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## TWO SONS HAUNTED BY GHOSTS IN *GHOSTS* AND *THE FAMILY REUNION*

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### ABSTRACT

"In both *Ghosts* and *The Family Reunion*, there is no escape from getting bothered from the past in the future or in the present, but in both of the plays, it is accepted that the ghosts of the sad memories of the past would be faced in order to form a future no matter how painful it can be". Mourning can be said to be a ritual for remembering the past. Mourning for the dead makes the dead real and bound to the present and in a way steal the quality that makes them ghosts. Ghosts tend to be unwanted as they haunt us. However, mourning makes the memory of the dead desirable and welcomes it. That is exactly why ghosts are not welcome in both of the plays as mourning is lacked in them. In *Ghosts*, Mrs. Alving rejects to mourn her deceased husband as she thinks that the death of his was salvation to her own well being and of her son's. She sees the living memory of her husband was what was keeping her executing her own identity and her free will in a complete sense. The same thing is true for Amy in *The Family Reunion*. Not only has she refused to mourn the dead husband but also she refuses to mourn for the dead wife of her son. She sees both of those as beings that kept her from fulfilling her duties as a wife and a mother. And with the death of those two she thinks that the remains of the present can be lived in the happiness.

**Keywords:** ghost, illusion, reality, past, present, pain, confrontation

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### INTRODUCTION

*Ghosts* by Henrik Ibsen and *The Family Reunion* by T. S. Eliot are renowned plays that have their indistinct ways of asking questions about the society at the time they were written. But, they also might ask questions about the societies which future might hold when they are going to be read and talked about. And, today, each of those two plays contains the figure of a son who is disturbed by the sinful actions together with sinful intentions of the past that did not take place. Both of those sons cannot get rid of the ghosts of the past and are forced to live in a present and a future where the

border between imaginary and the real turns out to be unclear.

Ibsen's play *Ghosts* takes place in a rural environment, a country house in Norway in a rich household where the family members Mrs. Alving and her son are at the center. Although the environment of *The Family Reunion* might be the similar, being in a rich country house in rural England, the characters' focus is not the same. The play focuses as contrast to the *Ghosts*, not only on the son of the family and the mother but also on the aunts and the uncles of the son. And while the son of the house is only one and only in *Ghosts*, we see

that in *The Family Reunion*, the son is the eldest of three. However as the other two sons do not appear at the center of the play, it is somewhat possible to say that in *The Family Reunion* we have only one son on the center. While this son Oswald is single as far as we know, the son of *The Family Reunion*, Harry has experienced the death of his wife. Both of the mother figures in both of the plays are widows but they both lack in the mourning for the deceased due to the sorrowful events they went through their marriages. And both of those mothers chose to send their sons abroad so that they might form a comfortable and sterile life outside the borders of the household. But in the end, they both decide to keep their sons with themselves. Although it can be said that Mrs. Alving is as not enthusiastic about keeping her son with her as Amy in *The Family Reunion*, it can be said that they both have expectations to be fulfilled by their sons instead of their sons' fathers. Mrs. Alving is looking up to her son as a way of mending the past's wounds and creating an alternative past. That is exactly why she is trying to have ceremony in honor of Captain Alving, who had been dead for ten years. With her son's coming home and with the founding of the orphanage she is trying to release the ghosts of the past and wants to be not disturbed; however that will not be the case.

#### **GHOSTS: UNWANTED**

In *The Family Reunion*, Amy the mother has much bigger expectations from her son. She is willing to do whatever to keep her son in the house running things instead of herself. That is, in a way, a contradiction to her own being. As she was the only one who was in control at the time when her husband lived, now she wants the patriarch returned now that she is fully aware that her health is not alright. In a way death becomes a resolution to make things right in her eye. She is trying to give the right to rule to the patriarch. In this context, death is seen as only something to fix things in the living world. That might be the reason why in both of the plays the ghosts are seen as the undeniable part of the present. In both of the plays, there is no escape from getting bothered from the past in the future or in the present, but both in *Ghosts* and in *The Family Reunion*, it is accepted that the ghosts of

the sad memories of the past would be faced in order to form a future no matter how painful it can be. In *Ghosts*, Mrs. Alving complains about the inescapability from those ghosts. "It's not that they live on in us; they are simply lodged there, and we cannot get rid of them" (126). And in *The Family Reunion*, Harry utters those words:

And the wail of the new full tide  
Returning the ghosts of the dead  
Those whom the winter frowned  
Do not the ghosts of the frowned  
Return to the land in the spring?  
Do the dead want to return? (28)

Although spring may connote bearing blossoms and a new life, in *The Family Reunion* it is stated that bearing a new thing just as creating a future or a present is always painful no matter how beautiful the result will be. Mary explains how she sees the spring like this:

Pain is the opposite of joy  
But joy is a kind of pain I believe the  
moment of birth  
Is when we have knowledge of death  
I believe the season of birth  
Is the season of sacrifice  
For the tree and the beast, and the fish  
Trashing itself upstream:  
And what of the terrified spirit  
Compelled to be reborn  
To rise toward the violent sun  
Wet wings into the rain cloud  
Barefoot over the moon? (28)

The sun and its movement upwards also resemble the image of birth. With the action of birth, right out of the womb of the mother, the infant reaches light. And, the first reaction given by infant is crying. And as crying is seen usually as an outcome of the sorrowful events, birth can be said to be related to pain. In *Ghosts*, at the end of the play, with the sun's going up, Oswald becomes paralyzed and speechless uttering only those words "The sun... The sun" (164). And at this scene, at the scene of birth, instead of the infant, the mother is the one who cries. With the light shed on the lives of the characters and the ghosts of the past, characters suffer pain. In *The Family Reunion*, Harry describes this as:

The sudden solitude in a crowded desert

In a thick smoke, many creatures moving  
Without direction, for no direction  
Leads anywhere but round and round in  
that vapor. (12)

In both of the plays, both Oswald and Harry contain the memory of their childhood home restricted to the smallest area of the nursery. Their nursery memories however tend to be painful instead of being enjoyable. The only memory that Oswald has of his childhood is that his father's forcing him to smoke pipe when he was very little and then he had to suffer badly from that. That might reveal the secret appeal of the father to replace his figure with the child or his future incapacity to make things right in the future. It is possible to say the memory of Captain Alving is his ghost and returns to the memory of Oswald and then to the present reality and haunt Oswald's life. The same thing can be said for Harry who also suffers from nursery memories which tend to be very far from entertaining.

The boy who left. Round by the stables,  
In the coach-house, in the orchard,  
In the plantation, down the corridor  
Tat led to the nursery, round the corner  
Of the new wing, he will have to face him-  
And it will not be a very jolly corner. (*The Family Reunion* 5)

In *The Family Reunion*, it is accepted that facing one's own self after so many years is painful and should be painful. It is stated in the play that when one returns home after years apart, the thing that is changed will not be the environment but it will be the self that was there years ago. It is in way like facing one's own ghost that come though the passage of the past. That passage is haunted by the memories and the painful event however they needed to be understood as fatally important corner stones that lead the person though the alleys of the present. Agatha speaks of this in this way:

I mean painful, because everything is  
irrevocable,  
Because the past is irremediable,  
Because the future can only be built upon  
the real past.  
Wandering in the tropics  
Or against the painted scene of the  
Mediterranean,

Harry must often have remembered  
Wishwood –

The nursery tea, the school holiday,  
The daring feats on the old pony,  
And though to creep back through the little  
door.

He will find a new Wishwood. (5)

However that is exactly the opposite what the characters in the play are trying to do. They are trying to remain blind to the past and move on without it. Mourning can be said to be a ritual for remembering the past. Mourning for the dead makes the dead real and bound to the present and in a way steal the quality that makes them ghosts. Ghosts tend to be unwanted as they haunt us. However, mourning makes the memory of the dead desirable and welcomes it. That is exactly why ghosts are not welcome in both of the plays as mourning is lacked in them. In *Ghosts*, Mrs. Alving rejects to mourn her deceased husband as she thinks that the death of his was salvation to her own well being and of her son's. She sees the living memory of her husband was what was keeping her executing her own identity and her free will in a complete sense. She says: "But I'm not putting up with it any longer, all these ties and restriction. I can't stand it! I must work myself free" (124). The same thing is true for Amy in *The Family Reunion*. Not only has she refused to mourn the dead husband but also she refuses to mourn for the dead wife of her son. She sees both of those as beings that kept her from fulfilling her duties as a wife and a mother. And with the death of those two she thinks that the remains of the present can be lived in the happiness. However that idea does not turn to be true at all. Having the memories and the pains that come from the heart and soul of the characters the present day reality is bound to be a reflection only of the past. In a way there is no escape from the past.

Both of the sons in both of the plays are ill, and this is something that keeps them apart from the others. Oswald has a brain damage as it seems and his illness is incurable. And he refuses to be treated. When Mrs. Alving wants to call a doctor, he says to his mother: "If you love me, Mother... how can you let me suffer all this unspeakable terror!"

(162). However that becomes the pitiful end for Oswald; he loses his conscience, his ability to communicate and to move completely after that scene. The same is also true for Harry as he is also wanted to be treated by the family members but he refuses. Just like Oswald has accepted the impossibility of maintaining his conscience, Harry is also aware that one cannot rely on his/her conscience as the term conscience is a controversial matter for Harry. He says:

It goes a good deal deeper  
Than what people call their conscience; it is  
just the cancer  
That eats away the self.  
I knew how you would take it.  
First of all, you isolate the single event  
As something so dreadful that it couldn't  
have happened,  
Because you could not bear it.  
So you must believe that I suffer from  
delusion.  
It is not my conscience,  
Not my mind, that is diseased, but the  
world I have to live in. (13)

Both Oswald and Harry think that the people need to be awakened from their dreams and come and live with the truth. That is why they both lack in faith to the concepts of conscience. People need to be shaken and shown the reality no matter how painful it is. But that is a hard limit as the other characters in the two plays do not respond well to that request. They tend to stand as rather shallow characters. In *The Family Reunion*, the deep characters like Harry, Mary and Agatha may be away from bearing an obstacle to that request however. Gerald, Charles, Ivy and Violet are hard to persuade to open their eyes and see. And no matter how hard Harry tries to talk them into an alternative future and present, they remain in their current positions. In a way, they do not want to be disturbed by the pain. Opening one's eyes should be painful they think and not giving that comfort away is their final choice. Harry says this:

I lay two days in contended drowsiness;  
Then I recovered. I am afraid of sleep:  
A condition in which one can be caught for  
the last time.

And also waking. (13)

The actual thing that he fears is dying without being able to see realities. Oswald thinks that one need to be awakened from dreams. He says to his mother: "Yes, you've made me stop imagining things now anyway, and that's a good thing. And if only I can get this last thing settled now..." (159). And, the sun's coming up and the morning works as a metaphor for awakening. Oswald sees the sun as a salvation from the dread and as the point where matters are resolved. He says: "...and meanwhile the sun will be rising. And then you'll know. And then I'll no longer have this feeling of dread" (159).

But, both Harry and Oswald are afraid not only of sleeping but also from awakening. Oswald knew that the sun will awake him but what he does is a call for help to sleep. When Oswald mentions his mother of the illness he possesses, the first thing he shows her is the box of pills of morphine to make him go to a long sleep. He asks his mother to keep him from pain by giving him an anesthesia just as Harry mentions it in this way:

Without purpose, and without principle of  
conduct  
In flickering intervals of light and darkness;  
The partial anesthesia of suffering without  
feeling  
And partial observation of ones own  
automatism  
While the slow stain sinks deeper though  
the skin  
Tainting the flesh and the discoloring the  
bone –  
That is what matters, but it is unspeakable,  
Untranslatable: I talk in general term  
Because the particular has no language.  
(12)

In both of the plays what the others think is important they tend to shape the current form of the characters. In *Ghosts*, Pastor says what is thought by the household should be kept within the household and it should be kept as a secret. When Pastor criticizes the relationships out of marriage Oswald mentions the hypocrisy in the society, he says: "Well, you can believe every word they say. Some of them are experts. [*Clutching his head.*] Oh, when I think of that glorious, free life out

there...smeared by this filth" (112). The same thing is true in *The Family Reunion* where the family members criticize their being on the news in the newspaper and they loath seeing their own lives talked about. What the others think of themselves will without doubt make themselves look at themselves from another perspective which they might not like at all. When Harry and Mary talk, we see that they are both aware that what is tried to be created by the other family members is just an illusion. Mary says:

Your family a delusion—than it's all a delusion,  
Everything you feel—I don't mean what you think,  
But what you feel. (27)

The same thing is done by the ghosts of the past to the presents. The ghosts of the past come to being in the present and they turn the tables and make everybody see the lives of theirs in the light of the past, in which they find themselves crippled and in need of help. That is why Mrs. Alving and the pastor are so afraid of what will happen between Regine and Oswald. The identities of those two characters need to be valued through the eyes of the ghosts of the pasts. It is heavily believed that the children will do the same mistakes of their parents. When Mrs. Alving hears Oswald and Regine talking, she says this: "Ghosts! Those two in the conservatory... come back to haunt us" (120). And, Oswald's illness is believed to be passed from his father just like an inheritance. It is seen inescapable.

With Harry the same rule applies. Just as his father had thought of killing his own wife, Harry realizes that he also thought of killing his wife. At this point Harry realizes that he suffers from a common conscience that lies in-between his fathers and his. And, just like Oswald's mother Mrs. Alving thinking that her son will do the same action as his father did, Amy also fears that Harry will abandon her as his father did. She blames Agatha of stealing her son away from her just as she did it to her husband. It is as if an illness that both Oswald and Harry suffer from which pass to them through their genes. And, in the world of the two the thoughts are saluted more rather than the actions themselves. Oswald's illness lies in his brain where his thoughts

are gathered and shaped. And he knows that whatever he thinks is ill based and not to be taken for granted. Harry is the same as he doesn't trust his own conscience as he is aware that his brain is under the control of unseen creatures and vision that the others are not able to see.

Both of the plays end with the disappearance of the sons. In *Ghosts*, Oswald suffers from the second and the last stroke which becomes his eventual ending. For Harry, in *The Family Reunion*, the same thing applies. People assume that he is going to be a missionary but he rejects that he uttered such words. When his driver is asked whether he will keep Harry company or not, he says that Harry will not need anyone near him soon. It is suggestible that both of them move into the void, the unknown. Both of them knew what would happen to them, Oswald knew that his second and last stroke would come and that would be the end of him. Harry, quite mysteriously, also knew what would happen to him. Thus, rather than running away from his end, he in a way embraced it.

#### CONCLUSION

Thus in conclusion, we can say that both of the sons in *Ghosts* and *The Family Reunion* bear similarities as they both are haunted by ghosts of the past, they both find themselves involuntarily walking on the path of their fathers and paying the price of their sins. That's why the notion of "joy of life" remains a question for both Oswald and Harry. They both cannot rely on their conscience. They both question what the illusion is and what is the reality. They are both afraid being in a state of sleep, but they both know awakening will be painful. They find themselves in a situation where they both know that they were haunted and that there is no way of getting rid of their ghosts.

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