Like Mother Like Son: Masculinity and Melancholy in Topdog/Underdog

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In the play *Topdog/Underdog* (2002 Pulitzer Prize Winner), Suzan Lori-Parks gives us a culminating moment in the lives of two African American brothers, Booth and Lincoln, who live together in a tiny apartment with no running water. In the introduction to her play, Parks writes “This is a play about family wounds and healing. Welcome to the family” (Parks 4).

When analyzing a work of fiction, there exists the interesting irony that one is not analyzing real events involving real people. The pressure of this irony is somewhat relieved in a theater when the fictional event takes place as a live production. On the stage, the dramatic work becomes a theatrical reality. At the least, the audience suspends believe to enter the world before them and interpret the stage life as real life. Such is the nature of drama (on the page) and theater (on the boards) as opposed to the novel, short story or memoir. Because drama is based on the direct interaction of characters through dialogue and any narrative in the play exists in that dialogue, then discourse analysis lends an appropriate and powerful hand for analyzing a dramatic work.

As Rena Fraden has pointed out, Susan Lori-Parks bears animosity toward critical analysis of her work. In one interview, Parks states, “I like my characters to do things. I’m less interested in meaning—whatever that word means, I’m not quite sure” (Fraden 43). Writers say many things about their works, but Parks seems consistent in her view of her own writing.
“I’ve told him a hundred times ‘George [George C. Wolfe, the director], there are no metaphor!’ I don’t know what a metaphor is! . . . There are two men in a room. Just take it for that. . . Slavery! Don’t even think about slavery” (Fraden 44). Of course Parks’ assertions leave little room for critical and theoretical analysis. But analysis must forge ahead. Therefore, the only choice left is for the critic to respectfully ignore her complaints, proceed and listen to Parks’ protests with a clue to the literature at hand.

Myra Tucker-Abramson states about *Topdog/Underdog* , “It is the rage of disempowerment and loss, that moves Booth to kill his brother, and in this way, the burden of responsibility for Lincoln’s death lies at least as much on the shoulders of systemic and economic racism as it does on Booth” (93). For me, this is the form of criticism that Parks is speaking against, and not necessarily all criticism. An appropriate theory would admit a myriad of ambiguities: **“The masks black men wear are many and varied and might be understood as congruent with the difficult history of the agency or lack thereof of black masculine self-fashioning that is autonomous sand wholly self-interested. As we all know, history is always in question when black masculinity is in discussion” (Walcott 75).**Tucker-Abramson claims, “It is the rage of disempowerment and loss, that moves Booth to kill his brother. . . The burden of responsibility for Lincoln’s death lies at least as much on the shoulders of economic degradation and systemic racism as it does on Booth” (93). I believe the backbone of Topdog/Underdog will break under the burden of such a mission. However, I do agree with Tucker-Abramson’s claim that “definitions of masculinity” are at the heart of the struggle between the two brothers, especially Booths’ internal struggle. The face to face interaction of the brothers supports this notion.

Therefore, utilizing the post-structuralist concept of Erving Goffman’s interaction order, I will establish the family framework of the two brothers, Booth and Lincoln, as they attempt to live together. In the text of Topdog/Underdog, I will discover two major components of interaction order--normalcy and trust—and explain how the breakdown of normalcy and trust leads Booth to kill Lincoln. Also, I will show that Booth’s confusion about normal heterosexual behavior and the lack of reward in this mythical arena, along with the sexual myth’s correspondence to Booth’s shattered dream myth of making a lot of money at 3-card monte, leads Booth to kill Lincoln.
Although the cast list (Parks 7) names Lincoln the Topdog and Booth the underdog, ironically Booth is the first and last man standing in the play. “Perhaps the real crime of the confidence man is not that he takes money from his victims but that he robs us all of the belief that middle-class manners and appearance can be sustained only by middle-class people” (Goffman 29).

**INTERACTION ORDER**
On a macro level in evaluating Topdog/Underdog, an easy trap for a critic is to convince himself or herself that the hegemonic power structures of white capitalism and dominant politics together with the terrible history of oppression of the black man in the Americas is why Booth kills Lincoln. In speaking of Topdog/Underdog, Myra Tucker-Abramson states **“Parks shows the history of slavery to be directly linked to the economic slavery of black men in America, as is represented through the double signification of Lincoln” (87). . .“It is not predestination that has led to this tragedy but the confluence of economic degradation, systemic racism, and definitions of masculinity inscribed from without”** **(Tucker-Abramson 95). In the play there is no doubt that low wages or no wages, the shattered hopes of economic dreams that disappear, and the desperate attempts to live week to week bear on the psyches of Booth and Lincoln.**
Erving Goffman says, “In sum, then, although it is certainly proper to point to the unequal distribution of rights in the interaction order (as in the case of the segregative use of the local communities of a city), and the unequal distribution of risk (as, say, across the age grades and between the sexes), the central theme remains of a traffic of use. . . And of course, to accept the conventions and norms as given (and to initiate one's action accordingly), is, in effect, to put trust in those about one. Not doing so, one could hardly get on with the business at hand; one could hardly have any- business at hand” (Goffman 6).

Any analysis of Topdog/Underdog should not ignore the disparate ways each man reacts to these conditions. What happens outside the door of their apartment certainly influences both men, “Either one accepts collective structures as organizing social life, or one admits to an infinite number of contingent circumstances which drive social action” (Rawls 148). If Erving Goffman used drama as a paradigm to examine every day social interaction, then it follows that the telescope of Goffman’s observation can be turned upon the stage play as if the interaction of the actors is a “real” social event.

Erving Goffman’s concept of interaction order is useful in looking at Parks’ play. “My concern over the years has been to promote acceptance of this face-to-face domain as an analytically viable one--a domain which might be titled, for want of any happy name, the interaction order--a domain whose preferred method of study is microanalysis” (Goffman 2). Goffman’s analysis includes normalcy and trust as codependent features for interaction order “Normality is based either on our perception of the regularity of events and
people’s behavior, its factual dimension, or on our classification of action as rule/norm following its normative dimension. Consequently, the predictability, reliability, and legibility of social order can be seen as synthetic criteria of normality. Trust, as an outcome of situational normality, reduces the complexity of a situation and increases the probability of cooperation” (Misztal 314).

**Normalcy does not imply a peaceful existence nor an easy mode of living. Normalcy implies a routine or a pattern that continues day in and day out. The recent economic turmoil in the United States provides excellent examples of where normalcy was disrupted in the lives of many individuals and families. Take for example, any person who performs manual labor eight or ten hours a day, six days a week. Most factory workers or agricultural workers, men or women, who spend sixty hours a week making a low wage have reasonable claim to complain about their daily toil and lack of leisure time. But when they lose their job, as occurred to many millions of people recently, they long for the normalcy of their sixty hour work week.**
Booth and Lincoln have developed their own brand of normal life together. Although their antagonism and arguing appear confrontational, these acts are part of the daily ritual that create a normalcy for the two men. An early example in the play shows the paradoxical nature of normalcy. At the opening of scene one, Booth is practicing the game of 3-card monte. Booth is so involved with the cards that he fails to hear Lincoln enter the apartment. Then, the stage directions read “Booth, sensing someone behind him, whirls around, pulling a gun from his pants. While the presence of Lincoln doesn’t surprise him, the Lincoln costume does.” (Parks 13). Of course, a gun pointed at your face is not normal for most of us. But this is the norm for Booth and Lincoln.

Another norm in the relationship between the brothers is that Booth steals items and shares them with his brother. This is not what most people would include in typical, rational normal behavior, but keep in mind that Goffman’s idea of normalcy deals with routine and repetitive acts. Shop lifting and stealing are ritual acts that Booth performs on a regular basis. Unlike his lack of grace at 3-card monte, Booth is a master at larceny. The stage directions at the beginning of scene two describe all the items Booth managed to hide on himself: a belt, the jackets and pants of two suits, two neckties, a bottle of whiskey, two folded shirts and a magazine. It resembles the Volkswagen commercial where twenty-five people climb out of a Beetle.

Booth’s ritual of petty theft and resulting gifts for his brother, immediately precede the weekly Friday custom of Lincoln bringing home his pay check in the form of cash. Friday evening is the integral normal event in this domestic disaster that Lincoln and Booth create for each other, especially in their imagined roles as ma and pa (Parks 30-1):
LINCOLN: Taaaaadaaaaaaa!
BOOTH: Lordamighty, Pa. I smells money!
(With a series of very elaborate moves, Lincoln brings the money over to Booth.)
BOOTH: Put it in my hands, Pa!
LINCOLN: Take yrself a good long whiff of them greenbacks.
BOOTH: Oh lordamighty. Ima faint, Pa! Get me muh med-sin!
(Lincoln quickly pours two large glasses of whiskey.)
LINCOLN: Don’t die on me, Ma!
BOOTH: Im fading fast, Pa!
LINCOLN: Thinka thuh children, Ma! Thinka thuh farm!
BOOTH: 1-2-3-
(Both men gulp down their drinks simultaneously.)
LINCOLN and BOOTH: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!
(Lots of laughing and slapping on the backs.)
Because the apartment belongs to Booth, he takes the money for rent and miscellaneous expenses and gives back a small portion to Lincoln as his allowance. This ritual with the Friday money is important for a couple of reasons. First, it shows the symbiotic nature of the relationship between Booth and Lincoln. The two brothers need each other to rent an apartment, to eat, to wear new clothes and to drink whiskey, but at the same time their relationship is parasitic. Booth wages guerilla warfare on traditional capitalistic institutions by shop lifting and stealing. Lincoln provides stability by working a regular job and receiving a regular pay check. Second, the money ritual occurs every Friday like clockwork. It is a normal, expected event for the brothers, especially for Booth.

When in scene five the normalcy is disturbed by Lincoln losing his job, the stress and breakdown of trust is not immediate. Booth calls Lincoln a free man. Lincoln talks about cards and shows Booth the ins and outs of 3-card monte. But the spell is broken. The normalcy disappears, and with that loss goes Booth’s trust for Lincoln. Booth needs the make-believe role as ma. Booth requires from Lincoln a stable environment based on Lincoln’s weekly income, even though the apartment is too small for the men. “Social interaction can be identified narrowly as that which uniquely transpires in social situations, that is, environments in which two or more individuals are physically in one another's response presence” (Goffman 2).

Every family experiences power struggles of some type. When each person in a family
solely defines him or herself based on family relationships and those relationships disintegrate, then no frame for personal identity exists. Booth is a petty thief. An excellent thief. Other than larceny, his imaginary power results from his fictitious stories about sex, money, and card skills to his brother Lincoln. Now that Lincoln( in the next scene) is making money again at 3-card monte, Lincoln doesn’t need Booth. But Booth needs Lincoln. Booth lack s economic power. He lacks a labor skill amenable to capitalism. Booth lacks a woman and so lacks his masculinity. “Foucault undertakes to reconceive power altogether, not on the analogy of an object that can be possessed and passed around but rather on the analogy of an event. Power is something that happens. It is a kind of tension that emerges when people have different goals or perspectives or conflicting projects” (McWhorter 42).

Scene six breaks any lingering remnants of normalcy between the brothers. This is a Thursday night, but Lincoln enters with his usual Friday night “Taaadaaa!” (Parks 86). The apartment is silent. Ma (Booth) is not there to respond. The stage directions say about Lincoln, “Hes high on liquor. . . . He pulls an enormous wad of money from his pocket” (Parks 86). Lincoln played three-car monte and he won a lot of cash.
During an interview with Rena Fraden, Suzan Lori-Parks said:

“Why does everyone think that white artists make art and black artists make statements? Why doesn’t anyone ever ask me about form? . . . It’s insulting when people say my plays are about what it’s about to be black—as if that’s all we think about, as if our life is about that. My life is not about race. It’s about being alive” (Fraden 41).
If Booth cannot live a life without his brother Lincoln, then events lead Booth to kill his brother.

Near the end of the play *Topdog/Underdog*, Lincoln shows Booth how to play 3-card monte. The only money Booth has is the inheritance his mother gave him when she left home. The inheritance is supposedly five hundred dollars, which is wrapped tightly in a nylon stocking. Booth never opened the money gift. Booth wagers the inheritance in the final card game with his brother Lincoln and loses his inheritance. A short time later, Booth confesses to Lincoln that he has killed his somewhat girlfriend Grace. “Grace. I popped her. Grace” (112). Lincoln realizes Booth is not his normal self and tries to give back the stocking inheritance. Booth will not accept the money. When begins to tear open the nylon stocking, all normality for Booth disappears.

“Almost all acts of violence are mitigated by the violator proffering an ex-change of some kind, however undesired by the victim, and of course the violator presupposes the maintenance of speech norms and the conventions for gesturing threat to accomplish this. So, too, in the case of unnegotiated violence. Assassins must rely on and profit from conventional traffic flow and conventional understanding regarding normal appearances if they are to get into a position to attack their victim and escape from the scene of the crime” (Goffman 5).

At the end of Topdog/Underdog on page 114, Booth places his gun “into the left side of Lincolns neck” (Parks). Unlike the historical President Lincoln, this Lincoln knows he is about to do and has the opportunity to say to his brother “Dont” (Parks). Then the stages directions read “Booth shoots Lincoln. Lincoln slumps forward, falling out of his chair and onto the floor. He lies there dead. Booth paces back and forth, like a panther in a cage, holding his gun” (Parks).

Booth ends the play as he began the play. He attempts to play 3-card monte, but he realizes he has no skill and the only family he knew, Lincoln, is dead. Booth ends the play with these stage directions:
(He bends to pick up the money-filled stocking. Then he just crumples. As he sits beside Lincolns body, the money-stocking falls away. Booth holds Lincolns body, hugging him close. He sobs.)
BOOTH: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!

**THE SINS OF THE MOTHER**

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