JAMES TYRONE AND BIG DADDY IN THERAPY: A CASE STUDY IN USING AMERICAN DRAMA TO TEACH WRITING TO SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

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In the early 1990's, administrators of both undergraduate and graduate social work programs began to call for increased emphasis on writing instruction in their classes, recognizing the minimal attention that it had traditionally received in their departments. This appeal was sounded loudly in 1989, when Simon and Soeven noted, "The quality of writing of many social work graduates continues to be inadequate for meeting the demands of contemporary social work" (47). To combat these weaknesses, teachers began requiring writing courses in undergraduate and graduate social work programs. But a few years later, educators observed that there had been little improvement, and writing skills still lagged despite increased attention to the problem. Today, educators still seem unsure how to improve these skills. Elizabeth Rompf writes, "Deficiencies in student writing alarm and frustrate many social work educators. Despite demands for clear writing and countless hours spent by faculty in correcting papers, students continue to submit mediocre work" (125). However, students' struggles put these teachers in a difficult position, because as Waller notes, "Although most social work educators understand the relationship between writing and effectiveness in the profession, many believe that teaching writing is beyond their purview" (162).

While social work educators agree that these weak writing skills should be urgently addressed, there is little consensus which department—English or social work—should bear the responsibility. However, an alliance between the two would relieve much of the burden on social work professors who feel either unprepared to teach writing or overwhelmed with other duties to focus effectively on the improvement of writing skills. The demands of the social work curriculum leave little time for writing instruction, and many social work educators do not feel comfortable teaching writing even if time allowed. Few have formal training in composition theory and instruction; social work professors—like many educators outside English and writing departments—might feel uneasy grading papers according to standard rhetorical guidelines. As we know, effective writing instruction means more than assigning papers, grading them, and making students revise (though a colleague in another department recently told me that if I didn't think he taught writing, I should look at all the marks he makes on his students' papers).

Strong writing skills carry additional importance in healthcare fields. The quality of a clinician's written communication could easily have a direct effect—even detrimentally—on the care of patients and clients. A patient's well-being may depend on the mental health professional's ability to communicate efficiently to future therapists or other caregivers. For example, poorly written case notes, medical records, or psychological assessments could make treatment by other clinicians difficult.Furthermore, in this age of litigation, psychiatric reports and assessments are often written with one eye on the paper and the other on the lawyers. Finally, social workers need to be proficient in grant and proposal writing. As Waller, Carroll, and Roemer note, "Teaching writing is as essential to professional social work training as teaching dynamic oral presentation" (43). For these reasons, some schools of social work now incorporate writing into their curriculum through collaboration with writing teachers. Many have met with success. For example, Carney and Koncel report on a program at Smith College, where writing counselors in the school of social

work meet with students in individual writing conferences. In addition, Waller, Carroll, and Roemer write about collaboration at Rhode Island College between the school of social work and the writing center.

In an interdisciplinary partnership at The Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington, DC, the English department and the National Catholic School of Social Service (NCSSS) teamed to help social work majors improve their writing. These students were required to take a course I taught called "Writing Improvement Workshop" while concurrently enrolled in the social work course with which it was linked, entitled "Human Behavior and the Social Environment." The behavior course examined lifespan human development and its requisite heavyweight theorists such as Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson, Albert Bandura, and Lawrence Kohlberg, while the writing course was designed to improve the writing skills of social work majors in preparation for their professional training.

As a doctoral candidate specializing in twentieth century American theatre, I thought that the partnership of family dynamics and human behavior theory with American dramatic literature would be a natural pairing. American drama is rooted in conflict, both internal and external, a conflict further detailed by Geoffrey Proehl in his book *Coming Home Again*: "The American stage is typically one of family destruction where escape means freedom and failure tragic oppression" (10). Tom Scanlan takes a similar view of the American family onstage in his book *Family, Drama, and American Dreams*: "American drama in the twentieth century has been strikingly preoccupied with problems of family life. Its most characteristic moments are realistic scenes of family strife and squabble and bliss wherein conflicting themes of freedom and security recur and are expressed as dilemmas of family relations and personal psychology" (214). But while dysfunction seems a necessary component of American family drama, perhaps reflecting the "difficult familial background" that Tennessee Williams deemed necessary for a writer, even those plays without overt elements of character instability (*dysfunction* is

such a relative term, anyway) can still be powerful representations of the American family dynamic. Students of mental health professions could learn a great deal by studying the interpersonal relationships in these plays. Although these relationships exist onstage, they are no less real and genuine than the offstage dynamics that they represent.

Each fall, in my "Writing Improvement Workshop" course, characters from some of the most powerful plays in twentieth century American drama found therapeutic solace in the classroom, where students examined such legendary characters as Blanche DuBois, James Tyrone, and Troy Maxon through a series of case studies. Most of the students in the class were sophomores, so the class was their first exposure to the field of social work. Twice a week, these sixteen students attended my class and then walked across the hall to their human behavior course. As very amateur future social workers in my class, these students applied theories of human behavior—tenets such as systems theory, cognitive theory, social learning, role theory, and social constructionism—from their social work course to the American dramatic literature in my class, using characters as case studies. I had hoped that students' writing would improve because their assignments were directly linked to knowledge that was fundamental to their role as clinicians and therapists. Moreover, in applying these theories to the issues in the plays, students would find it easier to retain the social work material, thus improving their performance in the human behavior course.

Of course, the application of human behavior theory to literature is hardly a novel idea. For much of the twentieth century, psychoanalysis dominated the psychological interpretation of literature. However, the systems approach, upon which the social work class was based, has received little attention. In the systems method, the family is one functioning unit: the actions of each member have an effect on all others in the unit, both individually and collectively. Yet interestingly, while psychologists continue to update their methods of psychological intervention to adhere to more present-day thinking, literary

criticism has remained largely fixed in its use of century-old views of psychoanalytic character analysis. Whereas psychoanalytic thought focuses on unconscious—and unseen—motives, family systems theorists observe interaction among family members. Put in a different analogy, psychoanalysis and family systems each view behavior through a different lens: psychoanalysis sees behavior through a tight zoom lens, while the family systems approach sees it through a panoramic lens. The systems approach, then, works well with dramatic literature since both emphasize observable behavior (as opposed to a novel, whose point of view might often include introspective narration better suited for a psychoanalytic interpretation). So, while we covered psychodynamics in class (using, appropriately, Sam Shepard's play *Buried Child*), it is only one theory among many that can be used to analyze American drama.

Our classroom methodology was simple and highly structured. Classes were held Tuesday and Thursday. Each Tuesday a new play was introduced in my class and a new human development theory was introduced in the social work class. To ensure preparation, I gave a short quiz each Tuesday consisting of five passages from the assigned play. Students had to identify the speaker, the addressee, and the context of the passage (these were not obscure passages, but those with obvious thematic overtones that any astute reader could identify). We discussed the play's theatrical conventions and themes, as well as the author's background. Implicit in this class discussion was the students' ability to recognize the different ways that families were portrayed in the works. Since their experience with dramatic literature was for the most part scarce, most students had difficulty understanding the plays after a first reading; thus, it was often necessary to spend time on issues of knowledge and comprehension. Also on Tuesdays, each student was required to make one fifteen minute biographical presentation on an author at some point during the semester. Students were quick to draw parallels between the lives of playwrights such as Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill, and August Wilson and their works,

recognizing the autobiographical nature in many of their plays. It was usually easier for the students to work out the issues in the plays after hearing the dysfunction that pervaded the lives of some of the authors (Williams and O'Neill come to mind). Similarities between play and playwright made the play more authentic to students whose careers will involve the observation of familial interaction. After hearing about an author's life, students discovered that the communication in the plays was not entirely fictitious, but instead representative of genuine human interaction. Recognizing that Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* was based on Tennessee Williams, for example, they dissected the play's dialogue once they realized that the Wingfield family in the play was Williams' own family, and that this dialogue accurately portrayed the conversations that took place in their house. In other words, students were more likely to read the plays as social workers if they knew they were reading an autobiographical work with realistic dialogue.

Thursdays were used for class discussion, when students approached each play within the weekly theoretical framework. We talked about the family dynamics, both in terms of how the characters relate to each other and of how the family as a unit relates to outsiders. We discussed the role of each character and how his or her actions altered the functioning of the family unit. But the title of the course was "Writing Improvement Workshop," and the goal was to produce better writers in the field of social work. The class was centered, then, on the development of the case study, the weekly writing assignment. At the end of each week, by noon each Sunday, students submitted to me via WebCT a two to three page case study in which they applied the weekly human behavior theory to one character in the play under discussion that week. For example, a student might write a paper illustrating how Babe Botrelle, the youngest sister in the play *Crimes of the Heart*, demonstrates social learning theory. This student would use an operative definition of the theory with liberal textual support from the play. These short papers made up forty percent of the semester grade, with a paper due every week.

The purpose of these case studies was so that students could act, as I mentioned earlier, as amateur social workers. Using the example of Babe Botrelle, a student would give a "diagnosis" of social learning theory and then support this diagnosis with examples of Babe's behavior. This type of writing is practice for the future: in a few years, as practicing clinicians, these students will write case notes and psychological assessments in which they must defend a patient's diagnosis using specific behavioral examples. While the case studies in this class were a different sort, they did teach the students to scrutinize a character's behavior (specifically the character's verbal communication) and to draw conclusions based on observation—something that they will do in the future. Of course, the downside to these weekly assignments was a heavy workload, both for them and me. Each week they were writing a three page paper, reading a play, taking a quiz, and possibly revising a case study from the previous week. However, because these writing assignments related directly to performance in their major class, they approached the assignments with vigor and (dare I say) enthusiasm. I would like to think that better writing occurred because the students were more engaged in the material after recognizing that it improved their retention of the theories.

The case studies were returned to the students in two days, with suggestions for revision. Students had one week to revise their case studies, for unlimited grade improvement. They learned quickly that revision did not mean correcting the odd comma splice or tense shift. They were encouraged—and in some cases, required—to meet with me to discuss their plan before they revised. For some students, these weekly assignments came easily, but others were initially worried that they would not have enough information to fill two or three typed pages. This concern, though, was short lived, as several students found the three page limit too restrictive. I set this limit to encourage conciseness in their writing. As social workers, these students will one day write and read hundreds of progress reports and psychological profiles. To provide their patients with proper care

(and to protect themselves from litigation), they must be able to produce writing absent of ambiguity and vagueness.

Finally, their end-of-semester project was an extended version of the weekly case study. Students selected a biography or autobiography of a playwright from the semester, and applied one of the behavioral theories to the playwright's life. As per my instructions, they were to make "liberal use of textual examples from the author's life." Students found the plays—and consequently, the playwrights—intriguing enough that they had little trouble selecting an author. Certainly the lives of playwrights such as Williams, O'Neill, and Lillian Hellman are colorful enough to lend themselves to substantial analysis. The papers were ten to twelve pages in length, and after writing case studies the entire semester, this longer version was a logical extension for them.

Our first play each semester was Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie,* which provided a good starting point because of its small number of characters, single setting, and constant conflict within the family. Students studied the play in conjunction with their social work discussion on general systems theory. They discussed terms such as homeostasis, enmeshment, abandonment, and enabling, focusing on how the actions of each character, no matter how small, impact the often fragile balance in the group. Not only did students see the Wingfield family unit as a closed system, they also saw each individual character as a closed system. They noted the desperate attempts of the family members to maintain homeostasis, and recognized Tom's blurred, guilt-ridden familial role. One student noted, "He has assumed the role of father, provider, and son. As the play wears on, this expected duality visibly begins to frustrate and sadden Tom. He is torn between his desire to help his sister in whom he recognizes a disability, and guilt for wanting to escape his own family." Another student also saw Amanda projecting "the hurt she feels from the exit of the father onto her son Tom, whom she views as much like him." Of course, escapism is another element in the play, a literary theme with which most students are familiar. Its

existence in these plays, however, is especially important because escape from reality and conflict avoidance are symptoms they will encounter frequently as clinicians.

The Glass Menagerie also allows students to examine attitudes concerning disabilities, an appropriate topic for prospective social workers. Laura has a limited physical disability, but also suffers from a debilitating shyness. Because of a mild limp that makes her devastatingly self-conscious, she rarely leaves the apartment. Students saw her as a victim of social phobia, and also evaluated each character's approach in helping her overcome a crippling shyness. The play always provoked worthwhile discussion on society's treatment of those with disabilities. Because each character treats Laura differently, students were able to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their approaches.

I encouraged the students to read the plays as social workers, not literary critics or close readers. They looked at these families through a clinician's lens, searching for examples of dysfunctional behavior while noting the family dynamics. For example, students read Tina Howe's *Painting Churches* in conjunction with the study of Erik Erikson and his eight stages of development. Most wrote about the stages in which the characters are stuck. One student discussed the nature of the relationship in the play between the mother Fanny and her daughter Mags: "Fanny lacks the ability to create the symbiosis needed between her and her child. In fact, Fanny reverses this responsibility completely so that it becomes Mags' job to coordinate her mother's experience of getting and hers of giving. This role reversal stunts Mags' ability to complete Erikson's second life stage, *autonomy vs. shame and doubt.*" Just as in *The Glass Menagerie,* many of these family issues are problems that social workers see frequently. Mags, an artist in her early thirties, returns home to visit her aging and increasingly senile parents. She struggles with a life that pulls her in opposite directions: she desperately craves parental approval while simultaneously trying to establish her independence. At the same time, she slowly realizes that it will soon be her responsibility to care for them. Mags' craving of this parental affirmation so late in

life provides a good discussion point for students, especially because her demand for this attention is obvious at several points in the play (as is her mother's constant disapproval of her actions and looks). Flashbacks and memory sequences prove that this dynamic between mother and daughter dates back to Mags' childhood years. The play raises two other important issues facing mental health professionals today: first, the possibility that Mags is anorectic, and second, the appropriateness of hospice care for elderly parents. And because all these problems fall on Mags' shoulders, students offered solutions for how she could best manage these issues.

The combination of the two classes gave the students a specific methodological angle with which they could approach the plays and their characters. As sophomores, they had no formal contact with families in any outside clinical capacity. The class offered them a rich opportunity to apply theory to the many characters, relationships, and families in the plays. Students understood that they would encounter similar families in their profession. Theories became tangible, not paragraphs in a textbook. Before I taught the course, case studies were used in the human development course, but their effectiveness was limited, according to Dr. Marie Raber, now chair of the MSW program at CUA, who once taught the human behavior course. According to Raber, the course heavily emphasized theory without using many real-life examples. Students were not provided the depth of awareness and understanding of the characters in a group setting. However, the behavior exhibited by the characters in the plays, in all their varied settings, served as strong motivation for students to think, conceptualize, and apply theories in a more effective and educationally sound fashion.

From a pedagogical perspective, the course was not without challenges. First, it required understanding of the human behavior theories. I could hardly expect, nor would I want, the students to check their human behavior discussions at the door before they came to class. Though I sensibly left the in-depth discussion of the theories to the social work professor, teaching

this course required knowledge of the human development theories, so I prepared for two courses in choosing the proper play for each theory, and reviewed the human behavior theories during the semester. Fortunately, my background gave me some knowledge of these theories, since I once was a special education teacher for learning disabled and severely emotionally disturbed adolescents, and I also spent ten summers as a senior staff member at a camp for children with emotional, physical, and learning disabilities. In addition, my dissertation is a family systems approach to contemporary American drama, using some of these same theories and plays. Despite this, one fact must be made clear: my training is in English literature, not social work. I would have done an enormous injustice to the latter field by treating the human behavior material in anything else but an elementary manner. I only reinforced what students had already learned in the human behavior course.

In addition, after my first semester teaching the course, I eliminated a few plays from the reading list that did not work as well as I had hoped. In their place, I selected plays that dealt more directly with contemporary social issues, like Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, which deals with AIDS and homophobia, and *How I Learned to Drive* by Paula Vogel, which addresses childhood sexual abuse. I also found it wise to stick with plays that contain nothing but straight-ahead, entirely plausible realism. Plays that stretch the bounds of realism, such as Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* (a play I taught the first year), can be difficult for students to tackle. For instance, it is entirely possible that somewhere in the United States, people nap on their dinner tables and keep goats in a pen in the kitchen and eat nothing but artichokes all day (as they do in Shepard's outstanding play), but it is unlikely. Students are more likely to encounter families such as the Kellers in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, a play about a father's conflicting devotion to both family and country during wartime, or the Tyrones in O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, which addresses a family's struggle with an alcoholic son and a morphine-addicted mother. Since it is much more practical to

use plays that sit comfortably within the boundaries of acceptable realism, I reluctantly removed *Curse of the Starving Class* from the following year's reading list. While those theatrical conventions in Shepard's play were important, they were not our focus. If they were, the course could have quickly turned into one more aptly suited to the theatre or English departments. For example, in our discussion of *Curse of the Starving Class,* a few of the students saw napping on a kitchen table as some type of dysfunctional behavior. Shepard intends this as a symbolic act, I explained, not something that we should expect to see in real life. In other words, students had to recognize that these acts were designed expressly for the stage. The omnipresent question of realism in American drama is appropriate in literature courses, not in this course, and it is important to make that distinction if discussion wanders in that direction.

Feedback from students was positive. Many saw this as a surrogate field experience. One commented that "until we have something concrete, like the conflicts in the plays, I can't see how to apply the theories. They don't become real until I have a person to whom I can apply them." Another said that she had studied material of the course in two other classes and had a difficult time remembering the theories. "Applying the theories to characters in the play has helped the theories become tangible and applicable to real people, as opposed to just vague notions in a book," she wrote. Several also said that they felt their writing had improved, with one admitting, "If I can't write a paper in this class, then what am I going to do as a social worker?" Of course, an additional benefit has been their increased appreciation for American drama. The group emerged enthused with drama. At the beginning of the semester, most had only minimal exposure to American drama, with experience ranging not far past *Death of a Salesman*. Most had never heard of any of our contemporary American dramatists, and some expressed skepticism at the prospect of reading plays all semester. "When I saw the plays in the bookstore, I thought, 'Oh no, we're reading PLAYS,'" wrote one student. However, given a context in which they could

understand the plays, the students eagerly embraced the direction of the course. One said that she would "take a leap and say that I am a little cultured now. I have filled a cultural void in my education. I have learned about plays, the authors' lives, and the importance of stage directions." Another admitted that she never would have read these plays otherwise, but is very glad she had, because "they teach us about our social history, and can be appreciated at an historical level and not just a literary one. A lot more can be learned from the readings besides an appreciation for literature." While many confessed initial apprehension at the idea of reading plays, when we had the opportunity to see Tina Howe speak at the end of the semester, all but one of the students attended her talk, though I did not require attendance. And one student recently told me that the first section she heads to when she goes to a bookstore is the drama section. However, the most telling comment came from a student who perfectly paraphrased my intent of the class, and the very nature of their discipline: "we're taking an active role in analyzing the WHY."

American family dramas, in all their dysfunction and conflict, can be an effective tool for students in social work. Many students believed that this dysfunction has made them aware of what they will see as clinicians—some very troubled, and troubling, families. The students agreed that the class also helped them understand the material from the social work class. "We can see what is wrong and then pick a theory that would best help us work with the character," one said. One student even had difficulty coping with the recurring element of suicide, but realized that this difficulty made her more introspective about her own feelings: "the stories were just too overwhelming. This is something that students have trouble coping with normally, and it is often difficult to relive every week. However, this is why we are social work majors, so I guess there are a lot of positives that can be drawn from this experience as well." Another student, however, expressed unabashed optimism: "I don't mind that it is usually depressing—these problems are what we will be working with, and we better start facing that fact. This class gets me fired up to

change the world!" For beginning social work students who have no field experience, this onstage conflict could be good preparation to begin the study of issues that they will see in their future as social workers.

Figure 1: Plays and accompanying theories for Fall 2001 semester

The Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams: systems theory
Painting Churches by Tina Howe: Erikson's lifespan theory
How I Learned to Drive by Paula Vogel: cognitive and moral development
Crimes of the Heart by Beth Henley: behaviorism, social learning, exchange theory
Buried Child by Sam Shepard: psychodynamic theory
All My Sons by Arthur Miller: economic theories (Marxian and conflict)
Long Day's Journey into Night by Eugene O'Neill: symbolic interactionism, role theory
Getting Out by Marsha Norman: phenomenology, social constructionism, hermeneutics
Angels in America by Tony Kushner: perspectives on groups, organizations, communities
Dinner with Friends by Donald Margulies: the family as social organization
The Heidi Chronicles by Wendy Wasserstein: transpersonal theory
Fences by August Wilson: general application of theories from semester

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