It's a Family Affair
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Tennessee Williams' short story "The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin," when read through a psychoanalytic lens, illustrates how family dynamics and the narrator's fear of abandonment structure the text. The narrator's dysfunctional relationships with other characters in the story reveal a pattern of behavior that can be attributed to unconscious sexual desires. Tom's unnatural dependency on his sister, fear of abandonment, and compensation for an absent father result in his fixation and sexual desire for Richard Miles. The domestic and social roles of the narrator help determine his development as a character since they are an integral part of his identity. The text's asexual, or sexually suppressive, nature controls the narrative in that it causes Tom to feel guilt about his own sexual desires, and these desires manifest in numerous sexual imagery and symbols.

The family structure begins to form and shape Tom's fear of abandonment by illustrating the confusion of roles and dysfunctional relationships. The household consists of an extended family which lacks any actively involved adult males with whom Tom can identify and learn his respective role. Because parents of the same sex are traditionally the primary instructors of gender roles and Tom's father is not available, he does not become properly socialized. No relationship exists between Tom and his absent father, who is mentioned only in passing and described as being "a devilish man, possibly not understood but certainly hard to live with" (316). Implications exist about the narrator's parents' problematic marriage, which reveals itself in Tom's mother's singing as "something she only did when my father had just left on a long road trip and would not be likely to return for quite a while" (313). It is important to note that Tom's parents have a dysfunctional relationship because his observation of that dysfunction serves as his idea of what relationships are like. The only other man in Tom's life, his grandfather, is preoccupied and often "mumbling a sermon to himself in the study" (313), thus leaving the narrator's dominating mother and grandmother, from whom he "received no attention at all," to head the household.

Because of these multiple dysfunctional relationships, Tom develops a dependent, almost obsessive attachment to his sister without whom he can survive neither domestically nor socially as he is continually "set upon by the rougher boys of the town" (314). However, when his sister reaches puberty, the narrator's grandmother and mother insist that she adopt the qualities of a "proper lady" and abandon "the wild country of childhood" (314). Bewildered and hurt, Tom views this sudden transition of his sister as desertion and his mother and grandmother as "approving and conspiring to increase it" (314). No longer able to engage in childish activities, Tom's sister is encouraged to partake in more sophisticated endeavors, such as piano lessons, and begins practicing with Richard Miles.

Abandoned by his sister, ignored by his mother and grandmother, and lacking a male role model, Tom begins to fixate on Richard, and this fixation evolves in three stages. The narrator, initially jealous and resentful of Richard for usurping his place as his sister's companion, comes to "dream about him as [he] had formerly dreamed of storybook heroes" (317). Because all of the men in the text are absent or preoccupied, even Miss Aehle's father is "paralyzed," Richard functions as the only available male role model, and the narrator's idolization of him occurs as a result of his compensating for an absent father. The second stage of Tom's fixation with Richard soon develops into a crush "of a shy and sorrowful kind, involved with [his] sense of

In Dr. Jen Riley's 
*English Studies*  
(English 30001), an introduction to literary theory, students were asked to write an argumentative paper using psychoanalytic or Marxist criticism. 
**Lisa Robinson** uses psychoanalysis in *It's a Family Affair* to examine a Tennessee Williams short story. Robinson concludes that dysfunctional family relationships, as well as a fear of abandonment, lead to the narrator's confused identity and unconscious desire for his own sister.
abandonment" and because his sister had fallen in love "as always [he] followed suit" (317). By this admission, it seems the narrator has transferred his dependency on his sister onto Richard and, in fact, may be competing with her for Richard's companionship. This sibling rivalry is resultant of Tom's unconscious desire to punish his sister for abandoning him by taking the boy she loves and, in order to avoid future abandonment, he secretly admires Richard and flees from him when a possible confrontation arises. Tom has assumed a passive role in his "relationship" with Richard because he has learned from his role in the family to be passive, living as a male in a matriarchal household second to his beautiful and favored sister.

Finally, Tom's innocent crush on Richard evolves into sexual desire, and since he has transferred his dependency/obsession from his sister onto Richard and he desires Richard sexually, he therefore unconsciously desires his sister sexually. The narrator has successfully substituted his unconscious desire for his sister and acknowledges that "the transference of my interest to Richard now seemed complete. I would barely notice my sister" (319). However, these desires are not felt without shame. Just as Tom watches Richard secretly from his cracked bedroom door and wonders "How...did I explain to myself...the fascination of his physical being without...confessing to myself that I was a little monster?" (319), he also "averts his look" from his sister's beauty and "began to find life unsatisfactory" (316). Without a father to provide sexual guidelines, and because of his view of women as holding familial power, Tom is confused as to what his role in a relationship is. The narrator's "relationship" with Richard both enables him to vicariously have sex with his sister and obtain a father.

Tom is ashamed of his sexual desires and equates the "sensual with the impure" (319) because of the text's asexual or suppressive attitude toward sex. Imagery aids in supporting the overtly asexual nature of the text as in the case of Miss Aehle, who is described as being a "typical spinster" living in a house covered by "moonvines and honeysuckle" as if she covets her virginity. Likewise, the image of Tom's sister being "escorted away" and "addressed in hushed and solicitous voices" (313) suggests a denial of sexuality. As she has sexually matured, she no longer associates with her brother so as to hinder any potential sexual activity. Also, along the same lines, the narrator's aunt remains "the one woman in the world by whom [his] mother was intimidated" (315) due to her beauty and sensuality. Williams mentions Tom's aunt only to make the reader aware of her death, and in this way Williams seems to suggest that all things of beauty and sensuality are destined to die before they can "decline by common degrees in a faded season" (320) just as Richard later dies. Even the title of the story implies suppressed sexuality or the symbolic death of sexual desires. Tom likens Richard's violin case to "a little coffin made for a small child or doll" (318) in the same way that he views his abandoned relationship with his sister as being "put away in a box like a doll" (316) as if his sexual desires for both parties has "died."

Another device Williams uses in the text to perpetuate its asexual agenda is music, which operates as a dichotomy both symbolic of sex and the suppression of sex. Music represents the denial of sex when the narrator suggests that Miss Aehle views "playing little pieces on the piano or scratching out little tunes on a fiddle" as a way to "make up for everything that was ostensibly wrong in a world made by God but disarrayed by the devil" (316). Similarly, the recital symbolizes a failed sex act where afterwards exists a "conspiracy to ignore that anything unfortunate had happened" (323) as if to deny sex and sexuality. The recital scene reads like a dream sequence that symbolizes disastrous intercourse between Richard and Tom's sister. In the narrator's version of the duet, Richard is the "heroic" sexual aggressor who raises his bow, a symbolic phallus, "high in the air" with a machismo "Hah!" that is compared to a "bullfighter daring a charge" and then lowers it to the strings in a "masterful sweep" implying sexual skill. Richard then "edged up closer to her position" and "took the lead from my sister and plunged them into the passage" (323) with the tune of the piano "barely noticeable underneath him" (323). Here, the language and verb use connotes the physical act of sex. When the recital
was finished, they "received an ovation" or orgasm, and Tom's sister "started to rush for the cloakroom," symbolic of female sexual imagery and suggestive of her dissatisfaction with the act. Tom's unconscious desire to punish his sister for abandoning him results in her dissatisfaction or failure to perform in the act.

Clearly, when viewed through a psychoanalytic lens, "The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin" illustrates how dysfunctional relationships within a family, and fear of abandonment, leads to the narrator's confused identity and unconscious sexual desire for his sister. The asexual or sexually suppressive nature of the text, whether intentional or unintentional, in fact reveals a number of images and symbols that are overtly sexual in orientation and manifest in the narrator's inability to suppress his desires. Tom's psychological makeup is founded on his dependency and sexual desire for his sister and his dysfunctional relationship with his parents, which results in his fixating on Richard Miles.

Works Cited