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Family Loyalty in Literature: The Inner Conflicts We Encounter in Dealing with Family Relationships

Cynthia Ebertz

Johnson County Community College, cebertz@stumail.jccc.edu

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Family Loyalty in Literature: The Inner Conflicts We Encounter in Dealing with Family Relationships

Abstract

Coming from a Latino culture, my life revolves around the importance of having family relationships that are loving and supportive. But my culture's ideals clash with the American ideals of family, and it sometimes becomes difficult for me to appease my family while at the same time trying to do what makes me happy. And not only do I grapple with cultural differences, but I also fight with differences between the generational concepts of my parents' time compared to the ones of my time. We encounter such conflicts in thousands of literary works, which give us another venue to examine and analyze situations with a little distance. In choosing to analyze the theme of family loyalty, I came across short stories of three powerful authors: Amy Tan, Flannery O'Connor, and James Baldwin. These three authors composed unique settings with generational differences between their story's main characters to show the inner conflicts one deals with in the name of family.

Cover Page Footnote

Faculty Mentor for this paper was Danny Alexander, English.

Coming from a Latino culture, my life revolves around the importance of having family relationships that are loving and supportive. But my culture's ideals clash with the American ideals of family, and it sometimes becomes difficult for me to appease my family while at the same time trying to do what makes me happy. And not only do I grapple with cultural differences, but I also fight with differences between the generational concepts of my parents' time compared to the ones of my time. We encounter such conflicts in thousands of literary works, which give us another venue to examine and analyze situations with a little distance. In choosing to analyze the theme of family loyalty, I came across short stories of three powerful authors: Amy Tan, Flannery O'Connor, and James Baldwin. These three authors composed unique settings with generational differences between their story's main characters to show the inner conflicts one deals with in the name of family.

In "Two Kinds," Amy Tan depicts a Chinese family that immigrated to the United States. Jing-mei, the second-generation Chinese daughter of the family, is the narrator and sets the tone for the story by saying, "America was where all my mother's hopes lay" (1232). Jing-mei's mother had the unrealistic expectation of the daughter becoming a prodigy someday, and she pushed Jing-mei to try out new talents almost on a daily basis (1232).

Like Jing-mei, I want to keep my parents happy and to make them proud of the daughter they raised. And I do accomplish that, for the most part, but there are times when I know I've let them down. So I brush it off and tell myself that I'll do better next time, only to end up disappointing them again. And again. And again. Which is how Jing-

mei started out in her younger years, anxious to please her mother but constantly failing at whatever new talent her mother had her try.

Jing-mei's mother felt she was doing what was best for her daughter, pushing her to really try her hardest in hopes of Jing-mei making something of herself someday. But what the mother didn't realize, or was too blinded to see by her own need to be proud of Jing-mei, is that she was accidentally inflicting pain on her daughter. Jing-mei came to resent the new trials and even her own mother for treating her like a slave. Jing-mei resented it so much that she began to assert her "right to fall short of expectations" (1239) as she failed in several other venues of life.

As the mother and the daughter fought to gain control of how Jing-mei was to live her life, their relationship grew more and more strained. I find it odd that the mother didn't stop to consider and understand how Jing-mei must have felt, and if she did, it didn't seem to have had much of an effect on her, as she didn't lighten up on Jing-mei. Most parents reach a point where they realize how unhappy their child is, but the mom in this story kept pushing and pushing until Jing-mei decided to cross the line, regardless of the consequence of her words, and never got the chance to apologize. The story ends with Jing-mei playing two pieces on the piano, "Pleading Child" and "Perfectly Contended," only to then realize that "they were two halves of the same song" (1240).

I find that this ending is significant in describing Jing-mei's character development. She was the pleading child trying to escape the damaging cycle created by her mother, and later in life she becomes perfectly contented as she chooses to dismiss her mother's wishes and live as she feels right for herself. I think most of us go through this transition. As children, we try to get a grip on our lives in a time when our parents

are deemed to know what's best for us. My parents struggled to loosen their grip as I grew up and tried to make my own decisions, just as Jing-mei's mother did. I understand now that they were trying to help guide me, but at the same time, I needed to have opportunities to take life with its ups and downs on my own terms as a growing young adult.

We see a stronger disconnect between parent and child in Flannery O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge," where we read about an old-fashioned mother and a progressive son living in the South after a century of desegregation between the blacks and the whites. Julian, the son, continuously criticized his mother (most of the time internally) for her racist ideals and rather ignorant opinions. Unlike Jing-mei in Tan's story, Julian expressed a complete disconnect from his mother as "he had cut himself emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity" (1010). His objectivity (or bias against her, rather, perceivable by his constant belittling of her image) holds true for the majority of the story as he decides "to make himself numb" during the time he spends with his mother (1005), but his objectivity completely diminishes at the end of the story as we reach the fate of his mother and Julian drops the cold act as worry and fright consume him.

This story showcases the typical I-can't-stand-my-family-but-still-love-them situation. It is the character with this type of mindset that I can relate to only in a limited way. I realize that not being able to see eye-to-eye on a topic such as racism puts a lot of strain on a relationship, especially when having to live together, but I personally would never be able to treat a family member in such a way as Julian treats his mother. I've had arguments with my parents, and some of them were really bad arguments that turned into

days of silence between us until we finally talked things out, but never did I wish to purposely upset them through my actions in order to teach them a lesson and prove them wrong. Because, as we see in this story, seeing a parent hurt is painful for both parties, and it usually only complicates the relationship between them. I do, however, understand the son's frustration at his mother's tendency to look down on people she doesn't even know. If there's anything that gets under my skin, it is that a person feels above others and believes they have the right to treat those below them as lesser human beings.

Even still, Julian shouldn't be searching for a way to teach his mother a lesson and ridicule her. Human beings are stubborn creatures, and it's very difficult for a person to change his or her mind. You could strongly disagree with a family member, and even be repulsed by their way of thinking, but at the end of the day you are family, and having somebody of your own flesh and blood around will always be more important to you than having nobody at all, regardless of how they choose to view the world. I came to this conclusion by analyzing Julian's reaction at the end of the story. He spent the entire story trying to find a way to prove his mother wrong, but when it came time to aid his mother, he desperately tried to help her not only to avoid feeling guilty for her condition (1016), but also fulfill his ingrained duty to truly care about a family member that raised and shaped him to be who he is.

The duty to care for and help a family member with whom you have conflicts is also present in James Baldwin's short story, "Sonny's Blues," where two orphaned brothers living in Harlem, New York struggle to make a living in a place where their lives are defined by their surroundings. The oldest brother, whose name is never made known to us, is seven years older than Sonny and doesn't take Sonny's life's ambition

seriously. Sonny, lacking guidance, ends up in jail for the use of heroin and takes a while to recover as his older brother learns to play the role of the older, supportive brother.

This intricate story presents us with an aspect of a relationship that many of us struggle with: Accepting a person for who they are and supporting them regardless of the differences. We see this with the two brothers as Sonny tries to get his older brother to understand that he has a passion for what he wants to do and that playing Jazz music is Sonny's way of dealing with his own struggles. This is probably the biggest issue I have with my own parents as I continuously struggle to make them understand that I am my own person and can make my own decisions. But I can also relate to the older brother — who takes a long time to come around and finally listen to Sonny instead of making his own assumptions about what's best for his brother — for wanting to lead Sonny down a healthier path of life.

In a way, I feel like we all have these two brothers in our own subconscious. My Sonny, the younger brother, has a passion for writing; I want to become a great author who will someday contribute literary works to address issues in today's society, and that might even help to advance societal movements. At the same time, my older brother sticks with logic, telling me to specialize in translation because that's how I will realistically be able to make a living. My Sonny needs the creative outlet of writing to work through my pains, worries, and happiness. My older brother needs me to be level-minded in order to stay realistic and prepare for real life expectations. These two brothers within us always clash, each with their own idea of finding happiness in life, or their own idea of finding ways to be content with life.

These three short stories all depict characters that grapple with family and their inner selves as they deal with their generational differences. The inner conflicts these characters encounter in disagreeing with their family members demonstrate the delicate nature of human relationships. We consciously act upon our own desires, whether that'd be finding our independence, getting somebody to think differently, or struggling to find our own happiness. But our subconscious also brings us to consider the feelings and wellbeing of those who are important in our lives. The material in these stories brought me to realize that family relationships bring our weaknesses to the surface, forcing us to deal with them. And in turn, each relationship we have, takes part in shaping our own identity. We learn to have a little more confidence and stand up when we think our family members are in the wrong. Family relationships have a strong hold on us, no matter how much we might try to deny it or hope to sever the relationship's grip on our own life. Even if it brings pain and suffering, we should always strive to put our own values, prejudices, and ideals aside in trying to understand our family.

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