has succeeded in providing a new realist vision of women's abilities to face their inevitable tragic fates and how to conquer their despair. In *Crimes of the Heart*, the playwright uses certain method to present the development of the heroines' characters through blending the tragic events with a comic frame. In fact, Henley focuses on the simple humorous activities more that the importance of the tragic event to present her vision of how to survive and face the crisis of life.

Crimes of the Heart is a play that is concerned about three sisters whose lives are headed in distinctly different directions; however, they are struggling to get on their lives.

I. Beth Henley's *Crimes of The Heart*

Beth Henley is a female Southern playwright whose work, *Crimes of the Heart*, utilizes a means of dramatic presentation which is now being used by most contemporary capable and established writers; as they are considering the new voices in this field. Accordingly, they have dramatized issues and concerns which simultaneously address the minority and which have been accorded mainstream attention. The presentation of the new realism is expanding the reach of the traditional theatre, which is being refreshed by new voices and vital perspectives. As a result, Henley's drama is the presentation of the new realist mode of portraying means that certain minority elements of society under-represented by reflecting her point of view as a Southern and Feminist playwright.¹

Thus, Henley uses a new mode of realism that shows tragedy in feminist theatre is not an imitation of life but a re-thinking, and re-defining of life, thereby rendering a new approach to it. At the same time, as a female playwright, reflecting a woman's point of view, Henley focuses on a group of women and not on one female protagonist. What the playwright wants to show is the fact that the heroine in the feminist tragedy is not one single individual but a single female consciousness. The sharing and the feeling of love, which are presented by the sibling relationships of the heroines identified in *Crimes of the Heart*, are a proof of the presence of the female consciousness to discover and create themselves.¹

Crimes of the Heart (1981) is about the relationships among women who have experienced troubled lives and after desperate solutions to their problems. It tells the story of Magrath sisters, reunited due to the arrest of the youngest sister, Babe, for the attempt to kill her husband, State Senator Zackery Botrelle. Each one of them is afraid of the recurrent pain; especially for those sisters who live with the burden of their mother's suicide years ago. The tragic history of their sexual relationships is something that adds to their crisis of having helpless suppression of

their dreams for the sake of a domineering grandfather. For Lenny, the oldest sister, her shrunken ovary is a barrier to any future marital relationship. Thus, she spends her life with her grandfather and gradually loses her identity and dreams. Meg, the youngest sister, who is known for singing and notorious relationships, has to face her failure as a singer. Babe is oppressed and abused by her husband, a matter which turns her away to a relationship with a young black teenager. The Magrath sisters would like to change their fates but they find themselves tied because of their grandfather, for whose sake they silently bear them.

The role of the grandfather in their lives is of great significance. The play opens with Old Granddaddy, a surrogate father to the sisters, is now in the hospital dying. Old granddaddy is the only father figure that the sisters identify with and he becomes a key structural device in the play. A death watch atmosphere is set by his off-stage dying. Lenny has already moved her cot into the kitchen to “be close and near him at night if he needed something.”¹ From the beginning of the play the audience know that his state is gotten worse in the hospital. As the sisters are reunited to face a series of crises, Act Two ends on the jolting announcement that he had a stroke. Act Three begins with the news that he is in a coma and that his death is expected.

Throughout the play, it seems that the sisters have tried to live out his dreams for them. He has filled them with illusions which have led them into self-destructive lifestyle. He distinguished Babe as “the prettiest and most perfect of the three” (p.21). His sense of pride is increased by arranging her marriage to Zackery Botrelle, the richest and most powerful man in Hazlehurst” (p.22). It was Old Granddaddy’s dream, not Babe’s dream that she would “skyrocket right to the heights of Hazlehurst society” (p.22). Babe is not ready to be suited among the social set. Moreover, Old Granddaddy’s dreamy husband has proved to be an abusive man, so Babe seeks love and understanding in the arms of fifteen-year-old

black boy and shoots her husband when he strikes the boy. In following granddaddy's path that is pointed out for her, Babe finds herself alienated, perplexed and suicidal.¹

Also, granddaddy has his own dream for Meg which led her astray. He is the one who motivated her to believe that she could become a Hollywood celebrity. He told her that with the gift of singing all she needed was exposure, and she could make her own "breaks" (p.23).

Ironically, Meg is metaphorically, struck in cement, trapped in the dream she and her Old Granddaddy share. Meg has also been driven to the brink of madness trying to live the role Old Granddaddy has cast her in. Being unable to achieve success, she has started working in a dog-food company. She has experienced a nervous breakdown which has prevented her from coming home in Christmas. She psychologically loses her singing voice partially to get even with granddaddy for whom she has been singing. In the hospital, Meg finds herself telling him lies about her making of a record album, only to create a fake identity in order to please a father figure. Meg says "I hate myself when I lie for that old man. I do. I feel so weak." (p.69). It seems that Meg is so much controlled by Old Granddaddy in her attempts to fulfil his vision of what she should be.¹

Lenny is fulfilling Old Granddaddy's image of what she should be. Old Granddaddy has made Lenny aware of the fact about her "shrunken ovary" (p.34). As a result she starts to live her life as Old Granddaddy's nursemaid. The only man she has had a relationship with she stopped seeing because of Old Granddaddy, who told her that a man would not marry her because she could not have children. Lenny feels that Old Granddaddy has always wanted to see them happy, "He went out of his way to make a home for us, treat us like we were his own children. All he ever wanted was the best for us." (pp.69-70). So, the sisters are trapped in an ambivalent

relationship with a father figure who has determined what is the best for the sisters, and they feel guilty not following his wishes.¹

In spite of the ambivalent feelings the sisters have toward their grandfather, it is his illness that brings the three sisters to reunite and unveil their secrets to one another. Hence, Lenny succeeds in renewing her relationship with Charlie. Meg, in her attempt to renew her friendship with Doc Porter, finds the hopelessness of this affair, but discovers that she has not lost concern for life, and in this discovery returns to her interest in singing. Babe, who attempts suicide, finds that she has no will to die like her mother. It is obvious that the frustration that had caused their mother to commit suicide has left them with psychological wounds, but it has affected them to have the determination to survive. Together again, they generate, in their harmonies and dissentious, a solidarity which suggests at least one antidote to their suffering, albeit only momentary. Moreover, the heroines isolate themselves from the constructions of the grand-father and decide for themselves for their lives.¹

I. The Magrath Sisters' Journey into Finding the Self:

It is interesting the way Henley depicts those women in their journey to create a new self in the new world. As the play opens, the situation improves because it gets worse. Henley's comic genius is shown in this contradiction. Each sister is able to feel the other's pain, but not by being the other completely to the extent that she loses her identity by surrendering to the woe. Each one preserves enough of herself to see the absurdity in the other's situation. As the same can be said about her personal situation in that she feels the pain of life but retains enough detachment to see the absurdity in it. Act-three presents the contradiction in successive senses. Babe goes upstairs to hang herself as her mother did but runs back downstairs moments later, with the broken rope round her neck to answer the telephone. She then tries to suffocate herself in the oven, but as she gets insight into

her mother's suicide, moves her head and hits it, which stuns her so that she falls back and has to be rescued by Meg.¹

Henley presents domestic comedy and inserts it with an absurdist perspective; the blending of these two elements is primarily effected by Henley's use of a disconnected, fragmented style of dialogue, a style comically reminiscent of another playwright. Accordingly, Henley has mastered the art of grotesquely comic by co-mingling serious and life threatening concerns with daily activities. Having such a style makes it obvious how the serious concerns are reduced to trivialities, and the daily activity is raised to seemingly unwarranted but certain levels of importance. The extreme subjectivity explained in the various characters' value system leaves us in a state of uncertainty, but this uncertainty does not lead to despair; it is a simple state of being to be accepted. We simply turn to laughing at the "succession of misfortunes inflicted upon people who lack the capacity to avoid them."¹ Henley combines together the violent and the humorous. As she herself said:

I've always been very attracted to split images. The grotesque combined with the innocent, a child walking with a cake, a kitten with swollen head... somehow these images are a metaphor for my view of life... part of them is being brought up in the south; southerners always bring out the grisly details in any event. It's a fascination with the stage of decoy people can live in this life the imperfections.¹

Confusion completely asserts itself within the first minutes of the play. The news of Babe's attempt to murder her husband is replaced by the concern for the death of an old horse which was struck by lightning; followed by the news that Old Granddaddy's health has deteriorated. To conclude; the tragic events include an attempted murder, suicide, illness and sexual abuse. These events are not as much significant as the way Henley uses to present them by inserting horrifying important events into a world of mundane. The facts of death, suicide, and assault take on a certain intimacy. They are no longer only distantly experienced, and neither are they sensationally experienced as in much literature, drama, and the media in general. Henley's aim is to make the presentation of events, set in a household that could be our neighbour's, a matter which could lead the terrifying surmise that assault and death lurk at every corner, even in the most normal neighbourhood. Thus, Henley succeeds in giving these threatening facts of life a certain intimacy, and she also goes to a level where this fusion of the significance with the mundane succeeds in convincing us that death, suicide and assault are realities that we face every day to some extent.¹

Being able to succeed in presenting these ingredients, Henley causes the feeling of a widespread relief among the audience. The ingredients are in place for a serious drama of women's alienation and there is an implication that male's insensitivity has pushed more than one of them to the verge of self-destruction just like the sisters' mother. However, it seems the play takes a comic direction, albeit one that never entirely heals the wounds opened up by experience. Hence, the feeling of relief comes after mystery or worries and cares just like Babe's discovering the reasons behind their mother hung the cat with her in suicide. The hysterical laughter, after the news of Old Granddaddy's predictable death, comes when Meg announces in defiance. "He [her granddaddy]'s just gonna have to take me like I am and if that sends him into a coma, that's too just down bad" (p.99). Ironically; he has just been sent into a coma, and Meg's line creates a hysterical

laughter among the sisters. Brendon Gill notes that the sisters' outburst into laughter "strikes us as the most natural thing in the world to do"¹. The difficulty of performing such a scene which blends a fine line between comedy and horror is connected to the sisters' contradictory feelings towards an absent father figure.

It is this contradiction that shows another problematic point in the play- its resolution. For Morrow, a critic, states that "Lenny's birthday cake foreshadows her being surrounded by enduring and increasing circles of love"¹. However, one has to agree with Guerra's less sanguine conclusion. According to this critic, Guerra, Lenny's statement that the laughter of the sisters was just for a moment can only "remind the audience of the uncertain fates of these women and raise doubts that either their new closeness or their new selves can be sustained"¹. Thus, there is certainty of the resolution since the ending is obviously connected to the sister's reactions to Old Granddaddy; first the secretly unrevealed birthday wish which Lenny has made at the beginning of the play is linked to Lenny's first wish that Old Granddaddy will be put out of his misery; though Babe concludes that "birthday's wishes don't even count when you do not have a cake" (p.96). Another thing, that the final scene of the three sisters laughing, reflects the previous laughter scene over the Old Granddaddy's coma. Their laughter comes more out of hysteria than joy just like the scene when the sisters begin to stuff themselves with an enormous birthday cake for breakfast. In spite of the fact that they have revealed some of their secrets to each other, their moment of laughter and their gorging of themselves with a big birthday cake can only depict what Old Granddaddy has been offering them all along: solace and a life full of empty desserts. It seems as if those women, who are trapped in the world of pain and sufferings try to find ways to get through the bad days.¹

In fact, Henley provides a general answer at the end of the play that survival needs a concerted effort of love and community support. It is felt that Babe will

survive, she says “I’m not like Mama, I’m not so all alone”(p.121). And Meg learns the same lesson. After her night with Doc, she says, “I realised I could care about someone. I could want someone”(p.98). And the same is with Lenny’s revolution, since her problems are somehow solved through the traditional entrance of a lost suitor. For the two-other central character, Meg and Babe, the lesson is learnt but less resolved. Their lessons in the play lead to the fine conclusion that “we’ve just got to learn to get through these real bad Days”(p.120), and that one cannot do it alone. It seems that Henley presents a learning process that has been experienced on the realistic dimension which is just beginning for them, as the play ends with the sisters’ determination to face the next inevitable crisis together and endure it as well.¹

The playwright demonstrates, by inserting laughter into her characterizations, how the human spirit copes and survives despite despair. *Crimes of the Heart* presents human resiliency, with characters rising above earthly dilemmas to become ennobled through their capacity to love. In this sense, the Magrath sisters are able to find an alternative unifying bond which makes survival tolerable. This alternative is simply presented in the play to face the other failed answers; love on general and the comforts of family in particular are what Henley provides as solutions to their problematic lives. The play’s final image; the sisters reconnect with one another to celebrate Lenny’s birthday with the cake and certainly without the assurance that calm will prevail. It becomes a less important crisis, which they have to face, in comparison to the result they have found at the end. In fact, Henley presents in *Crimes of the Heart* a heroine who takes the risk and accepts the potential to create a new self through a process of developing one’s individuality and being able to sympathetically identify with others.¹

Another significant thing to be mentioned is the setting of the play, which Henley uses as a proof of the female consciousness that pervades the atmosphere of

the play. The playwright wants to show that even if a woman might step out of the home physically, but still in the subconscious, home is frequently a setting sought after. The “kitchen-family room” is a significant setting in the feminist theatre. It implies that it is the woman’s space; her personal and intimate space. The setting of the kitchen with a dining table and a cot in *Crimes of the Heart* reveals this fact about woman’s space. It sheds light on woman’s autonomy since the action takes place only in that space.¹

Conclusion

The new realist way which Henley presents in *Crimes of the Heart*, by giving a sequence of tragic events which are fused by humorous events and actions, reflects the playwright’s aim to depict the journey which the Magrath sisters pass to find and create their selves. The atmosphere of love and unity, which prevail throughout the events of, is the answer that Henley gives to those women who are presented as full of pain and despair at the beginning of the play. They have learned how to face their crisis together by laughing at the unhappiness they might find themselves in. Thus, they are going to be together for the next expected bad times.

Notes

¹ W. William Demastes, *Beyond Naturalism: A New Realism in American Theatre* (NY: Greenwood Press, 1998), p.126.

¹ C.W.E.Bigsby, *Modern American Drama, 1945-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 47.

¹ Beth Henley, *Crimes of the Heart* (NY: Dramatists Play Service Inc, 1982), p.19. All subsequent references to the text are from this edition.

¹ Paul Rosefeldt, *The Absent Father in Modern Drama* (NY: Peter Lang, 1996), p. 77.

¹ Ibid. , p. 78.

¹ Ibid.

¹ E.D.Huntley, " *Crimes of the Heart*" *Mast plots II: Drama Series* (CA: Salem, 1990), p. 56.

¹ Robert J. Andreach, *Creating the Self in the Contemporary American Theatre* (Carbondale: Illinois University Press, 1998), p. 128.

¹ Demastes, p.137.

¹ Belsco and Koenig, *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights* (NY:1987), p.215.

¹ Demastes, p.140.

¹ Janet L. Gupton, "Un-ruling" the Women: Comedy and the

Plays of Beth Henley and Rebecca Gilman" in *Southern Women Playwrights: New Essays in History and Criticism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), p. 125.

¹ Laura Morrow, "Orality and Identity in *Night, Mother* and *Crimes of the Heart*". *Studies in American Drama* (np., 1988), p. 35

¹ Jonnie Guerra, "Beth Henley: Female Quest and the Family Play Tradition", Hart, p. 119.

¹ Jean Gagen, "Most Resembling Unlikeness, and Most Unlikely Resemblance: Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* and Chekov's *Three Sisters*", *Studies in American Drama*. (1989), p. 88.

¹ Linda Robert Paige, "Off the Porch and into the Scene": Southern Women Playwrights Beth Henley, Marsha Norman, Rebecca Gilman, and Jane Martin". *A Companion to Twentieth Century American Drama* (NY: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 318.

¹ Huntley, p. 410.

¹ Demastes, p. 48.

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الباحثة : مروة غازي محمد

الملخص

ان الكتابة من قبل كاتبة في مجال المسرح يعطي تصوير اعمق لذات المرأة الحقيقية. ان الكاتبة هنلي تحاول دائما ان تعكس في كتابتها خلفيتها الجغرافية ككاتبة من الجنوب المريكى بشكل عام و كاتبة نسائية بشكل خاص، المر الذي جعل هنلي تتميز بتقديم مسرح واقعي جديد و عصري. لقد نجحت الكاتبة بيث هنلي في اعطاء رؤيا واقعية جديدة عن قابليات النساء في مواجهة الاقدار المأساوية المحتمومة وكيفية التغلب على اليأس.. في مسرحية "جرائم القلب" تستعمل الكاتبة طريقة معينة لتقديم التطور في شخصيات البطلات من خلال المزج بين الاحداث المأساوية في اطار هزلي ضاحك. في الحقيقة تركز هنلي على الاحداث الفكاهية البسيطة اكثر من اهمية الاحداث المأساوية وذلك لتقديم رؤيتها حول كيفية مواصلة الحياة ومواجهة مصائبها حيث تمر كل من البطلات الثلاث في المسرحية برحلة نفسية و روحانية تكتشف كل منهن قدرات جديدة و شخصية قوية حاولت مصائب الحياة اخفاؤها.