Bowen Family Systems Theory and Family Disintegration

In Tennessee Williams’s Drama

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To my devoted wise father, Ahmad Fayiz

To my inspiration wonderful husband, Bassam

To my sweetheart brave son, Shojaa
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Abstract

The thesis examines the American psychiatrist Murray Bowen’s major contribution to his profession, Bowen Family Systems Theory, as a literary-critical tool to interrogate the theme of family disintegration in Tennessee Williams’s early and middle plays written between 1945 and 1962. Both Williams and Bowen were writing in a specific intellectual and cultural context in terms of post-World War II attitudes towards the American family and its social function. Bowen theory understands family as an interrelated emotional system, in which a change in the functioning of one part of the system directly relates to changes in the whole system. I argue that we find a parallel to this in Williams’s plays: members of the family do not function separately, but within the context of the system that shapes their feelings, thoughts, and behaviour.

The four chapters of the thesis pair eight of Williams’s major works using the eight interlocking concepts that form the basis of Bowen theory: chapter 1 examines differentiation of self and triangles in The Glass Menagerie (1945) and A Streetcar Named Desire (1947); in chapter 2, nuclear family emotional system and family projection process in Summer and Smoke (1948) and Period of Adjustment (1961); in chapter 3, multigenerational emotional process and sibling position in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955) and Sweet Bird of Youth (1959); and, in chapter 4, emotional cutoff and societal emotional process in Suddenly Last Summer (1958) and The Night of the Iguana (1962). Not only does Bowen help to elucidate a central theme of Williams’s writing, but the psychodynamics of therapy are reflected in Williams’s dramatic accounts of the plight of the mid-twentieth century family.

In the introduction I argue that Bowen theory is a useful tool for the analysis of modern American literature, developing the ways in which psychoanalytical theory has been used by literary critics to gain a broader understanding of the group context of family life in the postwar period. This will be demonstrated through the four chapters, while the conclusion considers what Bowen offers to literary studies more broadly, and what the limitations of his theory might be.
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Introduction

Family, Emotional System, and Tennessee Williams

The family is the basic unit of society, the unit of growth and experience, of fulfilment and failure. The family is also the unit of illness and health.

(Nathan Ackerman, 1964, p. 175)

The bird that I hope to catch in the net of this play [cat] is not the solution of one man’s psychological problem. I’m trying to catch the true quality of experience in group of people, that cloudy, flickering, evanescent – fiercely charged! – interplay of live human beings in the thundercloud of a common crisis. Some mystery should be left in the revelation of character in the play, just as a great deal of mystery is always left in the revelation of character in life, even in one’s own character to himself. This does not absolve the playwright of his duty to observe and probe as clearly and deeply as he legitimately can: but it should steer him away from “pat” conclusions, facile definitions which make a play just a play, not a snare for the truth of human experience.

(Tennessee Williams, 1955, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof)

The significance of the family as one of the foundational units of modern society, the role of the family in shaping an individual’s personality and experience, and the family as a site of achievement and frustration are all widely acknowledged. This is particularly the case in the United States, not just in sociological terms during the building of the new American Republic in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but in capturing the interest of thinkers, philosophers, politicians, ministers, psychologists, psychiatrists, writers, and artists throughout the twentieth century. Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) is one example of a major literary figure whose dramatic work focuses on the twentieth-century American family and charts the significant changes that the family unit underwent, from the trials of the Great Depression in The Glass Menagerie (1945) through to the fragmentation of the family
in his plays of the 1970s. While the theme of family disintegration is most obvious in late plays such as Small Craft Warnings (1972) and Vieux Carré (1979), this thesis will argue that Williams was always interested in the stresses and strains of family life from his earliest work, and he did not subscribe to the idealised notion of the nuclear family unit that was upheld by the United States government in the 1950s as the essential building block of the postwar nation.

In order to develop this central argument, rather than simply exploring the theme of family disintegration in Williams’s early and middle dramatic works, I will analyse eight of his most significant plays through a theoretical perspective drawn from the social sciences that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as an integrative theory in the field of psychiatry: Bowen Family Systems Theory. As I will elaborate, Bowen Family Systems Theory developed in parallel to the development of Williams’s drama and provides a useful theoretical tool for examining family dynamics and individuals’ behaviour in terms of roles within the family emotional system, which the chief exponent of the theory, the Tennessee-born psychiatrist Murray Bowen (1913-1990), understood as one unit. Bowen’s theory relies on systems thinking to explain the interplay of family members and is as interested as Williams in the psychodynamics that bind individuals together.

Over the past two centuries, family structures and family functions have been shaped by social, cultural, economic, and historical circumstances that are usually much larger than any single family is able to control. In the early stages of the American Republic the family was the symbol of integrity and unity within a coherent rural society. By the time of increased urbanisation after the American Civil War, the family was forced to adapt itself to a more complicated modern society in which changing family functions tended to reduce tight-knit kinship interaction. Additionally, historical, political, and economic events in the twentieth century (particularly World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II) all contributed to the weakening of the family institution, increasing the emotional anxieties of families affected by death or enforced migration, and creating economic and ideological insecurity for the family in post-World War II America. Whilst postwar advertisements depicted the typical suburban family as a cohesive and loving nuclear unit, other voices in the 1950s were more sceptical about whether families were as stable as politicians and advertisers were proclaiming. In The American Family in the Twentieth Century (1953), for example,
John Sirjamaki argues from a sociological perspective that “the nation is presently too large and complex for the people to correlate family membership and roles sufficiently with their participation in other institutions” (Sirjamaki, 1959, p. 53). In Sirjamaki’s opinion, urbanisation and the alteration of family functions to other social institutions caused its instability by the mid-twentieth century (pp. 52-3).

Writing a decade after Sirjamaki, Nathan Goldman pointed out that the “disorganization of the family is considered by most critics of the contemporary scene as the basic and most crucial problem of American society”. According to Goldman, “divorce, desertion, and separation are viewed as serious breaks in the institution of the family” (Goldman, 1967, p. 158). Norman W. Bell and Ezra F. Vogel also reacted against the notion of a nuclear family that was sealed off from other social units, claiming that the “family as a social system is not a closed system, existing in isolation. Rather, it is an open system which sustains relationships with other systems” (Bell and Vogel, 1968, p. 3). Partly responding to growing divorce rates in the 1960s and the rise of single-parent families, Goldman considers family breakdown as a manifestation of total social fragmentation, explaining that:

According to reports from a large variety of sources, American society is in a serious state of moral and social disintegration. Drug addiction, alcoholism, prostitution, gambling, divorce, venereal diseases, illegitimacy, poverty, homosexuality, crime, riots, racial discrimination, and many other morally abhorrent conditions are said to be at all-time highs (Goldman, 1967, p. 157).

Bell and Vogel agree with Goldman’s investigations by saying that even in the early twentieth century problems such as divorce, illegitimacy, decline of birth rate, poverty, separation, crime, and illegitimacy all became noticeable. They add that economic conditions play a main role in the stability of the modern family and individuals’ adjustment to changing social pressures. In their opinion “the impact of the Depression and World War II once more forced a broader view of the family, by calling attention to the intimate relationship between the family and contemporary external systems” (p. 6). Their argument hinges on the question of whether the family is disintegrating or integrating into larger social structures, which in turn depends on the norms, ideologies, and debates of the society at any specific period of time. In this way, the family is not
simply a description of a model of social organization, but leads us to consider the family unit from both interpersonal and social perspectives: the potential of family members to be mutually supportive is often countered by forces that undermine common purpose.

Talcott Parsons and Renee C. Fox argue that the American urban family, if compared with kinship groups, is characterised by its isolation from the kinship system (or extended family) and its “functionlessness” (Parsons and Fox, cited in Bell and Vogel, 1968, p. 379). They also add that the nuclear family adapted itself to the necessities of the modern industrial society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (p. 380). Parsons and Robert F. Bales find that if the postwar family lost what has been traditionally associated with families in the first half of the twentieth century, this does not necessarily indicate the “decline of the family”. Rather, they argue that family has become “a highly differentiated and specialized agency” that differentiated it from historical models (Parsons and Bales, 1955, pp. 9-10). In this connection, writing two decades after Parsons, in the 1970s when the family unit was in decline, Christopher Lasch clarifies that Parsons believes that family specialisation in children’s socialisation, love, “emotional solace”, and security increases its competence in a differentiated society in which family becomes a “haven in a heartless world” (Lasch 1977, p. 116). Parsons was an influential figure, though, at the time that Bowen was establishing his Family Systems Theory by stressing “relationships among systems” and “structural and functional differentiation” and encouraging us to consider the structure and emotional function of the family. This thesis sets out to develop this descriptive model of the family, but tests the limits of Bowen’s Family Systems Theory by testing it against Tennessee Williams’s depictions of families in his drama that often seem to be on the verge of fragmenting.

For the purpose of this thesis, the nuclear family will be examined as the basic dynamic unit in American society for two reasons: first, because families in Williams’s drama are mostly nuclear, even though they undergo strains and signs of fragmentation. Second, as I elaborate below, although Bowen theory has implications across generations and age groups, the nuclear family (the parents and one child at least) is the basic unit of analysis in 1950s family systems theory, corresponding with the 1950 Census which documented that 80 percent of American families were nuclear ones.
(Clair Brown, cited in Martin Halliwell, 2013, p. 136). In this respect, Stuart A. Queen, Robert W. Habenstein, and Jill Sobel Quadagno mention that:

The nuclear family receives the most attention. It usually has a separate residence; it commonly is a self-supporting unit. In fiction, in drama, and in everyday life, it is accorded the place of honour. More distant relatives are considered, too, but they are usually outside the inner circle of our closest ties, our most intimate experiences, and our basic obligations (Queen et al., 1985, p. 8).

They emphasise the importance of the nuclear family as the most significant component in American culture: both in reality and in fiction. The extended family and larger kinship group have not been excluded completely from the norms of what healthy family means. Rather, such cultural forms as the TV sitcom *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* contributed to the idealisation of the American nuclear family in the 1950s.

Together with these broad historical and sociological considerations, Tennessee Williams explores the often tense relationship between the American individual, family, and society in the context of his dramatic works. This central theme informs my choice of Williams as the central literary focus of this thesis as one of the most prominent American playwrights of the mid-century. Theatre historians R. Barton Palmer and William Robert Bray argue that alongside the drama of Eugene O’Neill, Arthur Miller and William Inge, “Williams’s plays explored, in innovative and dramatically effective fashion, the drama of the self, probing the dark corners and difficulties of desire and exploring the ties of love and family that bind and (entrap) troubled characters” (Palmer and Bray, 2009, p. 2). Williams is usually compared with Arthur Miller, and their plays of the 1940s and 1950s are measured as the “golden age” of Broadway American theatre. Both dramatists’ first theatrical successes, Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and Miller’s *All My Sons* (1947) and *Death of a Salesman* (1949) explore excruciating family conflicts in post-World War II America. But while Miller generally portrays political and economic situations, Williams tends to employ his poetic language to depict emotionally and spiritually wounded people unable to cope with the burdens of daily life.

Gerald M. Berkowitz persuasively argues that Williams moves American drama “towards its new function of illuminating psychological and emotional forces within his
characters” (Berkowitz, 1992, p. 77). Williams’s drama is considered a rich field for the Freudian psychoanalysis that dominated the stage in the aftermath of World War II. Berkowitz also mentions that Williams’s dramatic voice is rich in “symbols, emotionalism, and rhetorical flourishes” (p.77). Berkowitz’s perspective provides evidence that Williams’s drama proves to be an ideal model to investigate family disintegration, which I will read through the lens of Bowen Family Systems Theory. The relationship between Williams’s drama and Bowen’s theories is productive because of the number of characters in his plays who have mental disorders and appear to be emotionally disturbed. There is a broad range of these characters: Laura Wingfield in The Glass Menagerie (1945), Blanche DuBois in A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), Mrs Winemiller in Summer and Smoke (1948), Brick Pollitt in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955), Catharine Holly in Suddenly Last Summer (1958), Chance Wayne in Sweet Bird of Youth (1959), George Haverstick in Period of Adjustment (1960), the Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon in The Night of the Iguana (1962), and Violet in Small Craft Warnings (1972). But rather than reading these characters through a psychoanalytic perspective, family relationships are central to both Williams’s drama and Bowen theory.

In the 1950s, the United States witnessed the emergence of several pioneers in family therapy such as Nathan Ackerman (1908-1971), Murray Bowen (1913-1990), Virginia Satir (1916-1988), Don Jackson (1920-1968), and Jay Haley (1923-2007). In addition to anthropologists and sociologists, many twentieth-century therapists focused on understanding and explaining the individual’s behaviour through family relationships and their social and interpersonal contexts. The shift from individual to group therapy can be traced through the years that the United States was involved in World War II due to the increasing stresses on the armed forces. As Nathan G. Hale demonstrates, although individual therapy was more systematic than group therapy, the latter was extensively used by social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists by the end of World War II (Hale, 1995, p. 199). After the war family therapy started to appear more broadly, dealing with the family as a whole organism rather than merely focusing on individual or individuals within a group. The immersion of new family therapists, among them Murray Bowen, in the United States indicates the great need for solutions of family psychic and emotional obstacles in the post-World War II period.
Murray Bowen’s theories have gained a significant place in family therapy since the 1950s because of their ability to define the family as an emotional system. It is important to understand the development of Bowen’s ideas as they developed during the same period that Williams was exploring family strains in his drama. Bowen was born in Waverly, Tennessee in 1913, and was the oldest of five children. In 1934 he received his B.S. degree from University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and his M.D. from the University of Tennessee Medical School in 1937, before gaining further medical training in the Army during World War II. Bowen decided to shift from surgery to psychiatry during the war and in 1946 his psychiatric work began at the Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kansas: one of the key psychiatric training centres during the middle of the century, influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis. His efforts are distinct from other pioneers of family therapy (mentioned above) because he devoted his efforts to introducing a new theory of human behaviour, which he believed is as predictable as any natural phenomenon. He is also the first to provide a comprehensive theory that applies “the umbrella of general systems theory to one natural system, human emotions” (John V. Knapp, 1997, pp. 223-54).

He started to work on his theory at the Menninger Clinic in 1946 where he developed ideas about schizophrenic patients and their whole family relations, and he continued this work between 1954 and 1959 at the National Institute of Mental Health. This shift from a focus on the individual to the family is crucial to understand the development of family systems theory. From 1960 to 1965, Bowen’s efforts shifted from using clinical descriptions to using broader concepts, partly drawn from psychiatry and partly from sociology. By 1965 Bowen’s research led him to state that family systems theory includes six interlocking concepts: differentiation of self, triangles, nuclear family emotional system, family projection process, multigenerational emotional process, and sibling position. In 1972 Bowen defined the concept of societal emotional process (societal regression), and it was added to the theory formally in 1975 along with the concept of emotional cutoff. In 1974 Bowen added his name to the theory, which became known as “Bowen Theory” or “Bowen Family Systems Theory” in order to differentiate it from the Family Systems Theory and Family Systems Therapy that covered broad therapeutic approaches in the 1960s and 1970s. Bowen worked on developing his theory for over two decades until it reached its final frame of
Bowen theory understands the family to be an emotionally interrelated system: a change in the functioning of one part of the system is directly followed by changes in the whole system. Members of the family do not function or behave separately, but within the circle of the system that shapes their feelings, thoughts, and functions. Anxiety and change in one family member will affect the others’ feelings, thoughts, and reactions. Bowen theory provides a new paradigm for understanding individuals in the emotional context of the family. The theory not only focused on family relationships, but was also geared to understanding other societal institutions and groups, moving out in concentric circles from the private self to the broader family and the social engagement of its members.

Before going further in explaining the significance of Bowen theory, it is important to mention that Michael Kerr co-authored with Bowen one of the most fundamental books about Bowen theory, namely *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory* (1988), which is an important resource for this thesis. Kerr was the noteworthy director of the Bowen Centre for the Study of the Family (previously known as the Georgetown University Family Center and founded by Bowen in 1975) in the period from 1990 (following Bowen’s death) to 2011, and is currently the Director Emeritus of the Centre. Kerr had previously worked at the Georgetown Family Centre for twenty years along with Murray Bowen, and as Bowen comments, Kerr “probably knows more about my theoretical, therapeutic, and organizational orientation than any other person” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 339). He also published many other texts on Bowen theory, the majority of which were published in the Family Centre Report 1979-1996, edited by Ruth Riley Sagar.

Kerr and Bowen mention that Bowen theory was significant in the field of psychiatry and family therapy in the 1950s and early 1960s for two main reasons. The first of these is because Bowen theory describes “an important new set of variables that influence the physical diseases, emotional illness, and social acting-out problems” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, p. viii). These new variables are the level of differentiation of self, anxiety, and individuality-togetherness, which will be explained in Chapter One. Kerr and Bowen clarify that one cannot accept that relationships in the family system lead to
clinical symptoms, unless one understands the relatedness of the emotional system on “biological, psychological and sociological levels”. Kerr mentions that “what we call “diseases” can be more adequately explained by viewing them as the outcome of a natural process [...] It is very easy to see a symptom; it can be very difficult to see the processes that lead up to a symptom” (Kerr, 1986 cited in Sagar 1997, p. 10). In other words, Bowen theory assumes that family emotional process and the biological process of any physical disease affect each other to some degree.

The second consideration is that Bowen theory validates that “the interrelationship of these newly defined variables could be understood with systems thinking” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, p. viii). In this context, systems thinking is different from cause-effect thinking. Kerr explains that:

Systems thinking defines process, a process extending beyond one individual to a relationship, beyond one relationship to a triangle, beyond one triangle to interlocking triangles in the nuclear family, beyond nuclear family relationships to relationships in the multigenerational family, beyond the family to the social system, and beyond the human to the subhuman world (Kerr, cited in Sagar 1997, p. 30).

Systems thinking defines a sequences of events and concerned with where, what, when, and how these events happen, while cause-effect thinking is concerned with why (p. 29). Kerr points out that systems thinking is very old and simple, and what makes it simple is by linking the theoretical concepts with the rest of the life sciences and by applying it to a “living system” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, pp. 10-11). As this thesis will explore, this idea of the living system is particularly relevant to Williams’s drama and the conditions of family life in the mid-twentieth century, as well as more broadly for the social sciences and humanities.

Bowen Family Systems Theory is different from Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory that came to influence literary criticism after World War II. Bowen was trained as a psychiatrist in Menninger Clinic, a Freudian-oriented institution, yet he found Freud’s ideas to be subjective and to have veered away from a scientific base. As such, throughout his professional life Bowen aimed to formulate human behaviour as a science. Bowen theory deals with the family as “an emotional
unit” or “a network of interlocking relationships” rather than a group of self-directed individuals. Further, although family systems theory does not eliminate the intrapsychic process of the individual, it is oriented toward the family members’ processes of interaction. In contrast, through psychoanalysis Freud underlines that the individual’s behaviour is mostly driven by unconscious rather than conscious forces, based on the model of repression where transgressive thoughts are kept in the unconscious and only surface in lapses, desires, dreams, or periods of stress.

Vincent D. Foley also demonstrates the significance of Bowen theory by saying that “one cannot begin to study the field of family therapy without studying Murray Bowen”, arguing that “many of his ideas (for example, differentiation, family projection process, and triangles) have become part of all family therapy theory, regardless of one’s school of thought. In brief, Bowen family therapy has become the lingua franca of the field” (Foley, cited in Papero 1990, foreword). In this way, Bowen Family Systems Theory appears as a key concept in the field of family therapy because of its capacity to explain the complex action and reactions of not only the symptomatic member of the family, but also the behaviour of other family members from a scientific perspective. Bowen Family Systems Theory assumes that human behaviour is a science, just like biology, ethnology, anthropology, and physics, to name a few. Bowen finds that essential relationships between family members can be defined in “every family” despite the differences in each family’s attitudes, personalities, and values (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 10).

Keeping in mind that family systems can be defined in “every family”, it is important to define family in the specific context of Williams’s drama and Bowen theory. It is noticeable (as mentioned earlier) that Williams’s families in his plays from the 1940s and 1950s are mostly nuclear families — or that they have fragmented from a once nuclear model (Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is the one obvious exception in its depiction of a large southern family). In comparison, family according to Bowen “is a system in that a change in one part of the system is followed by compensatory change in other parts of the system” (Bowen 1978, pp. 154-5). In addition, and more purposefully, Bowen points out that “family is a system in that each member of the system, on cue, says his assigned lines, takes his assigned posture, and plays his assigned role in the family drama as it repeats hour by hour and day by day” (Bowen, 1976, p. 298). Bowen depicts the family system as a play system in that each actor has a role to perform,
through which he analyses the family conflicts and dilemmas in a scientific style. Defining the family in this way, and using the drama analogy to address family members’ relationships, enables us to think sensibly that the families of Williams’s drama correspond and coincide with the families of Bowen’s clinical analysis.

Defining the family as an emotional unit and Bowen’s assumption that the emotional process occurs in “every family” makes us question the validity of this theory across different cultures, but specifically in American society. Michael Kerr explains that “Bowen did not ignore the influence of culture or the unique aspects of human psychology on behavior, but he did not lay the foundation stones for his theory on culture and psychology” (Kerr, cited in Sagar, 1997, p. 9). Further, cultural values, religion, beliefs, and relationships can all boost the functional level of differentiation of self, as will be explained in chapter one and enhanced in chapter three. Blanche DuBois and her sister Stella in Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* would be noteworthy examples of the role of levels of differentiation of self in the emotional process rather than the cultural variables. Bowen’s efforts from the early stages of his theory were anchored in observing human behaviour as a natural system rather than a cultural system. This is because in his opinion culture and the unique aspects of human psychology are not always predictable and not adequate enough to be a science (Kerr, cited in Sagar, 1997, p. 9). Kerr and Bowen demonstrate that although people’s beliefs, feelings, values, customs, and other specific concerns are different in every family and culture, the emotional process is one and the same in all cultures (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 201-2). As will be discussed in the each of chapters, the essential patterns of the emotional process (triangles, projection process, the nuclear family emotional mechanisms, etc.) are evidence of the universality of Bowen theory because they can occur in all families regardless of the ethnicity or other cultural variables. However, it is also possible to observe the variety in the levels of differentiation of self of Southern families by analysing Williams’s plays, which indicate regional as well as national variance.

In the thesis I will argue that family drama offers a connection between the social-scientific and literary accounts of the relationship between the self and families. Not only were Tennessee Williams as a playwright and Murray Bowen as a psychiatrist contemporaries who contributed to an understanding of the dynamics of the family systems in twentieth-century American society, it is hard not to notice the relationship
between drama and psychiatry. Bowen points out that “medicine was said to be a combination of science and art. The science dealt with increased knowledge and the art with the application of the knowledge” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, p. 348). Although what Bowen means by art here is not strictly “literary art”, for the purpose of this thesis, medical knowledge (psychiatry) will be applied to literary art (drama). Both Bowen and Williams explore the state of American families during and after World War II, but the cultural specifics are much more apparent in Williams plays than in Bowen’s more abstract model of family systems. Bowen’s theory analyses the family in its actual conditions and culture without any limitation of what should and should not be. Bowen contributes through his theories (informed by his psychiatric training) and Williams by means of his drama, encompassing literary themes and the acting out of family situations through the performance of his plays.

To strengthen the connection between the two figures it is worth retuning to the key shift in family therapy and theory in the 1950s: the shift away from one-to-one psychoanalysis (as favoured by the Menninger Clinic) in favour of exploring broader interpersonal structures. In charting this shift, I will contend that Williams’s theatre is a kind of psychodrama that permits us to assess the theme of family breakdown in the mid-twentieth century. Sharon A. Deacon and Fred P. Piercy examine the role of such experiential methods as metaphors, art, sculpture, photography, and drama for evaluating family. They also argue that family “therapists can use psychodrama and role playing to enact family interactions and drama to gather information about family roles, rituals, communication, and problems” (Deacon and Piercy, 2001, p. 364). Psychodrama not only enhances themes about family, but also explains society at large. In this connection, Parker Tyler also argues that:

The value of the concept of psychodrama is to show us a theatrical motif that is a direct key to social truth. Perhaps we may take an ambivalent pride in the fact that this motif is peculiarly American. It is in our plays, novels and movies, where I may risk calling the Method Hero bluntly exposes himself (Tyler, 1963, p. 15).

Tyler discusses the significance of psychodrama as a theatrical pattern to reveal social facts, and also claims that this pattern exists in American movies, novels, and plays. As distinct from his fiction or poetry, Tennessee Williams’s early and middle drama
focuses on family dynamics that can usefully be explained through Bowen’s several stages, which works in tandem with the dialogue between characters to reveal the deep secrets of the individuals within the family.

Three main elements are of high priority in Bowen theory: understanding the emotional system; functioning; and the difference between feelings and emotions. Firstly, Kerr and Bowen clarify that the emotional system has metaphorically the same function as the solar system:

The emotionally determined functioning of the family members generates a family emotional “atmosphere” or field that, in turn, influences the emotional functioning of each person. It is analogous to the gravitational field of the solar system where each planet and the sun, by virtue of their mass, contribute gravity to the field and are, in turn, regulated by the field they each help create (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 55).

The argument is that family emotional system can be easily explained if one understands the solar system and the gravity that exists without being seen. Kerr and Bowen also add that the relationships among family members produce the emotional system in which each member occupies “different functioning positions” (p. 55). As a consequence, behaviour, attitudes, values, and feelings can be affected by the “person’s functioning position” in the system. In other words, in the solar system the sun’s gravitational pull plays an important role in the circulation of the planets around the sun, and the emotional system also plays a significant role among the family members.

Secondly, Bowen theory assumes that functioning and behaviour are governed by the emotional system. The theory also assumes that function is an indispensable element to understand the individual within the context of the family. Kerr and Bowen clarify that:

Family systems theory emphasizes the function an individual’s behaviour has in the broader context of the relationship process […] Thinking in terms of function adds an important dimension to understanding the motivation of an individual […] so family theory attempts to explain certain aspects of an individual’s behaviour in the
context of the function of that behaviour in the emotional system (pp. 48-49).

Bowen theory concentrates on the *functioning* of the family as a system and “its component parts”. This reflects the structural functionalism of twentieth-century anthropologists Alfred Radcliff-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski. Their assumption basically builds on the idea that society is a system that consists of subsystems (including the family) and any change in any institution (subsystem) causes change in the total system. Structural functionalism represents the society as an organism and each part in it has a function to perform. Talcott Parsons was also a noticeable functionalist in the 1950s, regarding society as a system consisting of mutually dependent components. He believes that family function relies on motivating the moral values of its members to ensure the solidarity and stability of society. Function is a common concept for both functionalists and for Bowen theory. Structural functionalism examines the functions of the family in the society and Bowen theory examines the function of the individual’s behaviour in the family context or in the emotional system. Simply put, structural functionalism describes family as a social unit, while Bowen theory represents interpersonal relationships within a family.

Thirdly, in family emotional systems three systems influence human’s functioning and behaviour: the emotional, intellectual, and feeling systems. “Emotion” is usually used as an equivalent word for “feeling”, whereas in Bowen theory it is a synonym for “instinct”. Emotion also relates to all living things (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 30). Thus, the ants’ response to an intrusion in their colony, or the movement of insects or plants towards the light, are emotional responses rather than feelings. The feeling system, in contrast, differentiates humans from low animals because the latter cannot feel guilt, shame, or jealousy (p. 31). The intellectual system, “is that part of man that makes him a unique form of life” and enables him to think and understand (p. 31).

With these three elements in mind, this thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge in its methodological approach, which establishes Bowen theory as a literary-critical framework for illuminating Williams’s family drama. I also propose that drama is a useful tool for both critical readers and literary scholars to explore the intrapsychic and interpersonal relationships among family members. As such, I do not deny the importance of either Freudian psychoanalysis or the value of other critical
approaches, but I want to focus on a comprehensive family systems approach via drama. Williams’s theatrical works enable us to understand Bowen theory better than any other literary genre because they present a live system on the stage, rather than controlled by a narrator or from a first-person perspective. The majority of Williams’s plays are adaptations of the short stories that he wrote at the beginning of his career, with many becoming successful Broadway productions that later were adapted for the screen, such as Streetcar and Iguana. But in their theatrical realizations the audience is presented with a reflection of the characters’ emotions and thoughts through dramatic interaction. The thesis will investigate Bowen’s eight interlocking concepts and, by focusing on one major dramatist, it will be the first full-length study to analyse Bowen theory in the context of American theatre. Just as “Freud on Broadway” dominated American drama in the 1950s (the title of David Sievers’ 1955 book), so “Bowen on Broadway” in this thesis will be the starting point to establish Bowen Family Systems Theory as an influential psychosocial tool in literary criticism. I should emphasize, though, that the thesis focuses on the published text of eight of Williams’s plays to trace the theme of family disintegration, rather than the performance history of the plays.

Before outlining the structure of this thesis, it is worth surveying the other ways family systems theory has been used to inform literary criticism. Literary scholars have paid little attention to family systems theory in general and specifically Bowen theory for understanding family dynamics and interpersonal interactions among family members, but there are a few examples of convergences between the two. Deborah Fran Weinstein (2002) studied the cultural history of post-World War II family therapy in the United States, concluding her thesis by saying that:

During the 1950s and 1960s, family ‘dramas’ played out in family therapy sessions with families who were not composed of actors and who worked without a script. Such dramas were ‘directed’ by family therapists, who often used the language of theatre and drama to describe their roles and interventions as performance (Weinstein, 2002, p. 327).

Weinstein’s conclusion provides evidence that drama is the most convenient genre to reflect on the movement of family therapy in America because it resembles Bowen’s definition of the family in which each member has a role to perform in the drama of life.
It also enhances my claim that Bowen theory explains profoundly Williams’s texts and characters from a social scientific viewpoint.

John V. Knapp, professor emeritus of English at Northern Illinois University and current editor of the literary journal *Style*, prominently calls attention to family systems-oriented literary criticism and persuasively questions the wide reliance of literary criticism on Freud and Lacan in understanding literary characters. Knapp introduces different family systems approaches: Salvador Minuchin’s structural family therapy, Virginia Satir’s communication process model, and Bowen’s transgenerational process (Knapp, 1997, pp. 223-254). In addition, in their edited anthology, *Reading the Family Dance: Family Systems Therapy and Literary Study*, Knapp and Kenneth Womack, include thirteen critical essays that apply several aspects of family systems therapy to a variety of literary genres. They highlight the “breadth of FST’s theoretical possibilities” (Knapp and Womack, 2003, p. 14), but the majority of these essays focus on American and English novels, with the exception of a multicultural essay about Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, the film *Dim Sum* and Flannery O’Connor’s short fiction. There is only one essay about drama, on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. In this account, Knapp argues that *Hamlet* is mostly read by many critics focusing on the intrapsychic issues of Hamlet rather than the interpersonal interaction among family members. In his essay, Knapp provides a family systems-oriented approach based on siblings’ competition between King Hamlet and Claudius, and the triangulation process of Hamlet with his parents (Knapp cited in Knapp & Womack, 2003, pp. 194-220). Still, Knapp does not refer in his discussion either to Walter Toman’s sibling profiles or to Bowen’s triangles. “Knapp suggests that the ‘limitations’ of an intrapsychic psychology like Freud’s – and more recently, Lacan’s – have kept literary critics from a thorough analysis of the ‘interpersonal difficulties’ that many literary characters experience” (Rosemary D. Babcock, cited in Knapp & Womack 2003, p. 48).

Knapp (2004) proposes that a shift from psychoanalysis to family systems psychotherapy enables us to recognise the quality and limitations of each one of them, recommending that the family systems’ “angle of vision is still a valuable tool for readers and critics” and it “is grounded in the world in which we in the new century live” (Knapp, 2004, pp. 149-66). He clarifies that in contrast to the psychoanalytic approach, “family systems as criticism enables the critic to understand diverse members of an intimate fictional grouping with integrity, rather than taking sides with the person
whose voice is the loudest, clearest, most poignant” (Knapp, 2004, pp. 149-66). This understanding not only permits us to understand family as an intimate emotional unit, but it also allows us to understand the theme of family emotional and social disintegration in Williams’s plays. However, Knapp’s work (1997) is mainly focused on general family systems approaches in family therapy, such as Virginia Satir’s Communication Process model, the Milan School of Mara Selvini Palazzoli in Italy, Salvador Minuchin’s Structural Family Therapy, and Bowen’s multigenerational process. Other contributions like Sarah Eden Schiff’s study (2004), Benjamin Roger Opipari (2006), C. M. Gill (2010), Cheryl B. Lester (2011) also use Bowen theory, in particular, in more specific paradigms in American films, novels, and drama than Knapp’s models. For example, C. M. Gill (2010) uses family systems theory to reassess the American film *Mildred Pierce* (1945), adapted from James M. Cain’s novel of the same name published in 1941. The film depicts a postwar middle-class family in which Mildred Pierce, the mother, assumes responsibility for her two daughters after she separates from her first husband, Bert Pierce. Gill argues that different readings of the film provide different answers to the question “what is *Mildred Pierce* the story of?” For example, Marxist critics perceive the film to be about the effects of capitalism on the modern American family. Some critics also draw attention to Veda’s materialism which is one of the factors in the Pierce family breakdown. Gill investigates the film from the broad family systems’ standpoint and explains how Bert and Mildred’s emotional and physical distance and the family’s level of anxiety both contribute to a triangulation process, from a Bowenian perspective (Gill, 2010, pp. 81-98).

Sarah Eden Schiff (2004) and Cheryl B. Lester (2011) also relate Bowen Family Systems Theory to American novels. Schiff applies Bowen’s eight concepts to the postwar American novelist Philip Roth. Schiff tests Bowen’s concepts on five of Roth’s earliest novels that portray the development of the self in the context of the family. Schiff illustrates examples from these novels interchangeably, explaining differentiation of self in general and not paying much attention to the levels of differentiation of self. As the core of Bowen theory, I would argue that differentiation of self should be given more attention because Bowen’s concepts are interlocking and understanding them relies a great deal on comprehending this fundamental concept. Additionally, in the multigenerational emotional process, Schiff merely hints at the process rather than explaining these examples in detail.
In comparison to Schiff’s study, Cheryl B. Lester (2011) investigates William Faulkner’s novels and stories, “the expressions of emotionally driven thoughts and feelings, bodily responses to heightened stress, [and] emotional reactivity”, which she reads as “symptoms of societal regression in a region whose history of exploitation, oppression, and violence against Black Southerners earned it the nickname of “American Congo”” (Lester cited in Bregman and White 2011, p. 265). Lester believes that Faulkner’s stories and novels exemplify characters from the Deep South “whose purchase on others and on their environment is narrow, whose freedom to think or act for self is constrained, and whose capacity for change is limited” (Lester, cited in Bregman and White, 2011, p. 264). Williams’s characters and theatre are not markedly different from Faulkner’s, with the former’s work embodying the South through the characters of Amanda Wingfield, Blanche DuBois and Alma Winemiller, and the interactions between the members of Big Daddy Pollitt’s family. Thus, I will apply Bowen theory to a different literary genre (drama) that has more direct dialogues than novels typically do. Further, the stage directions in each play will enable us to explore the characters’ emotions deeply, especially in assigning characters’ levels of differentiation of self and the triangulation process.

Among the previous publications, Benjamin Roger Opipari’s study (2006) is the most relevant and significant reading that analyses Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie* using the general family systems approach and applies Bowen theory to analyse Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1956). Opipari explores the broad family system approach, including Bowen theory, to analyse disabled family members in the work of five of the most well-known American dramatists. He finds that the twentieth-century American stage is developed through familial conflicts that can be read through the lens of family systems theory. Opipari also pays more attention to the characters’ environment and the interconnectedness of the family members with each other. Opipari’s main focus is on the emotionally and physically disabled family member(s) in five American plays and their effect on the functioning of the whole family. Further, he investigates each case from a different aspect of the general family systems theory: Laura’s emotional and physical disability in Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie*; drugs and alcohol abuse from the perspective of Bowen Family Systems in Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*; a case of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in David Rabe’s *Sticks and Bones* (1971); family secrets in Sam Shepard’s *The Buried Child*.
(1978), and an example of dementia and its effect on family conflicts and cohesion in Tina Howe’s *Painting Churches* (1983).

Rather than focusing the analysis on Laura’s disability in Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie*, Opipari focuses on the interaction among the Wingfield members, the predictable patterns of behaviour, and the structure of the family that govern their functioning in the family. Opipari demonstrates that the Wingfield family system is dysfunctional and all of them play a significant role in increasing the family’s level of anxiety (Opipari, 2006, pp. 29-62). In other chapter, Opipari highlights the efficiency of Bowen theory in examining the Tyrone family’s alcoholism in O’Neill’s major play *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1956) and how each member participates in the dysfunction of the whole family. Opipari also explains how the Tyrones’ poor levels of differentiation of self and anxiety cause the whole family’s emotional dysfunction: the father (Tyrone) and his two sons (Jamie and Edmund) are alcoholic, and the mother (Mary) is a morphine addict. Opipari pays some attention to Tyrone and Mary’s nuclear emotional system and their relationship with their family of origin. He also mentions the triangulation process without explaining the mechanisms of the emotional triangles and focuses on the emotional reactivity of the family members and their emotional fusion. Nonetheless, Opipari does not address other concepts such as family projection process and sibling position. Even though his study analyses Williams in a single chapter and uses the Bowenian multigenerational therapy in another, Bowen ideas have not been applied to the work of Tennessee Williams, in particular, before. Thus, in my thesis, I will concentrate on Bowen theory in all its eight concepts to analyse the emotional structure and family dynamics that leads to the breakdown of the system in eight of Williams’s major works from mid-1940s to the early 1960s.

Despite these applications, no critical study has been devoted to investigate the theme of family disintegration in Williams’s early and middle plays using a Bowenian approach. For instance, Galal I. Yousuf (2009) investigates the theme of alienation and fragmentation in the late plays of Tennessee Williams. Yousuf employs a postmodernist approach to consider this theme in Williams’s *Slapstick Tragedy* (1965), *I Can’t Imagine Tomorrow* (1966), *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* (1969), and *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* (1980). Yousef finds that Williams’s late plays highlight the theme of fragmentation in the American family and society. Thus, this corresponds with my argument that Bowen’s family emotional approach does not fit Williams’s late plays.
Williams’s plays written after *The Night of the Iguana* show the aftermath of family disintegration by depicting the degree of emotional distance between characters, whereas I am interested in the emotional system processes that bring the family about such a breakdown.

The fundamental objective of the thesis is to examine the functional level of differentiation of self of the families in the emotional system. I will argue that families with high functional level of differentiation of self are flexible to changes, capable of standing in the face of anxiety and, therefore, able to keep a sense of family emotional stability and integration. Families with low functional levels, in contrast, can be easily triggered under stress, are unable to keep a sense of equilibrium, and their emotional system is disintegrated. I will develop this argument through the chapters by discussing Williams’s early and middle plays – from *The Glass Menagerie* of 1945 to *The Night of the Iguana* of 1962. Whereas Bowen continued to refine and expand his system in the 1950s and early 1960s, Williams’s plays are more historically rooted and chart the fragmentation of the nuclear family structure, from the rebuilding of the nation during World War II to a moment when non-traditional family structures and higher divorce rates were changing perceptions of the American nuclear family. This timeline allows a social, emotional, and theatrical reflection of the central theme of family disintegration.

On a structural level, I will argue further that the families in Williams’s early plays are mostly nuclear families and thus more comprehensive to Bowen family systems model than his later plays. To clarify, *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), and *Summer and Smoke* (1948) are triangular-structured and contain nuclear families. Williams expands the model of the nuclear family to the multigenerational family in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), which involves a combination of several nuclear families. Even though in *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958) and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959) the model of the nuclear family is recognised in the guise of two families, the Hollys and Finleys, both plays include such fragmentary units as Mrs Venable, Chance Wayne and Princess Kosmonopolis. It is noticeable in Williams’s 1960s plays that *Period of Adjustment* (1961) is more optimistic in depicting the structure of the nuclear family than in the last play of this period, *The Night of the Iguana*. Thus, I will claim that as a result of fragmentation and cutoffs in the nuclear family, Williams develops the theme of disintegration beyond the family circle to the more socially disconnected individuals such as Shannon and Hannah in *Iguana*. For the
purpose of this thesis, Williams’s eight major works will be interrogated using Bowen’s eight interlocking concepts. The thesis will be divided into four chapters and each chapter spotlights two theoretical concepts that will be applied interchangeably to two major plays.

Chapter One will apply the first and second concepts of Bowen theory, differentiation of self and triangles, to Williams’s first and second theatrical successes, *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. This is because both plays are structured around character triangles. Differentiation of self is the core of Bowen theory and the understanding of Bowen’s other concepts relies on a profound and basic knowledge about the family’s level of differentiation of self. The first chapter will be the foundation of an examination of the functional level of Williams’s families. Differentiation of self and triangles will be the starting point from which I will associate the concept of differentiation of self with the other concepts to enhance and develop its relationship with family integration or disintegration.

Chapter Two will interrogate the nuclear family dynamics in Williams’s plays *Summer and Smoke* and *Period of Adjustment* through Bowen’s third and fourth concepts: nuclear family emotional system and family projection process. Although these plays do not link chronologically, they connect with each other emotionally via the theme of marriage. I also recognise that *Period of Adjustment* is mostly neglected by many of Williams’s scholars and it is described thematically as “shallow” or “superficial”. I will argue that Bowen theory provides a perceptive reading of the play that adds a novel interpretation to Williams’s emotional capability of producing a family systems-oriented drama. Furthermore, *Period of Adjustment* illustrates the three patterns of the nuclear family emotional system (emotional distance, dysfunction of one spouse, and marital conflict). It is important to mention that the structure of this chapter is slightly different from the other chapters because I will apply one concept (the nuclear family emotional system) to only *Period of Adjustment*. However, the concept of family projection process (originally derived from the nuclear family emotional patterns) will be investigated more broadly through *Summer and Smoke*, mirroring Bowen’s procedure in separating this concept from the other nuclear family emotional patterns.
Chapter Three demands additional analysis because *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is the distinctly multigenerational play in Williams’s drama. As will be discussed, Williams adapts *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to fit a family systems model rather than an individual’s issue. Here, three nuclear families’ level of differentiation of self, the nuclear family emotional patterns, and two sibling profiles will be examined. Although Williams wrote another multigenerational play, *Candles to the Sun* (written in 1936 and published in 2004), for the purpose of this thesis, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is linked to *Sweet Bird of Youth* to depict the allegory of the patriarchal Southern family. *Sweet Bird of Youth* is included in this chapter because it contains three sibling profiles that will enhance Bowen’s assumption that level of differentiation of self, anxiety, and family projection process could affect the characteristics of any sibling position.

Just as Chapter One starts with Williams’s first theatrical success, so Chapter Four will discuss Williams’s last theatrical and commercial success, *The Night of the Iguana* in which the nuclear family is barely recognisable. It will follow the other chapters’ structure of applying Bowen’s seventh and eighth concepts, emotional cutoff and societal regression, to *Suddenly Last Summer*. In this way, this final chapter and the conclusion will look at the ways in which isolation can occur both within family units and in broader social settings. By comparing Williams’s eight major works and Bowen’s eight concepts the thesis explores the emotional fragmentation of the twentieth-century American family, particularly because Williams’s drama can be considered a concrete reflection of Bowen’s abstract ideas about the family in the 1950s and 1960s.
Chapter 1

Differentiation of Self and Triangles

in The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire

My work is emotionally autobiographical. It has no relationship to actual events of my life, but it reflects the emotional currents of my life... When you're going through a period of unhappiness, a broken love affair, the death of someone you love, or some other disorder in your life, then you have no refuge but writing...

(Tennessee Williams, 1981, Paris Review)

This first chapter will use Bowen theory to investigate the theme of family disintegration in Tennessee Williams’s plays The Glass Menagerie (1945) and A Streetcar Named Desire (1947) via a discussion of the structure of characters’ relationships. The analysis in this chapter focuses primarily on Bowen’s concepts of differentiation of self and triangles and applies these concepts as literary-critical tools to a reading of two of Williams’s best known plays. Differentiation of self is the most important aspect of Bowen’s theory, and for the purpose of this chapter both concepts will be examined in The Glass Menagerie (hereafter Menagerie) and A Streetcar Named Desire (hereafter Streetcar) as each have a central triangular structure. A study of differentiation of self and triangles, as reflected in Williams’s plays, is a useful starting point to understand family dynamics in mid-twentieth century America, especially as the plays have common themes such as the conflicts of family life, social class, fragility, alcoholism, and a depiction of the American South. I will argue that while Williams’s plays reflect the deep structures of Bowen theory, they also encompass more specific shaping forces around cultural identity and place that Bowen’s abstract system tends to overlook. In this respect, although the plays were chronologically written after World War II, they also have distinct themes such as the economic and psychological effects of the Great Depression in Menagerie and complex sexuality in Streetcar.
I will reflect on these shaping forces, but my discussion will focus upon an aspect that Bowen and Williams shared: the fundamental interest in dysfunctional characters, which in these two plays pivots around the instability of the two main female characters: Laura Wingfield and Blanche Dubois. Rather than offering case studies of these two characters taken in isolation, Laura and Blanche are placed within the context of three-person relationships – in Menagerie Amanda, Tom, and Laura, and in Streetcar Stanley, Stella, and Blanche – which are acted out on stage within the confines of domestic spaces. These domestic settings make Bowen’s concept of triangles particularly relevant and links to the subject of mental dysfunction, which stimulated Bowen’s theories in their clinical context. The following discussion will introduce the concepts of differentiation of self and triangles in Bowen theory and consider their psychological and social significance, in order to analyse my main theme of family disintegration in Tennessee Williams’s two major plays.

**Differentiation of Self**

Michael Kerr and Murray Bowen defined the concept of differentiation of self as the individual’s capability to distinguish between thoughts and feelings in order to guide his or her functioning in the family system (Bowen, 1978, pp. 362-33; Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 100). Differentiation of self was the “cornerstone” of Bowen’s theory because of its “universal” significance to define and classify individuals on a “single continuum” in the family far away from “social class” and “cultural-ethnics” (Bowen, 1978, p. 362). In Bowen’s opinion:

>[This] theoretical concept is most important. It eliminates the barriers between schizophrenic, neurosis, and normal; it also transcends categories such as genius, social class, and cultural-ethnic differences. It applies to all human forms of life. (Bowen 1978, p. 364)

Instead of categorising people according to whether they are psychologically normal, or in terms of their socioeconomic situation or their ethnicity, the concept of differentiation of self assigns individual particular functions based upon their thoughts or feelings. Bowen’s concepts do not concentrate on cultural behaviour but on the natural behaviour in any ethnical family system. To simplify – and in line with my understanding of the concept of differentiation – cultural values, religious beliefs, and social convictions fall under the broad category of an individual’s thoughts. Rather than
these previous considerations, an individual’s behaviour is classified as functional or dysfunctional within the emotional system. The components of this system, as Bowen clarifies, are emotions and relationships: emotions are the motivation energy of the system and relationships express that motivation regardless of considering family as biological, cultural, social and communication system (Bowen, 1978, p. 158).

The variables that affect the level of differentiation of self are anxiety and the dynamic force of individuality–togetherness. C. Margaret Hall argues that “three important factors that influence differentiation are the degree of bonds with others, the level of anxiety in self and the relationship network, and the degree of emotional cutoff with others” (Hall 1981, p. 51). In addition to the previous two variables (anxiety and individuality–togetherness), Hall adds a third variable which is the emotional cutoff. Indeed, Bowen’s other concepts also have an influence on the differentiation of self, such as the multigenerational process because a person’s degree of emotional cutoff from their parents influences the person’s level of differentiation, and the parents’ level of differentiation of self is influenced by their parents and so on (Kerr and Bowen 1988, p. 98). I will discuss multigenerational process and emotional cutoff in chapter 3 and 4 respectively, but for the purposes of this chapter, anxiety and individuality–togetherness will be the basic variables that affect individuals’ level of differentiation of self and their functioning in the emotional system.

Anxiety is defined by Kerr and Bowen as an organism’s response to a real or imagined threat (environmental threats for example) and is supposed to be present in all living things (Kerr and Bowen 1988, p. 112). Anxiety and emotional reactivity – or emotional tension – are often used as synonyms in the emotional system. Both individuality and togetherness are “a biologically [instinctual] rooted life force: individuality “propels an organism to follow its own directives, to be an independent and distinct entity” (p.64), whilst togetherness “propels an organism to follow the directives of others, to be a dependent, connected, and indistinct entity” (p. 65). In a poorly differentiated family, children tend to function in reaction to others, and the intensity of togetherness often does not allow a child to feel or think for himself. In a well differentiated family, in contrast, the lower the sense of emotionality or togetherness the more flexible the relationships between parents and their children or between siblings: consequently, the child can act, think, and feel for himself.
Bowen’s distinctive contribution to an understanding of these basic human traits is his 0-100 scale of differentiation of self which he designed to clarify the “adaptiveness” of an individual to stress, in addition to analysing to what extent people can differentiate between feelings and rational thought (Kerr and Bowen 1988, p. 97). This scale aims to rate levels of people functioning from 0 to a 100, or from the lowest level to the highest level of differentiation of self, or from “undifferentiation” to “differentiation”. The concept of “normal” or “typical” is eliminated by this scale because it has no direct relation with emotional illness or health. Bowen thinks that a balance between thoughts and feelings is a marker of mental health; although everyone is prone to physical and emotional symptoms under conditions of severe stress, well-differentiated individuals can recover quickly. Rather than looking at fluctuations on the scale, Bowen classifies individuals based on their basic level of differentiation of self, arguing that “basic differentiation is functioning that is not dependent on the relationship process. Functional differentiation is functioning that is dependent on the relationship process” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 98; emphasis in original). Further, religious beliefs, cultural values, circumstances in the relationships system, and even drugs, can all enhance functional level of differentiation of self (Bowen, 1978, p. 99). Simply put, Bowen wanted a flexible scale because basic and functional levels of differentiation of self are not necessarily equivalent, and assigning a precise level of differentiation is difficult to some degree.

Anxiety in the emotional system mainly affects the functional level of differentiation, and therefore it is variable, while the basic level of differentiation is firm and unchangeable. Hence, and to avoid complications, the characters in Menagerie and Streetcar (and other of Williams’s plays) will be analysed according to their basic level of differentiation in functional ranges of 0-100, because basic and functional levels of differentiation intricately overlap, and basic differentiation is often concealed behind functional differentiation. In other words, the most fundamental point in this scale is to indicate that human behaviour functioning is directed at different times by feelings or thoughts that are subject to fluctuations. Another important aspect of this scale is that individuals usually retain an emotional equilibrium in the system, but with some difficulties and differences, particularly at times of stress.

Bowen subdivides the scale of differentiation of self to profile of low levels of differentiation (0-25), profile of moderate levels of differentiation (25-50), profile of
Bowen defines the qualities that characterise individuals in each range and the functioning differences within the range from less to more differentiated person. Thereby, as Bowen comments, the scale is as substantial as any other concept in the family systems theory, primarily because it demonstrates emotional maturity (or immaturity) at different levels on the scale. Second, the scale is considered a valuable tool to evaluate and understand human behaviour. Lastly, it is used to predict the possible trajectory of an individual’s future life (Bowen, 1978, p. 475). Bowen’s therapeutic goal is to help his patients increase their level of differentiation, based on the belief that the higher the level of differentiation in the family the more family members can cooperate, avoid selfishness in times of stress, save familial integrity, and maintain solidarity. This is an essential point in reinforcing the significance of the level of differentiation of self in absorbing anxiety that may otherwise lead to family disintegration, as will be discussed later in this chapter in relation to Williams’s plays. For the purpose of this thesis, and because my analysis of Williams’s characters is underpinned by Bowen’s scale of differentiation of self, a brief summary of each range will be demonstrated.

Individuals in the 0-25 range are the least differentiated and live in a world of feelings. Those who are in the lower part of this range are undifferentiated and are driven by the emotional system. The most important thing to individuals in this range is to love and achieve the maximum level of comfort, but these individuals are characterised by their “inability” to differentiate or to separate feelings from thoughts. They are very dependent on others and have a high level of chronic anxiety. Consequently, they rarely achieve even a simple level of comfort. Kerr and Bowen detect that these people exist “marginally in society”: for example, chronic schizophrenics, alcoholics, and drug addicts usually belong to the 0-25 range (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 101). One might say that “achieving comfort”, “being loved”, or loving others are enough techniques of avoiding undesirable actions in times of stress, but emotions alone are not enough to maintain the whole system’s integrity. Moreover, a balance between thoughts and feelings is always demanded in the emotional system. In this range the more the individual’s functioning depends on thoughts, the better he or she functions and behaves in the family. As I will go on to discuss, Laura Wingfield and Blanche DuBois are examples of this profile.
People in the lower part of 25-50 have nearly the same characteristics of people in the 0-25 range, but they differ in their modest ability to differentiate between thoughts and feelings and they are able to increase their differentiation level. People in this scale tend to “look to outside authorities such as cultural values, religion, philosophy, the law, rule books, science, physicians, and other sources to support their position in life” (p. 102). It should be noted that not all those people who search for religion and cultural values fall under this category, but because those in this category usually do not believe in themselves, they are highly affected by others and imitate others in order to achieve acceptance. People in the middle of this scale, namely 35-40, mainly function by their feelings rather than thoughts or intellect, but they are “sufficiently adaptive”. Most of their energy is directed towards seeking love. It appears that those in this category adapt themselves to please others, and often ignore their real needs. Amanda Wingfield will be a good example of this category.

Individuals in the 50-75 range tend towards intellectual functioning more than emotional functioning. Their feelings and thoughts are, to some extent, “well-defined”, but the level of differentiation neither reaches the differentiation target of the 75-100 range nor does it decrease to the 25-50 range of the scale. Although individuals in this range “can take over, calm the anxiety, and avoid a life crisis” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, p. 106), they sometimes develop social, physical, and emotional symptoms from which they are usually able to easily recover. People in this range can usually distinguish between their feelings and thoughts, and as they arrive at a sufficient level of differentiation, they can avoid not only familial crisis but also social and business stress. Therefore, in the case of family integrity, it could be possible that reaching this level of differentiation is adequate to avoid family disintegration. That is because stress and anxiety exist in human life and although people are affected by stress temporarily, they can reach a higher level of differentiation to control and manage their functioning positively in times of stress. In other words, this level of differentiation seems to be helpful to maintain familial relationships because human functioning is more rational when guided by intellect than it is when guided by feelings.

The ideal characteristics of the scale are possessed by those individuals in the range of 75-100. In Bowen’s opinion, people rarely have the characteristics of this range because it demands a “principle-oriented” or “goal-directed” approach (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 106). These individuals realise their feelings and thoughts, are aware
of how to communicate with others peacefully, can analyse others’ points of view, can assume responsibility towards others, and are independent, adaptable, and very aware of their rights and duties. Furthermore, their level of differentiation is very high and their level of anxiety is very low, and so they can adapt to stress without developing symptoms (pp. 106-7). In Bowen’s opinion, the 95-100 range is “hypothetical” or “theoretical” because most of these characteristics are rarely present in an individual. In my perspective, the 50-75 range has some similar characteristics of the 75-100 range, namely 75-90. Nonetheless, a major difference is that most people under level 75 can develop symptoms under stress. The higher the level of differentiation of self, the fewer social, physical, and emotional dysfunctions, and the quicker is the healing from a symptom.

Before going further in investigating the concept of differentiation of self in Williams’s *Menagerie* and *Streetcar*, we should shed light on the relationship between levels of differentiation of self and family cohesion. Kerr and Bowen remark that:

Family systems theory also addresses the human’s capacity for cohesiveness, altruism, and cooperativeness […] The higher the level of differentiation of people in a family or other social group, the more they can cooperate, look out for one another’s welfare, and stay in adequate contact during stressful as well as calm periods. The lower the level of differentiation, the more likely the family when stressed, will regress to selfish, aggressive, and avoidance behaviors; cohesiveness, altruism, and cooperativeness will break down. (Kerr and Bowen 1988, p. 93)

This quotation underlines the importance of differentiation of self in preserving family relationships and saving their integrity in the face of internal or external pressures. Accordingly, poorly-differentiated individuals are emotionally dependent and cannot adapt in times of stress, whereas well-differentiated individuals are autonomous, more flexible and adaptable in times of stress and are more likely to preserve their family’s emotional stability. It could be also hypothesised that the more the family has well-differentiated members, namely above 50, the more they will be able as a unit to reduce chances of disintegration. Hall comments that Bowen’s family psychotherapy aims to increase the level of differentiation of self: “As an individual becomes more differentiated, dysfunctional symptoms in individual behavior and in patterns of family
interaction decrease” (Hall 1981, p. 57). For that reason, well-differentiated individuals are aware of their role in the emotional system, are more able to maintain family integrity in calm and tense conditions, and can reduce emotional, social, and physical risks of family disintegration.

From Hall’s perspective, “Bowen suggests that most people in contemporary American society fall within moderate ranges of differentiation of self and that members of the same family tend to have about the same level of differentiation of self” (Hall 1981, p. 37). In order to examine this idea further – and to consider the social and cultural factors that are only implicit in Bowen’s theory – in this chapter I will examine the interrelationship between differentiation of self and triangles (Bowen’s second concept) and, particularly, the influence on the functioning of individuals in the family system. The next part of this study will explain differentiation of self in The Glass Menagerie.

**Differentiation of Self in The Glass Menagerie**

*The Glass Menagerie* is considered Tennessee Williams’s first commercial, critical, and theatrical success, winning the New York Drama Circle Award in 1945. It is originally adapted from his screenplay *The Gentleman Caller* and the short story “Portrait of a Girl in Glass”. *Menagerie* is considered a real American family example that reflects the cultural, emotional, familial, economic, and social situation during the Great Depression. David Krasner considers *Menagerie* “the period’s signature play” because it “depicts the adversity associated with physical handicap and age, as well as an acute feeling for the hardship of its era” (Krasner, 2006, p. 29). As an autobiographical play, *Menagerie* reflects Williams’s family by depicting an element of his life in St. Louis, Missouri. It also demonstrates the Williams’s family emotional system, especially their high level of anxiety as a result of the mismatched union between Williams’s alcoholic father and his Southern Belle mother. Further, Williams’s sister Rose “was diagnosed as having schizophrenia, was sent to a state asylum at age 28, later had a frontal lobotomy, and spent the rest of her life in a psychiatric hospital” (Jeste et al., 2004, p. 371). Rose’s condition weighed on Williams, leading Lori Leathers Single to claim that “Williams suffered guilt for having survived the familial tensions that ultimately destroyed Rose” (Single, 1999, p. 70). Williams’s guilt over his sister haunts his work not only in *Menagerie*, but also other works I will consider here such as *Suddenly Last Summer* and
The Night of the Iguana. This indicates that Williams’s drama is, in part, a reflection of real psychiatric, familial, and personal issues, which underscores Bowen’s differentiation of self as a helpful theoretical tool to examine Williams’s Menagerie.

The play depicts an American middle-class family when the nation was still economically under the sway of the Great Depression in 1939. In their own childhood, Williams and Rose led a rural and cheerful life in Clarksdale, Mississippi with the Dakins, their maternal grandparents. However, in 1918 they moved to the urban and industrial St. Louis, Missouri because their father, Cornelius, had a managerial job in the International Shoe Company. As Menagerie is set in a place reminiscent of St. Louis it links to the mythology of the Old South, even though geographically it is in the North Central region of the United States because Missouri was a slave state before the Civil War. The struggle between the Old South and the New South is represented by the struggle between Amanda and her children. This gives Williams’s play more concrete social and geographical coordinates than Bowen’s abstract theories. So, while the historical, economic, and familial background is helpful in analysing the characters’ differentiation of self, for Bowen levels of differentiation indicate personal characteristics rather than social conditions. Put simply, the scale of differentiation could be compared to astrological signs; it is easy to classify people as Leo or Gemini, but it is not an adequate method for determining intelligence or economic status.

Although the Wingfields live in their own private space, they cannot adeptly communicate with each other or with the exterior world. Each of them effectively lives in their own world: Amanda lives in a world of memories of the Old South, evoking a time when cotton plantations were the main agrarian concern of the region before the Civil War; Tom lives in the world of movies and dreams of adventures; and Laura lives in her own world of glass ornaments. The Wingfield members can be viewed as being emotionally, physically, and socially crippled, even though Laura is the only family member who physically manifests this condition. Therese Bendek describes the importance of the family emotional structure, which “expresses dynamically the function of the family” (Bendek, cited in Ruth Nanda Anshen, 1959, pp. 378-379). In Bendek’s opinion the interplay of family emotional process can predict the procedure in which the personality is shaped and developed in a particular culture. According to Kerr and Bowen, feelings and emotions are essential components in human “behaviour” and “functioning”, adding that “the physical, emotional, and social dysfunctions are
assumed to be a product of the emotional system” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, pp. 335-6).

In simple terms, the feelings and emotions of the Wingfield family play a significant role in their behaviour and function within the family system: this corresponds to Daniel V. Papero’s claim that a “person’s level of differentiation can best be observed in an anxious family setting” (Papero, 1990, p. 48). To help explain this, and because the Wingfield members are frequently very anxious, the following part of this section will demonstrate the Wingfields’ levels of differentiation of self by using Bowen’s scale: Laura (0-25), Amanda (25-50), Tom (50-75), and Mr Wingfield (50-60).

Laura Wingfield is the most obvious dysfunctional member in the Wingfield emotional system, and as such she resembles Rose Williams in that the latter could be said to be mentally dysfunctional, and Laura physically and emotionally so. However, Laura is the most powerful poetic element in the play. Robert J. Cardullo suggests that Laura, as a romantic figure, escapes from the urban dilemma of mid-twentieth-century St. Louis “through art and music”: that is the art of her glass menagerie and the music of her records (Cardullo, 2010, p. 76). She clings to nature, animals, tropical flowers, and even her nickname “Blue Roses”, which Jim O’Connor (the gentleman caller) used to call her in high school, relates to nature. Laura lives alone in an overcrowded world that she tries to cope with, but she is so introverted and enmeshed in her feelings. Laura’s character stands for introversion and “deadenning withdrawal” (McGlinn cited in Tharpe 1977, p. 511). As Tom describes her, “she’s terribly shy and lives in a world of her own and those things make her seem a little peculiar to people outside the house” (Scene Five, pp. 271-2). And Jim O’Connor analyses Laura’s personality as if he were a psychiatrist:

Jim [abruptly]: You know what I judge to be the trouble with you? Inferiority complex! Know what that is? That’s what they call it when someone low-rates himself! I understand it because I had it, too. […] I have a friend who says I can analyse people better than doctors that make a profession of it. I don’t claim that to be necessarily true, but I can sure guess a person’s psychology, Laura! (Scene Seven, p. 298).

According to Jim, Laura lacks self-confidence and does not believe in herself as an active member in society as a result of the physical defect in her leg that keeps her as isolated as a glass figurine on the shelf. Laura could be classified in the 0-25 range
because her impairment exaggerates her incapability of differentiating between feelings and thoughts, and therefore her functioning in the family system is totally guided by “what [she] feels right” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 100). Kerr and Bowen mention that individuals in this range “are so sensitized to the world around them that they have lost the capacity to feel; they are numb. Emotionally needy and highly reactive to others” (pp. 100-101). Laura is not really aware of the outside world and is emotionally dependent. She goes to places such as the zoo, aviaries, and museums to achieve at least a degree of comfort.

Kerr and Bowen also add that people in the 0-25 range “have a high level of chronic anxiety and it is difficult, therefore, to find situations in which they can be truly comfortable” (p. 101). In most situations, Laura seems very nervous, trembling, and faint. Thomas F. Van Laan’s study suggests that “Laura is the only one to whom Williams has given no lengthy self-expressive speeches” (Van Laan, 1988, pp. 247). Laura listens more than speaks and she scarcely expresses herself. As I will go on to discuss later in this chapter, Laura often suffers from high levels of anxiety. In several situations in the play, she “touches her lips with a nervous gesture”, “twists her hands nervously”, and stands “with clenched hands and panicky expression”. Further, in Scene Six “she is obviously quite faint, her lips trembling, her eyes wide and staring” at the presence of the gentleman caller (p. 286).

The ideal psychiatric reaction to dysfunctional individuals in this range is in a close relation to another, but this person’s level of differentiation should be higher than the dysfunctional member. This is possibly true in Menagerie because Jim tells Laura:

Jim: I wish that you were my sister. I’d teach you to have confidence in yourself. […] I happened to notice you had this inferiority complex that keeps you from feeling comfortable with people. Somebody needs to build your confidence up and make you proud instead of shy. (Scene Seven, p. 304)

Jim analyses Laura’s personality and identifies a possible therapeutic solution, and even he wishes that he was Laura’s brother in order to build up her confidence. Moreover, Kerr and Bowen suggest that this person could be a sibling, parent, or other person who has a relationship with the dysfunctional member, or, in broad terms, a person within the family emotional system (Kerr and Bowen 1988, p. 102). Accordingly, and as Jim is
more realistic than Amanda and Tom, he succeeds temporarily in raising Laura’s functional level of differentiation of self. Van Laan notes that Jim’s “warmth, charm, and eagerness should little by little encourage her to talk more freely and self-expressively than ever before” (Van Laan 1988, p. 248). However, Jim cannot recall Laura because he is engaged. When Jim reveals that he is now engaged, Laura’s expression is “almost infinite desolation” (Scene Seven, p. 307). Wieder David Sievers argues that Jim is “an amateur psychologist” (Sievers 1995, p. 373-4) because he psychoanalyses Laura in order to help her to come out of her shell, convinces her to dance and converse with him. But his personal circumstances mean that he cannot continue in this psychoanalytic role and he ends up breaking her heart. Therefore, she remains attached and fused to the Wingfield emotional system. As the member who is closest to the bottom of Bowen’s scale of differentiation of self, Laura’s position in the family triangle is determined by the emotional system as I discuss later in this chapter.

Amanda Wingfield can be interpreted as a stereotype of religious, traditional and well-mannered Southern womanhood. This appears in her Puritan morals and her traditional upbringing that she would like to impose on her children. The question is raised as to what extent Amanda’s Southern upbringing and thoughts influence her children’s level of differentiation of self. She is very obsessed and proud of her memories of the South where she had seventeen gentlemen callers. Her character is a mixture of sympathy, silliness, fantasy, and most of all, anxiety. Williams describes Amanda as:

A little woman of great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place. Her characterization must be carefully created, not copied from type. She is not paranoiac, but her life is paranoia. There is much to admire in Amanda, and as much to love and pity as there is to laugh at. Certainly she has endurance and a kind of heroism, and though her foolishness makes her unwittingly cruel at times, there is tenderness in her slight person. (Opening directions, p. 228)

Williams prompts us to admire and sympathise with Amanda as a faithful mother and wife. She sacrifices her life to keep her family together, and she suffers alone as a single-parent and deserted wife for sixteen years, which explains her anxiety. Amanda’s “endurance”, “heroism”, and “tenderness” suggest the ability to differentiate between
her thoughts and feelings, but the fact that she is “clinging frantically to another time and place” (p. 228) impairs both her own and her children’s functioning in the family system. This blend of heroism and foolishness indicates a moderate level of differentiation of self.

Apart from her fantasies, which can be excused as remedies to relieve her pains, Amanda’s vitality deserves appreciation because her sense of togetherness of family life is very high. Roger B. Stein comments that “[t]ry and you will succeed!”, which Amanda keeps saying to Tom, was a conventional American self-help slogan in the 1930s (Stein, cited in Stephen S. Stanon, 1977, p. 38). Amanda realises that life in an “industrial capitalist” society is not easy and she wants to transfer this realisation to her children. Money and success are the main themes associated with Amanda, towards which she displays a great deal of anxiety. David Krasner explains that Amanda still clings to values that retain the solidarity of her family because she fears its unavoidable disintegration (Krasner, 2006, p. 28). She wants Tom to compensate for his father’s absence and to support Laura and herself both economically and emotionally.

We can draw some broad conclusions from Amanda’s position within the family. For example, E. Mavis Hetherington et al. illustrate three difficulties encountered by mothers, like Amanda, in “single-parent” families. Firstly, mothers suffer from “task over-load”, and probably encounter hardships in dealing with different familial duties such as “household maintenance”. Secondly, they often face financial problems and economic troubles, and finally, they are usually socially separated and “lacking in social and emotional support” (Hetherington et al., cited in Reiss and Hoffman, 1979, pp. 118-9). These are all factors which each clearly apply to Amanda, who tries to protect her family from an imminent disintegration.

According to Bowen’s scales of differentiation of self, Amanda could be classified in the 25-50 range. In addition to the fact that she has a moderate capacity to differentiate between her thoughts and feelings, she is not totally driven by emotions such as those on the lower (0-25) range of the scale, like Laura. Amanda is governed by Puritanical Christianity and behaviour, Southern culture (with seventeen gentlemen callers), and scientific facts such as the importance of “mastication” and the effects of hot drinks in the aetiology of stomach cancer. People in this range “are sensitized to emotional disharmony, to the opinions of others, and to creating a good impression”
(Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 102). For example, Amanda exerts an exceptional effort in preparing for the gentleman caller in order to create a good impression of a well-mannered family in front of Jim O’Connor.

Kerr and Bowen add that people in this scale “are apt students of facial expression, gestures, tone of voice, and actions that may mean approval or disapproval” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, pp. 102-3). Accordingly, when she discovers that Laura deceives her and is not attending the business college, Amanda “purses her lips, opens her eyes very wide, rolls them upward, and shakes her head” (Scene Two, p. 241). Then, to show her disapproval of Laura’s behaviour, Amanda “crosses slowly to the wall and removes the diagram typewriter keyboard. She holds it in front of her for a second, staring at it sweetly and sorrowfully – then bites her lips and tears it into pieces”. Amanda continues to express her anger and emotional anxiety by taking actions such as tearing up Laura’s typewriter diagram and the Gregg alphabet chart to an extent that scares Laura.

Although she is driven by her feelings towards her children, Amanda is often fairly reasonable and has a degree of self-awareness. This is apparent when she demonstrates to Tom that “the future becomes the present, the present the past, and the past turns into an everlasting regret if you don’t plan for it!” (Scene Five, p. 269). From her experience in the South, Amanda realises what will happen to Laura as an unmarried, crippled, and shy girl without an occupation: Laura is likely to be one of the “barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister’s husband or brother’s wife! (Scene Two, p. 245). Here, Amanda’s anxiety and fears of loneliness and the future are projected onto her daughter. She is a stereotypical Southern character who believes in marriage, money, and employment as the main elements in a woman’s life. Amanda herself is a “little birdlike women without any nest” who has suffered financially, socially, and emotionally even though she has a home. She does not want her unmarried and crippled daughter to “eat the crust of humility all [her] life” (245), but her own marriage experience makes her realise that a man’s elegant and stylish appearance does not reflect accurately his functioning in the family. Thereby, she demands a suitor “that’s clean-living – doesn’t drink”, and who “is not too good-looking” as a husband for Laura.
Despite wishing “success and happiness” for her children, Amanda interferes in Tom and Laura’s lives, treating them as if they are young children, impairing their functioning in the family emotional system, and moulding their level of differentiation of self. Preston Fambrough mentions that Amanda “labours grotesquely to mould the life of her adult children into American success stories through nagging and moralizing” (Fambrough 2005, p. 100). Amanda’s love of her children and her thoughts about the principles of success in life are suffocating. She creates a conflict in her children’s selves by comparing Tom with his faithless father, and Laura with herself. Amanda’s devotion ultimately leads Tom to flee from the house and increases Laura’s emotional anxiety, and as she says in Scene Four: “[m]y devotion has made me a witch and so I make myself hateful to my children!” (p. 257).

Like Williams himself, Tom is caught between discordant parents. His level of differentiation of self is higher than that of both Laura and Amanda, and he is usually annoyed by the latter’s constant interfering in his eating habits, appearance, movie-going, and plans. In investigating Irene Goldenberg and Herbert Goldenberg’s report about the roles in dysfunctional families, Single argues that Laura is the “identified-patient”, who carries the “pathology for the entire family”, Amanda is the “rejected parent”, and Tom represents the victimised “parentified-child”, who fills the void of his father psychologically and physically (Goldenberg, 1985 cited, in Single, 1999, p. 75). He supports his mother both financially and emotionally, and although his ambition does not stop at the shoe warehouse where he works, his dreams of changing his life exceed his actual ability.

Tom has a high level of anxiety that affects his functional level of differentiation of self in the family system. He goes to the cinema because he is obsessed with the idea of adventure and finds relief from life in movies. His smoking and drinking are also signs of his emotional anxiety. Despite these escapist practices, Tom struggles between following his own directives and independence, and following the directives of Amanda and remaining connected with the family. Thomas P. Adler emphasises that Tom’s central conflict embodies both “his duty to self and responsibility to family” (Adler, cited in Philip Kolin, 1998, p. 38). Amanda accuses Tom of selfishness, but his thoughts guide him to free himself from his family ties and duties. Still, this does not indicate a very high level of differentiation of self because Tom still does not balance between individuality and togetherness. Tom’s “nature is not remorseless, but to escape from a
trap he has to act without pity” (*Menagerie*, p. 228). The economic trap that the Wingfields face forces him to be the breadwinner of the family, depriving him of being an autonomous individual. Accordingly, it could be argued that Tom belongs to the 50-75 range of Bowen’s scale, particularly the lower part of this range, 50-60.

Kerr and Bowen remark that people in the 50-60 range “are still so responsive to the relationship system that they hesitate to say what they believe. While they *know* there is a better way, they still tend to follow a life course like those less than 50” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 106). Although Tom is aware of his responsibility towards his family and feels guilty for leaving his mother and sister, by the end of the play he follows his own thoughts and desires by escaping from the Wingfield trap. What makes his level of differentiation a little higher than Amanda’s is his *awareness* of the difference between thoughts and feelings, but he is still responsive to the anxieties in his relationship system.

In comparison with Tom’s level of differentiation of self, Jim O’Connor’s level is clearly higher but remains in the 50-75 range of the scale. According to Bowen, individuals in this range sometimes develop social, physical, and emotional dysfunction, but they have the ability to heal quickly and can challenge life’s difficulties (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 106). Jim keeps developing himself, as he tells Laura that in addition to his responsibility at the warehouse, he goes to a night school to study “a course in radio engineering” (Scene Seven, p. 299). Jim confesses to Laura that he once had an inferiority complex, but he recovered quickly by developing his intellectual abilities. Jim, therefore, as a purpose-directed individual, focuses his energy towards achieving his motivations, beliefs, and objectives rather than blaming and criticising others.

Although we do not see him in the play, Mr Wingfield resembles Williams’s own father, Cornelius, who rarely displayed affection toward his family. Mr Wingfield’s level of differentiation of self could be identified with that of Amanda and Tom. First, and according to the multigenerational transmission process that will be discussed in Chapter 3, spouses often have the same level of differentiation of self and children have nearly the same level as their parents. In this regard, Tom is a reflection of his father. Eric P. Levy argues that Mr Wingfield’s photo is Tom’s mirror, reflecting a negative “self-image with which Tom is identified” (Levy, 1993, p. 531). Likewise, it could be claimed that Tom replicates his father’s level of differentiation.
fears that Tom will follow his father’s path help to support this argument: “[i]t’s terrifying! More and more you remind me of your father! He was out all hours without explanation! Then left! Good-bye! And me with the bag to hold” (Scene Four, p. 261). Day by day, Amanda realises that Tom is preparing to leave and the tragedy of Mr Wingfield’s departure is likely to repeat itself.

Second, in almost every scene Mr Wingfield is mentioned or his image gazed upon. The fact that his picture is displayed in the most vital room in the apartment indicates that he is included in the emotional system even though he is physically absent. In this respect, Harry W. Smith states that:

The most important furnishings described are the glass menagerie of the title, the phonograph, and the-larger-than-life-size portrait of the long departed father. All these items have a strong emotional connection with the members of the family, and are used to underscore peaks of emotional intensity in the development of the play’s action (Smith, 1982, p. 224).

The central position of Mr Wingfield’s photo – above the fireplace – is emotionally significant. While Tom would like to tell the audience that the whole family suffers from the burdens and stress of emotional and economic depression, Mr Wingfield grins and smiles at his own lack of social, economic, and familial responsibilities, not caring for Amanda or the children and pushing his family closer to disintegration. On this point, Safi Mahmoud Mahfouz finds that Williams’s offstage characters, even those who are deceased, have a deep influence on the lives of others (Mahfouz, 2012, p. 404). But by portraying the father in a photograph, Williams creates an emotional distance between Mr Wingfield and the rest of the family. Daniel Jacobs explains that “Williams expresses his wish to reconstruct reality and, in this play of memory and desire, rid himself of the old man [his father]” (Jacobs, 2002, p. 1265). Jacobs’ reading underlines the fact that the father is still part of the family (at least for the other Wingfields) and offers evidence that the family’s emotional process does not necessitate the physical presence of its members.

Mr Wingfield’s emotional and physical separation from the family indicates a very moderate level of differentiation of self. This is to say, not more than 50. In other words, and as will be noticed later in this chapter, Mr Wingfield lacks the ability to
balance individuality and togetherness. His actions privilege individuality over togetherness, which keeps him as an outsider and separates him from the emotional system and family triangle. It could be argued that Mr Wingfield’s photo represents his physical existence, especially since the photo is highlighted in most scenes in the play. Furthermore, music and light signpost Williams’s capacity to create an emotional atmosphere in his memory play to motivate the characters’ “emotional interrelationship” (Smith, 1982, p. 226). In his production notes, Williams emphasises the connotation of music as “reference to the emotion, nostalgia, which is the first condition of the play” (Production Notes, p. 231). Additionally, the emotional importance of music will be noticed in the use of triangles in Streetcar.

In summary, the Wingfields are classified on Bowen’s scale according to their ability to differentiate between feelings and thoughts in the relationships system. Laura’s level of differentiation is very low and she remains fused to the emotional system; Amanda has a modest level of differentiation because she is governed by the emotional system rather than the intellectual one; and Tom’s level is slightly higher than both of them. The functional level of differentiation of the Wingfield members is moderate, except Laura’s level which is very low due to her projection in the family and her high level of anxiety. Single demonstrates that the “dynamics of this [Wingfield] dysfunctional family inhibit self-development and discourage autonomy” (Single, 1999, p. 82) and argues that Laura's individuality remains arrested, while Tom has to choose between independence and self-preservation or sacrificing himself to secure the family’s financial security. From a Bowenian point of view, first, Amanda’s level of differentiation affects her children’s, and, second, members of the family are not able to balance between individuality and togetherness. Tom is eager to achieve individuality but Amanda’s sense of togetherness propels him. Regardless of the social and economic circumstances that surround the Wingfields, the argument is that the overall functional level of the family does not enable them to maintain a sense of family integrity.

In order to develop Bowen’s scale for thinking about family structures in Williams’s plays, I will now move on to consider his other major post-war play A Streetcar Named Desire and will draw parallels between its chief characters and those in Menagerie. Blanche DuBois’ level of differentiation of self in Streetcar will be compared with Laura’s as they are the most dysfunctional characters, remaining in the lowest position of the scale. Although Amanda, Blanche and her sister Stella derive
from the same southern culture, I will show how Stella’s functioning in the emotional system is higher than that of Blanche and Amanda. An investigation of Streetcar’s characters levels of differentiation will enable us to extend the Bowen’s central theory as a literary-critical tool.

**Differentiation of Self in *A Streetcar Named Desire***

*A Streetcar Named Desire* mourns the disintegration of the romantic and idealised Old American South that is symbolised by Blanche and her moralities and cultural values, and concentrates on the brutal injustice of the New South represented by Stanley’s cruelty. It was first published in 1947 as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but Williams wrote several versions of this play in 1945 under different names, including “The Moth”, “Blanche’s Chair in the Moon”, and “The Poker Night”. The first two versions indicate Blanche’s symbolic character, and the third version equates to Scene Three in *Streetcar*. Sievers argues that *Streetcar* is the essence of “Freudian sexual psychology” because it focuses on Blanche’s destiny after a long period of sexual suppression (Sievers, 1955, pp. 376-7). Sievers adds that in Blanche’s character Williams “depicted profoundly the origins and growth of schizophrenia” (p. 379). On this point, a session of the American Psychoanalytic Association meeting in 2011, a group of analysts and psychiatry residents discussed Williams’s *Streetcar* and found that the family, flashbacks, and the figure of the stranger are three main psychological elements of the play (Joan Arehart-Treichel, 2011, pp. 8-21). They also concluded that “for a play to be great, you need not just ideas, but emotional tension” (pp. 8-21). As most of the readings of the play revolve round Blanche’s psychic fragmentation, this part of the chapter analyses the characters’ levels of differentiation of self and how anxiety affects their (dys)functioning in the family emotional system.

Blanche DuBois’ character is reminiscent of both Amanda’s pride in and glorification of the Old South, and Laura’s emotional vulnerability and impairment. Blanche is a reflection of what might happen to Laura. She was born on “fifteenth September, that’s under Virgo” (Scene Five, p. 167), an astrological sign that symbolises the Virgin and stands for sensitivity and chastity. From her first appearance, Blanche looks tired, scared, faint, and anxious. When Eunice, Stella’s neighbour, tells Stella of Blanche’s arrival, Blanche waits for her sister to come and “sits in a chair very stiffly with her shoulders slightly hunched”, “her legs pressed close together”, and “her
hands tightly clutching her purse as if she were quite cold.” (Scene One, p. 119). On the one hand, Blanche is shocked by the awful place in which Stella lives, whereas on the other hand she is worried about not being welcomed in her sister’s flat.

Blanche escapes from a dark past of death and immoral desire, and she pretends to be physically and emotionally stable. Berkowitz mentions that Blanche “enters the play in a state of physical and emotional exhaustion, and fights a tragically losing battle against insanity” (Berkowitz, 1992, p. 90). She is not only exhausted emotionally and physically, but also financially. Hence, she seeks to live with her sister Stella to be supported emotionally and financially. Berkowitz also mentions that Blanche “is struggling desperately to retain her emotional and mental equilibrium” (Berkowitz, 1992, p. 90) due to a sequence of arduous experiences: she was shocked by the suicide of her homosexual husband when she was sixteen; she witnesses multiple deaths in her family; she loses the family home Belle Reve; she is fired from the high school where she teaches English, as a result of her dubious behaviour with a seventeen-year-old boy; and finally, she seeks a shelter in her sister’s house, where she is forced to confront her brutal brother-in-law.

Noorbakhsh Hooti’s study suggests that “Blanche’s problem is the loss of a self which had been sustained in an aristocratic and extravagant male world” (Hooti, 2011, p. 22). Hooti’s reading of the play indicates that Blanche believes in male authority, largely due to her Southern upbringing that celebrates patriarchal values. Amanda Wingfield and Blanche DuBois are two representative characters of the Old South. Amanda, who sees herself in her children, believes that Laura should marry and find a husband to be her breadwinner instead of Tom; while Blanche, tries to compensate for the loss of her homosexual husband Allan Gray by indulging herself in affairs that ultimately cause her self-destruction. Taking a slightly different perspective, in a feminist reading of Streetcar, Wei Fang argues that Blanche’s destruction is related to the mentality of the patriarchal society in the Old South in which women are subordinate to men not only economically but also in almost every aspect of life (Fang, 2008, p. 106). Fang also argues that “it is inevitable that women would lose their self when faced with traditional customs and strict standards set by men” (Fang 2008, p. 104). Ostensibly, this could be true because Blanche’s character is a contradictory mix of gentility, hypocrisy, sensitivity, fantasy, and sexual desires that are all possible indicators of a conflicted sense of self. From the Bowenian perspective, Blanche’s
dysfunction is a product of a multigenerational emotional process and her level of differentiation of self is shaped according to her parents’, and so on. As mentioned previously, according to Bowen class and ethnicity do not influence the level of differentiation. Nevertheless, Williams’s emphasis on place shifts the focus towards Blanche’s struggle between her aristocratic thoughts and Southern values, and between her feelings and desires that give way to anxiety.

Although Blanche can be seen to represent art, poetry, Southern morals, tenderness, and an idealised notion of culture, her level of differentiation is not the same as Amanda’s. Blanche’s vulnerability, anxiety, and emotional disequilibrium suggest that she should be classified in the 0-25 range of differentiation of self. Blanche has a high level of chronic anxiety and she spends hours ‘soaking in a hot tub’. Although she may do so as an element of a religious tradition to wash away sins, Blanche also believes that soaking in hot water is a kind of “hydro-therapy” to reduce anxiety.

Kerr and Bowen find that “much energy [for people in the 0-25 range] is consumed in the reactiveness to having failed to get love” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 101). Blanche confides to Stella her need for love and emotional support and that she “never was hard or self-sufficient enough” (Scene Five, p. 169). Blanche is emotionally needy and requires support and, as such, she presents excuses for searching for shelter as if she is in the centre of an emotional, social, and physical storm and does not know where to hide or to find safety. She tries to find shelter with Stella and then Mitch, but Stanley stands in the way of both relationships. The suicide of her homosexual husband haunts her and causes her social and emotional dysfunction. Accordingly, and as Kerr and Bowen state, individuals in the 0-25 scale “may have functioned successfully up to a point in life, but when the system was disrupted through perhaps death or divorce they collapsed into permanent impairment” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, pp. 101-2). This is exactly what happens with Blanche when she was sixteen-year-old; she is shocked by the homosexuality of her husband and feeling guilty over his suicide. This supports my argument that Blanche’s basic level of differentiation is higher than her functional level, and her degeneration from a gentlewoman to an emotionally disturbed woman is evidence of the deterioration of her level of differentiation. It also supports Bowen’s assumption that a basic level of differentiation is established by the age of adolescence, but specific circumstances of the relationship can influence the functional level of differentiation.
In comparison with Blanche, Stella Kowalski has a clear ability to differentiate between thoughts and feelings. Her physical cutoff from her aristocratic family in Belle Reve, her choice to live in a more humble situation than she is used to, and her adaptiveness in her nuclear family, all imply a high level of differentiation of self. Thus, she could be classified in the 50-75 range. Stella is “free to state beliefs calmly, without attacking the beliefs of others for the enhancement of self” (Bowen, 1978, p. 202). When Blanche reproaches Stella for leaving Belle Reve, Stella responds by saying that “the best I could do was make my own living” (Scene One, p. 126). Notwithstanding that, she is very sensitive when Stanley hits her or smashes something; she tells Blanche that it is difficult to “describe someone you’re in love with!” (Scene One p. 124). C. W. E. Bigsby finds that “Stella’s compassion is real. She negotiates a middle ground. Her actions are dictated by a blend of necessity and love” (Bigsby, 1984, p. 62). Bigsby’s reading of Stella points to her ability to differentiate between her thoughts and feelings towards her husband and sister. At a time, she sympathises with Blanche, and at the same time she realises her need and love for Stanley.

Kerr and Bowen state that people in the 50-75 range “are free to participate in highly emotional situations knowing they can extricate themselves with logical reasoning when need arises” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 106). In the poker scene, Stella calms Stanley’s anxiety by stopping her conversation with Blanche because her logical functioning guides her to avoid a row with her inebriated husband. Then, when Stanley hits her she escapes temporarily to her neighbour upstairs until the men calm her husband down. Later on, and in the same scene, Stanley calls her name “with heaven-splitting violence”, she “slips down the rickety stairs in her robe. … [and] They stare at each other. Then they come together with low animal moans” (Scene Three, p. 154). Stella is still magnetically (and perhaps irrationally) attracted to Stanley despite his violent nature. This is because she has a well-defined opinion of her marital relationship and her level of differentiation allows her to adapt. Stella tries to maintain emotional equilibrium between Blanche and Stanley, a point that Hooti makes in the claim that Stella “is a balanced combination of extreme traits, which helps her survive in the animalistic world of Stanley” (Hooti, 2011, pp. 27-8). It could be argued that Stella’s level of differentiation of self leads her to mediate between the extravagance of her aristocratic, ideal, and genteel upbringing in the evanescent Old South (represented by Blanche), and her brutal, savage, and violent existence in the New South (represented
by Stanley). In other words, she has the ability to balance individuality and togetherness.

In the last scene, Stella is guided by her intellectual functioning to choose between living with Stanley and sending Blanche to a mental asylum, and between believing Blanche’s story. By the end of the play, she possesses the ability to choose between her thoughts and feelings, and she chooses to remain with her husband in order to preserve her family’s emotional integrity. Furthermore, Eunice tells her that “Life has to go on. No matter what happens, you’ve got to keep on going” (p. 217). Along these lines, Bowen argues that “a more differentiated person can participate freely in the emotional sphere without the fear of becoming too fused with others. He [or she] is also free to shift to calm, logical reasoning for decisions that govern his life” (Bowen 1978, p. 364). Therefore, Stella is more differentiated than her sister who tries to discover a new life governed by anachronistic aristocratic values which she hopes to cling onto by marrying Mitch. As a well-differentiated person, Stella is aware of the difference between her feelings and intellectual principles: for example, even though Stella cries when the doctor and matron arrive to take Blanche to an asylum, she knows that she has done the right thing because there is no other place for the unstable Blanche to go. Stella’s emotional flexibility enables her to be free from her feelings and to reach life decisions that preserve the family based on her thoughts rather than being swayed by her feelings.

Stanley Kowalski, Stella’s husband, is an American of Polish descent. Williams links him “to a group of black characters” in other texts “who are similarly characterized as physically threatening, inarticulate, lacking intelligence, full of desire, and sexually potent” (George W. Crandell, 1997, p. 343). In Crandell’s view, Stanley can be compared to the animalistic imagery associated with black male characters in Williams’s short stories such as, ‘Desire and the Black Masseur’ (1948), ‘Miss Coynote of Greene’ (1973), and ‘Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll’ (1985). However, Stanley’s cunning does not indicate a person who lacks intelligence because he is aware of what he does and plans resourcefully of how to get rid of Blanche. Stanley can be seen to embody cruelty, vulgarity, and violence, and, as Berkowitz comments, he is also “associated with Capricorn, gaudy colours and raw sexuality” (Berkowitz, 1992, p. 91). As such, Williams describes Stanley as follows: “Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been
pleasure with women” (Stage Directions, p. 128). Stanley’s pride in his own masculinity directs his behaviour and he sees women solely along sexual lines. We are told that he “was born just five minutes after Christmas” (Scene Five, p. 167) and his association with Capricorn (the astrological sign of the Goat) indicates that he is down-to-earth and realistic, even though Blanche thinks that he was “born under Aries [because] Aries people are forceful and dynamic” (p. 167). Either way, his relationship with Stella is based on an interchangeable physical attraction. And even though he looks like “a survivor of the stone age” in the eyes of Blanche, he is Stella’s cavalier, to the extent that she “can hardly stand it when he is away for a night” (Scene One, p. 125). The consistency between Stanley and Stella is disturbed by the arrival of Blanche and her invasion of their private sphere.

Stanley is easily irritable, and Stella understands that nature very well. Smashing, hitting, hurling, bawling, and throwing are the most common marked actions in his behaviour. For example, Stella mentions that even on their wedding night, Stanley “smashed all the light-bulbs with the heel” of her slipper (Scene Four, p. 157). Further, during Blanche’s birthday dinner, he also becomes outraged that Stella calls him: “Pig – Polack – disgusting – vulgar – greasy” (Scene Eight, p.194). Then he “hurls the plate to the floor”, and tells them to remember Senator and Governor of Louisiana Huey Long Jr’s famous slogan: “Every Man is a King” (p. 195). From this point onwards, Stanley’s pride does not allow him to be humiliated by his wife and sister in-law. Stanley is a self-confident person to the degree that he thinks of himself as a king, who has the right to control his kingdom. On an emotional level this suggests that he is the overfunctioning spouse and Stella is the dysfunctional one. We are told relatively little about his past, but Larry Blades argues that Stanley’s war experiences, as a Master Sergeant in the Engineers’ Corps, shapes his postwar behaviour (Blades, 2009). Blades adds that Stanley could be diagnosed as suffering from “posttraumatic stress disorder” from his war experience that causes stress, problems in the interpersonal relationships, and undermines his psychosocial functioning (Blades, 2009). This interpretation could help to explain Stanley’s outrageous behaviour towards Blanche, who is supposed to be the enemy that interferes in his kingdom. Despite Stanley’s animalistic behaviour, he retains a sense of self-possession and is not a stranger to rational thoughts to keep his family integrity. He could be classified in the 50-75 range of the scale because his self-confidence and self-importance are symptoms of his ability to differentiate between his
thoughts and feelings. Although he is quick-tempered and reacts with violence, his anxiety is not chronic, and he can recover quickly.

Stanley has a generally harmonious relationship with Stella. He believes that Blanche disturbs his togetherness with Stella and he tries to exclude her from the Kowalskis’ emotional system, leading in a series of increasingly violent actions: he reveals Blanche’s past before she arrives to New Orleans, destroys her relationship with Mitch, and finally rapes her. In this regard, Philip C. Kolin mentions that Stanley represents “Blanche’s executioner, her destroyer, […] who violates her body and cuts her off from her sister, Stella, and her saviour, Mitch” (Kolin, 1991, p. 242). Rachel Van Duyvenbode also believes that in Williams’s drama the “prevailing fears of psychic or cultural disintegration should be encoded within the bodies or shadows of racial others [and that this] subverts the independence and integrity of white characters” (p. 207). In spite of the fact that Stanley is proud of himself as “a one hundred per cent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it” (Scene Eight, p. 197), Williams characterises him as a man of Polish origins, who causes Blanche’s cultural and psychological disintegration and destabilises the integrity of the white American society. Because social class and cultural ethnicity are not considered in Bowen’s construction of the family emotional system, Blanche is considered a stranger who subverts the Kowalskis’ emotional integrity. By allowing Stanley to triumph over Blanche, Berkowitz argues that Streetcar “seems to be offering a choice between the higher and lower aspects of the human potential” (Berkowitz 1992, p. 91). Yet it could be argued that these lower and higher facets of human behaviour not only represent Blanche’s dreams and Stanley’s reality, but they also embody Blanche’s low level of differentiation of self and Stella’s higher functioning in the family emotional system.

In comparison with the Wingfields, the Kowalskis’ levels of differentiation are higher. Consequently, in spite of the fact that Stanley’s way of life and his cruel treatment of Blanche are not morally acceptable (and mean that he is a baser character than Blanche), it is Stella’s level of differentiation and her awareness that hold her nuclear family together. In contrast, the Wingfields’ overall level of differentiation of self does not guarantee the solidarity or integrity of the family. It is important to keep in mind that “it is difficult to assign a person a specific level on the scale” because, first, there is a difference between basic and functional levels of differentiation; second, the
basic level can be “masked” by the functional level; and third, a “scale level” generally refers to basic levels (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 98). Accordingly, it could be argued that although it is difficult to appoint any individual a particular basic level of differentiation of self, it is still possible to predict a reasonable level of differentiation, especially that the scale refers “generally to basic differentiation into four ranges of functioning” (p. 100). Therefore, as we have seen for Tom and Stella, the higher the level of differentiation of the family member, the lower the chance of family disintegration. The next section focuses upon triangles as the second important concept in Bowen theory and analyses the effect of differentiation of self on the process of triangulation in Menagerie and Streetcar. This is important because differentiation of self is the cornerstone of Bowen concepts and triangles are the cement that binds them together.

**Triangles**

In the previous parts of this chapter, the main characters are examined according to their level of differentiation of self. Bowen theory postulates that anxiety and the level of differentiation of self both affect the intensity of the triangulation process. Thus, this section will investigate the role of the level of differentiation in intensifying or controlling the triangle. Kerr and Bowen define a triangle as “the basic molecule of an emotional system. It is the smallest stable relationship” and add that “the idea of triangles was the cement that integrated the concepts into a single theory” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 134, p. 379). It is important to mention that the oedipal triangle in psychoanalytic theory is different from Bowen’s emotional triangle, as the first is concerned with sexual matters between the parents and the child while the emotional triangle is more comprehensive and covers broader emotional processes. Further, emotional triangles explains *when*, *how*, *where*, and *what* a relationship is rather than *why*, as will be explained in this section.

According to the concept of triangles, a two-person relationship is only stable in times of emotional calmness. However, a three-person relationship is stable in times of calmness, but in times of tension anxiety spreads over the three corners of the triangle. Bowen also defines the emotional triangle as a concept that views the relationship between three people in the family (Bowen, 1978, p. 306). One family can consist of “interlocking triangles” when it has more than three people. For example, if a mother in
a nuclear family has a problem with her daughter and son, the tension may transfer to the father indirectly. In this scenario, the mother-daughter-son triangle becomes inactive, while the father-daughter-son triangle becomes the active triangle in the system. Kerr and Bowen argue that in times of calmness a central triangle can enclose the anxiety of the family, and as the level of anxiety increases the central structure triangulates with other family triangles or with society more broadly. In their opinion, interlocking triangles decrease the tension in the central triangle (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 140). Triangles exist in any relationship – in families, schools, hospitals, workplaces, and society – and Bowen adds that they can be found even in “animal societies” (Bowen 1978, p. 306). To illustrate this, Kerr and Bowen provide the example of the alliance of two monkeys to resist a third monkey in terms of mating and territory (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 144) – a point I will return to in chapter 3.

Kerr and Bowen argue that triangles exist “forever” and the process of triangulation is more permanent than the individuals who shape the triangles (Kerr and Bowen 1988, p. 135). Notably in terms of its applicability to understanding dramatic interaction, Kerr and Bowen use theatrical language, commenting that “the actors come and go, but the play lives on through the generations”. By this they mean that when the triangle loses one of the three-person corners, another one will fill the gap. As I will argue, in terms of basic structure, triangles are another key concept for understanding the dynamics of family in Tennessee Williams’s drama; they play an essential role in reducing family anxiety and, consequently, in reducing the chances of tension that leads to disintegration. Triangles also serve as “step-by-step descriptions of the functioning of the primary or parental triangle and related triangles in a family” (Hall, 1981, p. 61). This “step-by-step” characteristic will appear clearly through the development of the events of Williams’s plays and, as stated in the introduction, helps to explain why Bowen’s scientific method casts new light on a reading of twentieth-century American drama.

Bowen mentions that the degree of anxiety and differentiation of self are major variables in triangles (Bowen, 1978, p. 307). Firstly, triangles are formed when there is a high level of anxiety in the two-person relationship, requiring the involvement of a third person to decrease the level of tension. In other words, high levels of anxiety help automatically to form triangles in the family. Kerr and Bowen emphasise the significant role of triangles in managing the emotional equilibrium and stability of the family
system (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 139). They also mention that when the level of anxiety is low in triangles, there are two people called “insiders” (or a “twosome”) who have the tendency for togetherness, and an “outsider” whose level of comfort is less than the insiders (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 136). As I will argue, the characters will be read through this lens of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ to facilitate an understanding of the dynamics of triangles. Furthermore, these concepts are useful for bridging Bowen’s theory and many of Williams’s plays. Common to many of Williams’s plays, it might be helpful here to remember that Stella and Stanley Kowalski are positioned as insiders and Blanche Dubois as an outsider in some scenes in Streetcar, but this dynamic shifts at key moments in the play when the structures are challenged or even reversed. Secondly, if the triangled individuals have high levels of differentiation of self, they can control the emotional process and the functioning as well. However, low levels of differentiation within the involved people in the triangle can intensify and disturb the emotional process.

There are several facts about triangles. Firstly, Kerr and Bowen claims that the third corner of a triangle is transposable and can be human, subhuman, pets, or even activities (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 136). Secondly, a “stable” two-person relationship can become “destabilised” by adding or removing a third person, or an “unstable” two-person relationship can be “stabilised” by removing or adding a third person (pp. 138-9). This suggests a two-way process in which the addition or removal of a third person can have either a beneficial or detrimental effect on the relationship. Thirdly, the triangular dynamic shifts in times of tension and calmness, thereby making the triangle flexible. Finally, triangles have the characteristics of “fluctuation” (Hall, 1981, p. 63). Fluctuation could occur either during times of quietness or times of stress. In times of quietness, as mentioned earlier, the insider is more comfortable than the outsider. However, as I will discuss in relation to Williams’s work, the outsider is more comfortable than the insiders in times of stress and tension. Consequently, I will argue that Bowen’s concept of triangles is useful for understanding Williams’s plays, for two main reasons: first, because Williams is interested in characters who are not fully aware of their motivations and desires and, second, because he is more interested in triangular structures than portraying a stable nuclear family: sometimes triangles work to secure a stable family structure and at other times they are symptomatic of anxiety or disintegration in familial relationships. In order to explore these issues, following the
earlier discussion of differentiation of self, the role of triangles for understanding family interactions in *Menagerie* and *Streetcar* will be discussed in the following parts of this chapter. Further, triangles will be investigated in key scenes of the plays because, although the overall mechanism of triangulation process is the same, every triangle raises specific details about the character’s interpersonal interactions.

**Triangles in *The Glass Menagerie***

This section explores the dynamics of emotional triangles in which Amanda, Tom, and Laura function in reaction to each other in the family emotional system. As we have seen from the discussion above, the Wingfields are a broken family following the absence of Mr Wingfield, who shirked his responsibilities towards his family sixteen years before the start of the play. Before returning to the characters, to better understand the triangles in *Menagerie*, it is useful to take a step back to examine the setting of the play and how it is structured in terms of triangulation.

The Wingfields’ ground floor apartment is in “a rear building” in a crowded area in St. Louis, Missouri. The alley of the apartment mingles with “clothes-lines, garbage cans”, and the neighbour’s fire-escape. There is also the Paradise Dance Hall in another section of the alley that causes lights and music to enter the Wingfield apartment. The apartment consists of three rooms: a front room for Tom, Amanda’s room, and a living room that is separated from the dining room by curtains and which also serves as Laura’s bedroom. The living room contains a sofa and Mr Wingfield’s photograph, symbolising the absent father. It appears that the Wingfields’ apartment is designed for two people in terms of bedrooms (representing insiders or togetherness) and a living room for Laura, the third person. I will argue that Laura is the cornerstone of the triangle, despite having the lowest differentiation of self on Bowen’s scale; as I will discuss, Laura is trapped by the system, placed sometimes as one of the insiders and at other times as the outsider.

In Scene One – and according to Bowen’s triangles of two insiders and an outsider – Tom and Laura are the insiders interacting in the dining-room, while Amanda as the outsider is in the kitchenette. In calm times, Kerr and Bowen demonstrate that the triangle function can be “inactive” and this depends on the level of anxiety. The higher the level of anxiety the more active is the triangle, because in times of tensions the pathways of the triangle allow the shifts of the tension automatically to spread over the
three corners (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 135). Accordingly, and after the dinner, Amanda (crossing out to kitchenette) talks about her glorious southern past with seventeen gentleman callers; Tom andLaura seem forced to listen to the same repeated story as Tom comments “I know what’s coming” (Scene One, p. 237). Amanda continues to talk about her gentlemen callers, who are mostly “prominent young planters of the Mississippi Delta – planters and sons of planters!” (p. 238). According to the process of triangulation, at this point Laura and Tom’s togetherness is preferable to Amanda’s position as an outsider because the triangle is in a calm state. Although Amanda feels more comfortable than her children, she feels emotionally distressed about her daughter not having received any callers. However, Laura remains silent and Tom seems to be very sarcastic, asking such questions as “how did you entertain those gentleman callers, what did you talk about?”, “Isn’t this the first you’ve mentioned that still survives?” (pp. 237-9). As mentioned above, the triangle functioning is “inactive” here because the level of anxiety is very low. Although the insiders’ position is preferred, Tom and Laura control the emotional process by patiently pretending to be interested. Papero clarifies that “there are people who appear to have greater control of their reactive responses” (Papero, 1990, p. 46) in the emotional system. Tom and Laura in this situation show a degree of controlling their emotional reactivity to please Amanda.

At the end of the first scene, the tension between Amanda and Laura increases as Laura tells her mother that she is not expecting any gentleman callers:

Amanda [reappearing, airily]: What? No one – not one? You must be joking!

[Laura nervously echoes her laugh. She slips in a fugitive manner through the half-open portieres and draws them in gently behind her]

(Scene One, p. 239)

Amanda and Laura, in this case, are the insiders and Tom is the outsider who remains silent. Laura directs the speech to Tom by saying that “mother’s afraid I’m going to be an old maid” (p. 240). The triangle in this case is activated automatically as Laura and Amanda’s level of anxiety increases. Because the triangle has the characteristics of “constant state of motion” (Bowen, 1978, p. 307), the insiders, Amanda and Laura,
less comfortable than the outsider, Tom, who just observes them. To extend a point I made earlier, Bowen demonstrates that the state of insiders and outsiders depends on periods of calm or tension within family life; in quiet times, the insider’s place is better than the outsider’s because the triangle never has a maximum state of comfort for the three corners. In this respect, Kerr and Bowen comment that “the insiders [are] trying to preserve what they have and the outsider is trying to break into it” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 136). Consequently, Amanda as an outsider at the beginning of the scene is trying to “break into” the insiders’ bond of togetherness. However, the outsider’s site is more desirable than the insider’s during periods of tension, because in periods of high levels of anxiety between the insiders the triangular pathways move automatically to reach the outside corner. What happens at the end of Scene One is that one of the insiders, Laura, feels less comfortable than Tom, so that the pathway between Amanda and Laura is more active than that between Tom and Amanda. Consequently, the state of the triangle moves Tom into a position of an outsider, and as Amanda’s level of differentiation of self is higher than Laura’s, Amanda succeeds in breaking into Tom and Laura’s union.

In contrast, in Scene Two, Amanda and Laura are in the living room as insiders, while Tom is outside the home and he remains an outsider until the end of the scene. Amanda gets very angry when she discovers that Laura is deceiving her and does not go to Rubicam’s Business College, thus destroying the hope that Laura will at least have a job in the future. In her conversation with Laura, Amanda appears more stressed than Laura, who tries to defend her behaviour of pretending to go to the college by justifying that she is sick and cannot attend. Instead, Laura prefers walking in the parks, visiting the art museum, zoo, and flower houses, which all reflect her sensitive personality. There are two reasons why the triangle is in a state of tension, meaning that Amanda and Laura are the insiders, and Laura’s Victrola or glass collection (her two means of escape) could represent her outsider status. As previously mentioned, Kerr and Bowen clarify that “a live third person is not required for a triangle. A fantasied relationship, objects, activities, and pets can all function as a corner of a triangle” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 136), and so it could be that the big glass-house, the apiaries, and the jewel-box that Laura mentions all symbolise her function both inside and outside the triangle. Secondly, Laura responds to Amanda’s anger by drawing “a long breath”, getting “awkwardly to her feet”, and crossing to play her Victrola (Scene Two, p. 244). Then in
the same scene she “utters a startled, doubtful laugh” and “reaches quickly for a piece of glass” (p. 246). Laura tries to retrieve the relationship with the other insider, Amanda, but Amanda’s level of anxiety is very high. Consequently, Laura escapes to her glass collection to create a sense of togetherness and thus maintains a level of calm.

Scene Three consists of high levels of anxiety between Amanda and Tom, especially because Laura has disappointed her mother by quitting the college lessons. The Wingfield family is in the process of collapsing socially and economically, which increases Amanda’s anxiety and activates the triangle. In this scene the triangle moves to indicate Tom and Amanda as insiders and Laura as an outsider, although the three members of the Wingfield family reside in the same place. However, Amanda and Tom “are quarrelling behind the portieres” (Scene Three, p. 249) as Amanda detects the impending breakdown of her family. In her opinion, Tom jeopardises the family’s economic stability by staying out late at night drinking and wasting time watching movies. She also confiscates the D. H. Lawrence novel which Tom reads because, in her opinion, Lawrence is “insane” and his novel is “filth” (p. 251). By the end of this scene, Tom is outraged by his mother’s interference in his life, exemplified by “a series of violent, clumsy movements” and by calling Amanda an “ugly – babbling old witch” (p. 252). Amanda leaves Laura and Tom after he smashes Laura’s glass collection. Tom intensifies the level of emotional anxiety by his outrageous actions, which terrify Laura. The role of the triangle in this situation is to reduce the anxiety among the three corners by shifting the anxiety of Tom and Amanda over to Laura’s corner. At the beginning of the scene Laura observes the quarrel between her brother and mother “with clenched hands and panicky expression” (p. 249) and she stands without interference, but at the end of the scene when she shouts shrilly “my glass! – menagerie” (p. 253), she is involved by the system to reduce the tension between Amanda and Tom. Consequently, the triangle helps preserve the family relationships from emotional breakdown by keeping the Amanda-Tom pathway from exploding as the anxiety spreads over three corners instead of two.

In Scene Four, Amanda sends Laura to the grocery store in order to discuss some matters with Tom. In this scene, Amanda and Tom are presented as insiders who sit in the dining-room. Tom hesitates in apologising to his mother and it could be that his cup of coffee occupies one corner of the triangle:
Tom blows on his coffee, glancing side wise at his mother [...] Tom raises his cup in both hands to blow on it, his eyes staring over the rim of it at his mother for several moments. Then he slowly sets the cup down and hesitantly rises from the chair. (Scene Four, p. 257)

At this moment, Laura is outside the home and she is also outside the triangle. As the triangle is always in a state of motion, an object such as Tom’s cup of coffee serves as one corner of the triangle. As a consequence, Tom busies himself with his cup to create an emotional distance from Amanda and to reduce the overall anxiety.

Tom and Amanda are positioned outside the door of the fire-escape having a calm conversation and Laura is in the kitchenette in Scene Five. The triangle in this scene is inactive because the level of anxiety is very low. Each part of the triangle tries to reach the maximum level of “emotional closeness-distance” to adjust the position, the thing that disturbs the other corners, which in turn try to adjust their position in the triangle (Bowen, 1978, p. 307). Phillip Klever points out that “the involvement of one relationship influences the distance of the other, and the distance of one influences the involvement of the other” (Klever, 2009, p. 141), and so it appears that the position of the outsiders and insiders is determined by the physical distance between the members in the play. Thus, in Scene Six, Jim O’Connor is invited to have supper with the Wingfields. Laura is very anxious to the extent that she feels nauseous at the thought of attending the supper, and instead she rests on the sofa in the living room. Amanda, Tom, and Jim feel more comfortable than Laura and they could be seen as the insiders within this triangle as they sit around the table while Laura sits alone.

Several triangles appear in Scene Seven: the Tom-Jim-Amanda triangle at the beginning of the scene during a conversation about electricity, the Laura-Jim-Amanda triangle in which Jim entertains Laura while Amanda is engrossed in fantasy in the kitchenette, and the Amanda-Laura-Tom triangle that positions Tom as the outsider and Amanda and Laura as the insiders. However, the Amanda-Laura-Tom triangle is the central and most active triangle due to the high level of anxiety. Although Tom escapes from home, his position in the world of reality is preferable to Amanda’s position as deserted mother and Laura’s as crippled, jobless, and unmarried woman. However, Berkowitz suggests that Tom’s “story is one of failing to recognize that his mother and sister were spiritually better off where he left them, and that he himself was more at
home with them than he could be in the world of wars and depressions he keeps trying to convince himself is the real one” (Berkowitz, 1992, p. 89). In response to Berkowitz, it could be claimed that Amanda and Laura’s position is “spiritually better” than Tom’s, but from the perspective of Bowen’s triangles, Tom’s position is emotionally better than theirs. That is because he feels guilty about his mother and sister, but his real position is to be wherever his dreams lead him rather than at home.

By escaping from the house, Tom cuts himself off physically from the family but at the same time remains emotionally part of the family system. That also could be proof of how the emotional system works automatically. Consequently, Tom abandons the home but he cannot achieve complete emotional separation from Laura. Tom, as a member of the Union of Merchant Seamen, finally escapes the Wingfield trap by following his father’s footsteps. But radiant windows, perfumes, and pieces of coloured glass all remind Tom of his fragile and vulnerable sister. Although Tom escapes physically from the home, he remains emotionally attached to his family. Like his counterpart Williams, Tom clings emotionally to the memories of his family. Daniel Jacobs mentions that “Williams is able to separate further from his family by keeping himself, through his memory play, attached to them forever” (Jacobs, 2002, p. 1268).

Triangles also prove a useful technique for analysing the characters in Menagerie as a single unit, especially because it is a triangular-structured play. Based on Bowen’s model, a person’s level of differentiation affects the triangulation process. The majority of triangles in Menagerie are intensive due to the low level of differentiation of self of the characters involved in the central triangle; Amanda’s and Laura’s levels of differentiation are under 50, increasing and intensifying the emotional anxiety in the triangle. However, as will be seen in the following section – and based on my earlier discussion – in Streetcar the levels of differentiation of both Stanley and Stella are above 50 so that they have more control over the emotional triangle. Other important aspects of triangles will be examined in the next part of this chapter, extending my discussion of family disintegration in Williams’s drama.

**Triangles in A Streetcar Named Desire**

Just as the setting for Menagerie is important for understanding the triangular relationships in the play, so Streetcar is shaped by its iconic location. The play takes place in a “two-storey” building on Elysian Fields Street in one of the old parts of New
Orleans, Louisiana. The area looks public, and there are warehouses, vendors, bars, and the sounds of music: “New Orleans is a cosmopolitan city where there is a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races in the old part of the town” (Scene One, p. 115). The town is a mixture of white and black people who come from different parts of the world and live with each other, but it is implied that there are many African Americans because the “corresponding air is evoked by the music of Negro entertainers at a bar-room around the corner” (p. 115). The Kowalskis live in the ground floor flat that consists of only two rooms, one of which is a kitchen. Felicia Hardison Londre argues that for Blanche, “the absence of any door between the two rooms raises a question of decency – and perhaps metaphorically heralds the ill-defined boundaries in her [Blanche] coming struggles with Stanley over territorial space” (Londre, cited in Matthew C. Roudane, 1997, p. 52). It is clear that the Kowalski’s apartment cannot bear a third person, and I will argue that Blanche’s entrance intensifies the emotional triangle and disturbs the togetherness of Stanley and Stella. The space of the play – which stresses two stories, two rooms, and two streetcars – could also intensify the functioning of the triangle, as will be seen later.

The main triangle in Streetcar consists of Blanche, Stella, and Stanley. When Blanche arrives at Elysian Fields where her sister Stella lives, she leaves behind the memory of her Mississippi home plantation, Belle Reve. As such, she paradoxically represents both the outsider values of the Old South in immigrant New Orleans, but she is an insider in terms of her blood relation to Stella. Nevertheless, Blanche appears to criticise her sister’s life and the apartment, and she tells Stella that Belle Reve is lost. Blanche reveals that no family members left money and she has had to struggle in vain to keep the property on only a school teacher’s salary. She also blames Stella for not coming to visit the family except for funerals; instead, Blanche criticises her for enjoying life with her “Polack”. Hana Sambrook comments that the term “Polack” was often used to describe early twentieth-century Polish immigrants to the United States who were often “mostly uneducated” labourers “who were looked down upon” (Sambrook, 2003, pp. 11-12). It could be that “Polack” is an undesirable word that implicates a class difference, which stresses Stanley’s role as an outsider, at least in terms of Blanche’s nostalgic view of the more insular Old South.

In fact, the triangle in Scene One could have two faces: on the one hand, Blanche is an outsider who tries to interfere with the togetherness of Stella and Stanley,
but on the other hand, Stanley, as a Polish descendent, is the outsider, and Blanche and Stella are the insiders as Southerners with a longer lineage. Nonetheless, the emotional system is likely to outweigh the first face of the triangle because Stanley and Stella have the tendency towards togetherness and their relationship is stable, even though they relate to different social classes. On Bowen’s model, emotional triangles do not take into consideration of class, gender, or cultural identity, but these are clearly factors in the way that Williams positions the three characters in relationship to each other. Blanche, particularly, is in an inconvenient position as the outsider because she does not belong to her sister’s New Orleans home and Stanley asks her to justify herself by showing him the papers of Belle Reve.

The poker night scene is a good example of the interlocking emotional triangles: the Blanche-Stella-Mitch triangle, in which Stella is the outsider in the bathroom while Blanche and Mitch are the insiders having a conversation, and the Stanley-Steve-Pablo triangle at the poker table. These two triangles are inactive due to the low level of anxiety in each of them. The triangles remain calm and inactive until Stanley hits Stella because he asks the sisters to “hush up” and to “cut out” the conversation and to turn off the radio, but Stella does not respond. Kerr and Bowen clarify that “as anxiety increases (over a short or long period), the comfortableness of the insiders’ relationship eroded” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 136). According to this view, Stella becomes very nervous because Stanley is dissatisfied about the relationship between his friend Mitch and Blanche. He throws the radio out of the window.

In these moments of tension, and because the triangle has the characteristic of “fluctuation”, the central triangle (Blanche-Stella-Stanley) is reactivated due to the high level of stress. As a consequence the anxiety increases between Stanley and Stella as insiders, leading him to hit her. Their relationship is broken temporarily, and Stella initiates a moment of emotional togetherness with her sister Blanche because the latter’s role in the triangle is to decrease the anxiety: thus, “with her arms around Stella, Blanche guides her to the outside door and upstairs” (Scene Three, p. 152). Kerr and Bowen mention that “under stress, however, the anxiety spreads to other family triangles and to triangles outside the family” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 140). According to this, the anxiety spreads to Eunice’s family and to Stanley’s friends in a series of interlocking triangles: Stanley-Stella-Blanche, Eunice-Blanche-Stella, and Stanley-Mitch-Men (Steve and Pablo). Mitch and the other men try to calm Stanley.
down to reduce the tension, while Blanche guides Stella to Eunice’s flat into a place of safety. Stella returns to her husband after the anxiety decreases between them and Blanche returns as an anxious outsider again. The function of the interlocking triangles is to reduce anxiety in the central triangle. Therefore, the characters are not aware of their motives, the evidence that the process of triangulation occurs automatically in the emotional systems. Thereby, to reduce anxiety and avoid overheating in the central triangle, a series of interlocking emotional triangles are formed spreading tension over other triangles. Consequently, the process of the interlocking triangles helps the Kowalskis’ emotional stability and integrity.

In Scene Four Blanche tries to convince Stella to leave her husband. Stella explains that she loves her husband and she is happy in her life with him. Although Stanley seems to be outside the triangle, Stella’s passion keeps him as an insider and Blanche, despite the sisterly feeling, remains as the outsider. Stanley hears the whole conversation between the two sisters, especially when Blanche describes him as an “animal”, “sub-human”, and “ape-like”, and he retorts by telling Stella not to “hang with the brutes” (Scene Four, p. 164). Hence, Stanley realises that Blanche is endangering his family life, and we can read the second half of the play as his attempt to get rid of her.

In Scene Seven, Blanche’s birthday supper, Blanche is in the bathroom as the outsider, and Stella and Stanley have a conversation around the table as insiders. The level of anxiety increases gradually as Stanley tells Stella about Blanche’s shameful past in the cheap Flamingo Hotels, where she was asked to leave as a result of her suspicious (perhaps promiscuous) behaviour. Moreover, in Scene Eight, Stella and Blanche create a sense of togetherness and have the position of insiders when Stanley starts to shout at them, “so don’t ever call me a Polack” (p. 197). In this triangle, Stella sympathises with Blanche because she knows very well the nature of both her husband and sister. Stanley, as an outsider, is in the preferred position in the emotional triangle. The emotional tension increases in the triangle when Stanley insults Blanche by giving her a ticket back to Laurel as a birthday present. The automatic movement of the triangle shifts Blanche to the outside position: she “tries to smile”, then “she tries to laugh”, and “she gives both up and springs from the table and runs into the bathroom” (p. 198). Stella quarrels with Stanley, accusing him of being cruel towards Blanche, but Blanche is left alone in the apartment that evening when Stella goes to hospital to give
birth. The unborn baby forms another triangle with Stella and Stanley, making Blanche feel even more of an outsider. Previously, Stanley confirms the stability of their triangle by saying that “it’s gonna be all right after she [Blanche] goes and after you’ve had the baby” (pp. 195-6).

Scenes Nine and Ten take place on the same birthday evening scenario, and Stanley has already told Mitch about Blanche’s life prior to her arrival in New Orleans. Here a third corner of the triangle could be an object. In Scene Nine, Blanche and Mitch are the insiders and Stanley, who remains in the hospital with Stella, is the outsider, but if we take the third corner as an object then it could be that the outside corner is the polka music:

*A while later that evening. Blanche is seated in a tense hunched position in a bedroom chair […] The rapid, feverish polka tune, the ‘Varsouviana’, is heard. The music is in her mind; she is drinking to escape it …*

*She touches her forehead vaguely. The polka tune starts up again.*

(Scene Nine, pp. 200-201)

In fact, the polka tune is correlated with Allan Grey, Blanche’s husband, and the music reminds her of Allan’s suicide as a consequence of her disgust towards his homosexuality. Emotionally the polka tune is connected with death in Blanche’s mind; accordingly, and most likely, the polka music functions as the “outsider” that tries to “break into” the possibility that Blanche and Mitch can be together. In Scene Ten, the triangle has two faces: the central triangle, with Blanche and Stanley as insiders and Stella as the outsider because she remains in the hospital. The second face of the triangle is Blanche and her fantasied relationship as insiders, and Stanley as the outsider. Before Stanley appears around the building, Blanche enters in “a mood of hysterical exhilaration” and murmurs “excitedly as if to a group of spectral admirers” (Scene Ten, p. 208). This provides evidence that in Bowen theory a third corner of a triangle can be a “fantasied relationship”. Stanley enters the apartment, and Blanche tells him that she “received a telegram from an old admirer” (p. 209). Blanche tries to escape the tension and hold the outsider position in order to reduce the anxiety that she feels from her physical proximity to Stanley that ends with the scene of rape.
In the final scene, a doctor and a matron appear to take Blanche to an asylum. The poker night scene repeats itself in the last scene and the same interlocking triangles are shaped (Stella-Eunice-Blanche, and Stanley-Mitch-Men), except the psychiatrist-matron-Blanche triangle reduces the tension in the Kowalskis’ triangle. Thereby, when Blanche enters the Kowalskis’ life, she destabilises their relationship, and when she exits, their relationship restabilises. This clarifies the fact that the triangulation process could either have a detrimental or beneficial influence on the relationship. Moreover, the new baby replaces Blanche’s position and Blanche herself triangulates with the psychiatrist and the matron outside of the Kowalskis’ home. This discussion reveals that Williams’s is careful to structure Streetcar around interlocking triangles, so much so that it becomes necessary to eject Blanche in order for the family to reform around the new baby.

To conclude this chapter, notwithstanding that Tennessee Williams’s The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire are triangular plays in terms of their structures, it could be argued that they are also square-structured in that they consist of two main triangles. If we cut the square equally across a diagonal line, it produces two triangles: in Menagerie this is Amanda, Tom, Laura, and Jim (or it could be Mr Wingfield on the fourth corner), and in Streetcar, Blanche, Stanley, Stella, and Mitch. In the Wingfield square the hypotenuse (cut-line) of the square is Amanda and Laura, and in the Kowalski square it is Blanche and Stanley. In the Stanley-Stella-Blanche triangle Blanche is the disruptive figure, and in the Mitch-Blanche-Stanley triangle Stanley is the disruptive one. This enhances Bowen’s argument that the level of differentiation of self affects the triangulation process. In this respect, Blanche and Laura are positioned at the bottom of the scale of differentiation, so that their sense of togetherness keeps them “fused” to the emotional system and positions them mainly as mostly insiders rather than outsiders. The other corners of the triangles are where characters who have a 50 or above level of differentiation are positioned; the status of these corners fluctuate between being outsider or insider due to the level of anxiety displayed variously by Amanda, Tom, Jim, Stanley, Stella, and Mitch. This is to say that the therapeutic arc of the triangle is to raise the level of differentiation of self of the involved individuals and to have more control in the emotional process. In both plays, Williams points towards the victimization of the more unstable and least differentiated characters, Laura and Blanche.
High levels of differentiation of self and triangles plays a significant role in reducing chances of family emotional disintegration. The higher the level of differentiation of self among individuals in the triangle, the more they have control over the emotional process. Low levels of differentiation often involve a high level of anxiety and more intensive automatic triangulation process. Therefore, when people become aware of the difference between their thoughts and feelings, and are less under the sway of their feelings, they are more able to keep a sense of family integrity. As mentioned earlier, adding or removing a third person can have either a helpful or harmful effect on the relationship. In *Menagerie* Tom’s departure from the family implies a high level of anxiety and an intensive triangulation process that leads to the disintegration of the Wingfields, whilst in *Streetcar* the removal of Blanche (as the disruptive element) from the Kowalskis’ home returns stability to the family’s emotional system. This is especially true as the baby in Stella’s arms replaces Blanche’s position in the triangle.

To summarise my argument in this chapter: in the family emotional system members of the family do not behave separately, but their functioning is determined by the emotional system in which they are involved automatically, which has two primary aspects: differentiation of self and a triangular relationship with others. As I have shown, the flexibility of triangles and Bowen’s “step-by-step” scientific analysis of times of calmness and tension not only provide useful tools for investigating the dynamics of family, but they can also help to predict some aspects of the functioning of each family member. Moreover, triangles provide a tool for exploring the characters and their interdependency within dramatic texts: once the triangular relationships are stabilised, they help to reduce the anxiety among family members and thereby decreasing the chances of familial disintegration.
Chapter 2

Nuclear Family Emotional System and Family Projection Process in *Period of Adjustment* and *Summer and Smoke*

*Women have always been my deepest emotional root; anyone who’s read my writings knows that.*

*(Tennessee Williams, 1973, Playboy Interview)*

As the introduction to the thesis outlined, the nuclear family emotional system and family projection process are the third and fourth concepts of Bowen family systems theory. Following my application of Bowen’s first pair of concepts to two of Tennessee Williams’s best known plays in the first chapter, in this chapter I will investigate the theme of family disintegration in Williams’s plays *Summer and Smoke* (1948) and *Period of Adjustment* (1960) through Bowen’s third and fourth concepts. Chronologically, *Summer and Smoke* was published three years after *Menagerie* and only a year after *Streetcar*. It is also considered one of Williams’s most Southern plays where family values are strongly emphasised. However, on an emotional level, *Summer and Smoke* (hereafter in this chapter Smoke) links with *Period of Adjustment* (hereafter in this chapter Adjustment) to connect Williams’s familial works with Bowen’s views on the American family in the mid-twentieth century. Analysing two plays published twelve years apart in this chapter is helpful for showing how Williams’s plays both provided evidence of and, in certain respects, challenged Bowen’s theories across a significant time-scale. The two plays are complementary because they revolve around the theme of marriage and family life as basic components of the Southern middle-class family in America. In spite of the fact that *Adjustment* was written after *Smoke*, the former provides a flashback to some of the emotional complexities of the latter.

As will be described later, according to Bowen theory the fourth concept (family projection process) is considered one of the main mechanisms of the nuclear family emotional system. Accordingly, and for the purposes of this chapter, *Adjustment* will be discussed first to introduce a comprehensive overview of the basic patterns and theory of the nuclear family emotional system’s mechanisms (emotional distance, dysfunction
in a spouse, marital conflict, impairment of one or more children), then Smoke will exemplify Bowen’s ideas of family projection process following my main theme of family disintegration. The following section will discuss the theoretical aspect of the nuclear family emotional system in Bowen theory in relation to Adjustment, which will be discussed from the twin perspectives of the nuclear family emotional system and family projection process. However, Smoke will be discussed with reference to just family projection process: this play provides the best example of the way in which family projection works and enables me to explore what Bowen considers to be the universal aspect of the process and its applicability to all families. In other words, the discussion simulates the division of Bowen’s concepts in which he separated out family projection process (impairment of one or more children) from the earlier concepts of the nuclear family emotional system in order to emphasise its importance in his overall theory. Likewise, discussing one play from a single perspective highlights the theatrical significance of Williams’s Smoke in clarifying and developing an awareness of Bowen’s family projection process.

**Nuclear Family Emotional System**

The third concept in Bowen theory is the nuclear family emotional system, which outlines four main processes that will be discussed in detail in this chapter. It is very useful here to define the notion of the nuclear family and its development in the mid-twentieth century. Michael Gordon defines the term nuclear family as “a unit consisting of a husband, wife, and dependent offspring” (Gordon, 1972, p. 1). Stuart A. Queen, Robert W. Habenstein, and Jill Sobel Quadagno add that the nuclear family consists of parents and their born or adopted children (Queen et al., 1985, p. 11). Robert Campbell echoes this description by identifying a nuclear family as a household unit with two married parents with children under 18, but he also notes that historically this stable pattern went into decline in the 1960s when other examples of non-married or homosexual partners were increasing in number (Campbell, 2004, p. 245). From these definitions, it appears that there is an agreement that the nuclear family consists of two adults and one or more child, probably to a limit of three, and was the most common pattern of family organization in the United States during the 1950s.

From a more general perspective, in an analysis of a survey consisting of 250 representative human societies, George Peter Murdock finds that the nuclear family that
consists of a married man and woman with their offspring is the most basic and universal family unit from which other complex forms are branched (Murdock, cited in Bell and Vogel, 1968, pp. 37-8). Joseph M. Hawes and Elizabeth I. Nybakken claim that “there has never been one single family form in America, but the nuclear family [...] has often served as the model of the American family” (Hawes and Nybakken 2001, p. 1). They also argue that although extended families apparently were the most common in early America (and amongst Catholic and African-American families in the twentieth century) most depended on the entire extended network (p.1). From a more historical perspective, Elaine Tyler May explains that in the late 1940s and 1950s, postwar Americans shifted “from loyalty to the community of ethnic kinship to the suburban ideal of the emancipated nuclear family” (May, 2008, p. 28). Thus, the postwar movement of many white couples from urban centres to newly developed suburbs explains the spread of the nuclear family rather than any other family form. For the purpose of this chapter, the nuclear family will be discussed as an emotional system that consists of at least a two-person relationship in addition to a third person to form the emotional triangle, which is the essential building unit in any emotional system.

Bowen does not exactly mention what the nuclear family is, but rather defines its emotional functioning. He mentions that the “beginning of a nuclear family, in the average situation, is a marriage. There are some exceptions to this, just as there have always been exceptions, which is all part of the total theory” (p. 376). He also mentions that “the term family ego mass refers to the nuclear family which includes the father, mother, and children of the present and future generations” (Bowen 1978, p. 161). Bowen’s description of the nuclear family is in line with the conventional definition, divorcing it from its historical context. However, originally Bowen had an alternative term, “undifferentiated family ego mass”, which he used instead of “nuclear family emotional system” in the early phases of the theory (Bowen, 1978, p. 203; Hall, 1981, p.71). In using the original term, Bowen intended to describe the intensity of the emotional closeness among the nuclear family members. However, he perhaps realised that the term undifferentiated family ego mass was too diffuse: he modified the original concept to nuclear family emotional system because he found it more accurate if used to describe the emotional process in the nuclear family, and to distinguish it from the emotional process in the extended family and society, as will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively.
Within Bowen’s broader theory, the nuclear family emotional system is defined as a concept that “describes the patterns of emotional functioning in a family in a single generation” between parents and children (Bowen, 1978, p. 308, 376). This often takes into account the spouses’ original family patterns and can include multiple generations and nuclear systems, as I will argue in analysing Williams’s plays, especially *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in Chapter 3. The undifferentiation of self among the individuals in the nuclear family (father, mother, and children) produce four patterns or mechanisms of emotional functioning: emotional distance, dysfunction in one spouse, marital conflicts, and impairment of one or more children. These patterns can manifest themselves separately in one family or all of the traits could occur together.

By reference to the fact that Bowen’s concepts are interlocking, the role of differentiation of self, triangles, and anxiety will be investigated via the nuclear family emotional system, especially because the nuclear family emotional patterns are, to a certain degree, governed by the level of differentiation of self and anxiety. Furthermore, the nuclear family consists of different faces of triangles, as I discussed in Chapter 1 in relation to *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The following section of this chapter will examine three patterns of dysfunction in the nuclear family in accordance with Williams’s plays that focus on the nuclear family emotional system: emotional distance, dysfunction in one spouse, and marital conflict. The fourth pattern, impairment in one or more children, will be referred to as family projection process. Furthermore, the next section focuses on couples, and so children will not be examined in depth except when they are part of the triangular relationships that were explored in *The Glass Menagerie* and will be tested in family projection process.

**Emotional Distance**

Bowen finds that emotional distance is the “most universal mechanism” between spouses in order to avoid the intensity of the emotional relationship. It is maintained either by “physical avoidance” or by “internal withdrawal” (Bowen, 1978, p. 377; Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 173) and “is intertwined with all the patterns of emotional functioning in a nuclear family” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, p. 168). Accordingly, Kerr and Bowen do not classify it as a major pattern of dysfunction in the nuclear family; rather it is a spontaneous mechanism that is noticed in all close relationships to some extent. It could also be added that this mechanism not only occurs between spouses but also
between other people inside and outside the family circle. While my focus in this chapter is on emotional distance, Bowen develops this concept in relation to other concept (emotional cutoff) and includes other specific process, as I will clarify in chapter 4.

Daniel Papero argues that emotional distance “occurs automatically and generally without the partners being acutely aware of it” (Papero, 1990, p. 53). This point is fairly valid in daily life since both spouses live in the same place, but in times of conflict each one tries to avoid reacting to the other by spending time away, reading, doing housework, watching television, and other kinds of distancing. It could even be argued that emotional distance as a mechanism has a positive effect on the family integrity in preserving individuality within a group dynamic. By distancing themselves from each other, both spouses may come to think positively and are able to calm down, thus appreciating what each one of them means to the other. As such, not only is temporary conflict avoided, but also chronic conflict. In this regard, Chuan-Chuan Cheng’s and Charles Tardy’s investigation of the cultural effects of using silence within marital conflicts illustrate five advantages: namely, keeping harmony, maintaining one of the spouses’ self-image, protecting of others’ self-image, controlling conflict, and avoiding conflict (Cheng and Tardy 2009). They provide evidence that “spouses use silence to control conflict and to protect one’s own and other’s self-image in marital conflict” (p. 42). This seems functional, to some degree, because some spouses intend to remain silent in times of conflict to avoid further clashes and perpetuate equilibrium. Consequently, silence can be considered an emotional and physical mechanism of emotional distance that can often mitigate spousal anxiety.

As emotional distance can have a positive effect on the partners (the same as the triangulation process), it can also have negative results on the other extreme side of the marital equation. In this regard, Papero mentions that “[a]lthough distancing is automatic, it usually produces more distance than people want” (Papero, 1990, p. 53). In Papero’s opinion, such distancing may create a kind of discomfort that triggers both or one of the spouses’ anxiety to triangulate other people or react irrationally. Similarly, Peter Titelman mentions that Bowen “offers many descriptions of emotional divorce or emotional distancing (which involve some of the reactive behaviours such as withdrawal and isolation that would be a part of the later developed concept of emotional cutoff)” (Titelman, 2003, p. 12). Likewise, Roberta M. Gilbert adds that
emotional distance possibly leads spouses to drift apart and may result in separation or divorce (Gilbert, 2006, p. 17), suggesting that it can be one of the most corrosive forces within Bowen’s eight main concepts. Some level of divorce is probable, which could be either physical or emotional depending on the levels of differentiation of self and anxiety of the spouses.

**Dysfunction in One Spouse**

Bowen defines dysfunction in one spouse as a mechanism “in which one spouse becomes the adaptive or the submissive one, and the other spouse becomes the dominant one” (Bowen, 1978, p. 204). Gilbert points out that underfunctioning-overfunctioning mutuality (a term I will outline below) is like a see-saw relationship, so that when one spouse “does well, the other falters more” (Gilbert, 2006, p. 18). In spite of the fact that, in many societies, people choose their spouses according to mutual social or cultural interests, Bowen states that an individual selects a partner with a similar level of differentiation of self (Bowen, 1978, p. 377; Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 171), and that the higher the level of differentiation the lesser the likely emotional conflict in the future. Moreover, Kerr and Bowen confirm this assumption by pointing out that “people gravitate toward their emotional mirror images” (p. 167). They also add that there are two factors that affect selecting a partner: first, conscious factors such as values and interests and, second, unconscious factors related to feelings that are stimulated by the partners’ involvement in the emotional process (p. 169). Building up harmony and, thus, emotional fusion is the normal thing between the spouses at the beginning of their conjugal life. Even so, Elizabeth A. Skowron’s findings do not support Bowen’s assumption that people choose partners with similar levels of differentiation and she provides evidence that actually married couples are matched randomly more than having similar levels of differentiation of self (Skowron, 2000, p. 235).

To understand dysfunction in one spouse mechanism, it is necessary to realise that in “the closeness of an intense relationship the emotional selves of each blend or fuse together on a common self, a ‘we-ness’” (Papero, 1990, p. 51), or “intense togetherness” (as described by Gilbert 2006, p. 21) is the dynamic that easily stimulates anxiety between spouses. High levels of differentiation indicate less emotional fusion and a relationship that is enhanced by solidarity and confidence between spouses (Kerr
and Bowen, 1988, p. 170). Similarly, in Bowen’s opinion, if the level of differentiation of the spouses is low, the intensity of emotional fusion increases (Bowen, 1978, p. 377). There are three possible consequences: firstly, one of the spouses undertakes the adaptive role and the other becomes (or perhaps is forced to be) dominant to avoid conflicts. Secondly, both spouses try to adopt the adaptive role which might impair making decisions for the “we-ness”. Or, thirdly, both spouses conduct the dominant role that leads to complications in the relationship (p. 377). Over time, the adaptive spouse may experience social, physical, or emotional dysfunction because, as Bowen explains, the “dominant one gains self at the expense of the more adaptive one, who loses self” (p.377) and may develop a range of symptoms that vary from mild to severe, such as depression, psychosis, diabetes, ulcers, gambling addictions, and even criminal behaviour.

In the first scenario one of the spouses is dominant or overfunctioning, and the other is the adaptive, “subordinate”, or underfunctioning spouse. The overfunctioning spouse makes decisions on behalf of the other spouse and “becomes responsible for the twosome” (p. 204), while the underfunctioning spouse may become “a no-self, dependent on the other to think and act and be for the twosome” (p. 204) and vulnerable to the extent that he or she is not confident and incapable of making a decision. Kerr and Bowen clarify that:

While a dominant-subordinate or overfunctioning-underfunctioning reciprocity in a relationship is an important mechanism for binding anxiety and stabilizing the functioning of both people, an increase in the levels of chronic anxiety can exaggerate this pattern to the point that one person’s functioning is so impaired that symptoms develop (Kerr and Bowen 1988, p. 172).

From this perspective, it is noticeable that this mechanism balances the functioning between spouses by reducing anxiety. However, chronic anxiety stimulates this mechanism negatively to the extent that symptoms develop. The spouse who mostly adjusts his or her behaviour, feelings, and thoughts to keep the harmony of the relationship is more susceptible to symptoms. On this point, it is helpful to return to the discussion of Stella and Stanley Kowalski in A Streetcar Named Desire, who can be seen to resemble the underfunctioning-overfunctioning or the adaptive-dominant
mutuality. Stella adapts herself to the dominant Stanley and often yields to him to avoid conflict. But their relationship can still be considered stable and both manage to emotionally function without developing symptoms. Before moving to analyse Williams’s two plays, a third nuclear family mechanism will be discussed to clarify what differentiates each mechanism from the other.

**Marital Conflicts**

Marital conflict is the third mechanism of the nuclear family emotional system in which “neither [of the spouses] gives in to the other or in which neither is capable of an adaptive role” (Bowen, 1978, p. 377). In contrast to the previous mechanism (dysfunction in one spouse) most marital conflicts have no adaptive-dominant spouse, but rather each spouse’s energy is focused upon the other. Moreover, in this mechanism children are apt to be triangulated in order to decrease emotional intensity. The spouses’ energy in marital conflicts could “be thinking or action energy, either positive or negative” (Bowen, 1978, p. 378). This is because inasmuch as the relationship of spouses in the conflictual marriage is intensely negative to the extent of “destructive fighting”, it is also characterised sometimes by periods of intense positive emotional closeness. While each of the spouses refuses to be in the adaptive functioning, both “are generally ‘stuck’ to one another” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 187). Thus, chronic anxiety and low levels of differentiation of self play an important role in increasing the intensity of marital conflict mechanism.

On this model, marital conflict develops through three sequential phases: first, periods of intense togetherness or closeness; second, periods of emotional distance after a conflict; and third, another period of intense emotional closeness (Bowen, 1978, p. 204, 378). In this mechanism, intensive affirmative emotions result in more intensive negative emotions between the partners. To return to my previous example, Stella and Stanley Kowalski’s marital narrative in *Streetcar* evolves through these phases: they live in emotional harmony and accept each other’s behaviour and attitude. Then, when Blanche appears in their life, their marital role transfers from dominant-adaptive to a conflictual couple involving emotional distance. In the final scene of the play, Stanley reverts to calming Stella and both of them regain their closed emotional relationship at the expense of Stella’s sister Blanche, who is forced to leave the apartment. It is useful to remember in the Poker Night scene how the Kowalskis’ negative emotions are
sometimes very intense when Stanley hits Stella, but later that night they reunite as if nothing has happened. The point is that their affirmative emotions are as intensive as their negative ones.

Andrew Christensen and Lauri Pasch mention seven phases of marital conflict: namely, and in sequence, conflicts of interest which refer to each spouses’ preferences and needs; stressful circumstances such as daily life and work stress; precipitating events that are correlated with negative behaviour; engagement through the time of conflict versus avoidance; interaction scenarios including positive or negative mutual engagement or demand/withdraw interaction; immediate outcome between partners to analyse their conflict; and return to a normal way of life or reconciliation (Christensen and Pasch, 1993, pp. 3-14). Although these detailed phases seem accurate and practical in the therapeutic field, it could be claimed that Bowen’s emotional phases of marital conflict are more comprehensive in the emotional cycle. This is because some of these phases repeat those of Bowen. For example, engagement versus avoidance refers to emotional or physical distance in Bowen theory, and emotional closeness – the final of Bowen’s stages – is referred to as reconciliation in the other seven mentioned phases.

The basic level of differentiation of self and chronic anxiety are still the main factors that affect the nuclear family emotional patterns. Skowron finds that there is a correlation between levels of differentiation of self and marital adjustment: couples with high levels of anxiety and low levels of differentiation of self may be discontented in the relationship, whilst well differentiated couples with less emotional reactivity experience a great level of marital contentment (p. 233). Ora Peleg’s results also support the positive relationship between levels of differentiation of self and marital satisfaction (Peleg, 2008, p. 395). However, daily life issues, children, the family finances, and pressures stimulate emotional anxiety and, therefore, marital conflicts. In this regard, Kerr and Bowen point out that such pressures as money, children, and sex do not cause controversy between the spouses, but rather it is caused by “emotional immaturity” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 188). In simple terms, what creates conflict is people’s reaction to a specific problem rather than the issue itself. Furthermore, marital conflicts can potentially result in physical, emotional, and social impairment. Frank D. Fincham emphasises the correlation between marital conflict and family outcomes such as childish behaviour, physical illnesses (such as cardiac disease and cancer), and mental health (including psychological disorders and alcoholism) (Fincham 2003, p. 23). These
ideas relating to marital conflicts will be explained by illustrating marital cases in Williams’s comedy *Adjustment*. A focal point to emphasise is that, according to Bowen theory, and as will be noticed in this play, the amount of undifferentiation in the nuclear family “may be focused largely in one area or mostly in one area and less in others or distributed evenly in all three areas” (Bowen, 1978, p. 203). These three areas will be referred to as techniques or mechanisms, which are discussed theoretically and will be investigated empirically in the following part of this chapter.

**Nuclear Family Emotional System in Period of Adjustment**

In this section, mechanisms of the nuclear family emotional system and their role in family integration will be investigated: namely, emotional distance, dysfunction in one spouse, and marital conflicts in two nuclear families. These mechanisms will be discussed through two newlywed couples, the Haversticks and the Bateses, in order to test how they play out in Williams’s *Period of Adjustment*, especially because Williams’s interest in the private nature of relationships unfolds in the play and provides the most thorough means in Williams’s dramatic canon to investigate the veracity of Bowen’s mechanisms. Further, both marriages in the play focus largely on one or more mechanisms: the Haversticks focus on emotional distance and marital conflicts and the Bateses’ amount of differentiation leads variously to dysfunction in one spouse, impairment of their child, and emotional distance. However, each couple’s case will be emphasised according to the development of distinct phases in their marriage.

*Adjustment* was first published by New Directions and *Esquire* magazine in 1960 and subtitled “A High Point Over a Cavern”, focusing on the setting of the play in “a Spanish-style bungalow” in the suburb of High Point, Memphis, Tennessee. It has not always been well received by critics and audiences. Jim O’Quinn comments that Williams confessed in later years that he wrote the play in “a rush of activity partly induced by drugs”, and it ran on Broadway for an underwhelming 132 performances” (O’Quinn, 2012, p. 22). In this connection, Francis Donahue observes that Williams’s characters such as Stanley, Blanche, and Maggie, attract the playgoers’ attention more than any other characters presented in this comedy (Donahue, 1964, p. 135). However, in a more optimistic reading of the play Bruce Smith comments that *Adjustment* “enjoyed some major critical success” (Smith, cited in Saddik, 1999, p. 34). Smith clarifies that although the play does not reflect Williams at his “top form”, he
nevertheless managed to write what could be considered “a light comedy” (p. 34). Similarly, Heintzelman and Smith-Howard point out that the shallowness of the play “is a dramatic device that serves as a critical commentary on modern American society” (Heintzelman and Smith-Howard, 2005, p. 207). These are valid points because Adjustment could also be read as a criticism of to the norm of the “Golden Age” of the 1950s American family. However, although many critics comment that the play is a trivial, superficial, underwhelming, and “heavy-handed light comedy” (Gerald Weales, cited in Stanton, 1977, p. 62), I will argue that from an emotional perspective Adjustment offers a profound study of marital conflict. The key point to emphasise here is that whether or not the play was recognized as a critical success, Bowen theory provides a useful methodology to examine the dynamics of marital relationships in the play, while, at the same time, offering a historical, geographical, and dramatic location for testing the validity of Bowen’s ideas.

In Adjustment Williams explores marital relationships that signify the foundation of ideal family life in 1950s America. It explores the situations of two married couples: Ralph and Dorothea Bates and George and Isabel Haverstick. Although the setting of the play is a mid-Southern city, it is different to that of the two-storey building in Streetcar and to the Wingfields’ apartment in Menagerie. As such, Adjustment still focuses on a Southern setting, rather than the big postwar suburban developments in the North East and Midwest. Foster Hirsch observes that “Adjustment is Williams’s only play with a conventional middle-class setting. Nowhere else in the canon is there so much interior decoration, household appliances, jobs and children’s toys” (Hirsch, 1979, p. 64). The Tennessee bungalow consists of a soft bedroom and a living room that contains a sofa, TV, fireplace, and decorated Christmas tree with toys and a woman’s coat underneath. Nonetheless, and in comparison with the settings of Menagerie, Streetcar, and Smoke, Adjustment is part of Williams’s sense of a diminishing Southern myth.

In addition to the fact that Adjustment repeats some of Williams’s 1950s themes of loneliness, sex, escape, and lack of human communication, it also criticises postwar suburbia in the United States. The play depicts a manifestation of social regression that will be an aspect of societal emotional process in Chapter 4. In Gerald Weales’s opinion, the play has mistakenly led critics to consider it as a conjugal drama; Weales does not deny this fact, but he emphasises that the play’s main purpose is to criticise the
chaos of postwar American suburbs behind their ordered surfaces (Weales, cited in Stanton, 1977, p. 62). May mentions that “the ‘American way of life’ embodied in the suburban nuclear family, as a cultural ideal if not a universal reality, motivated countless postwar Americans to strive for it, to live by its codes, and – for black Americans to – to demand it”, even if it was not always accessible to all social groups (May, 2008, p. 11). May reveals that although life in suburbia was highly desirable, poverty and racial oppression were masked and hidden by political leaders in the 1950s because laws prevented (or, at least, dissuaded) black Americans from living in the majority of suburbs. Williams also reveals that the social foundations of these suburbs are not solid, particularly as many suburban neighbourhoods were not well integrated with other facilities and the houses were not always well-built. As such, it could be claimed that the chaos is social and emotional, as well as familial.

Martin Halliwell mentions that “suburban development, juvenile delinquency and racial conflict were three hot issues” of the 1950s, alongside the threat of communism (Halliwell, 2007, p. 5). Furthermore, in his discussion of middle-class gender roles in suburban life in Sloan Wilson’s 1955 novel The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, Halliwell points out that “although the suburban home was touted as a safe haven during the cold war, the crack in the shape of a question mark in Tom’s living room ceiling […] suggests that it was also a place of insecurity” (p. 63). Tom Rath in Wilson’s novel can be seen as a counterpart to Ralph Bates and George Haverstick as he is a former paratrooper, having served in World War II. He settles with his wife Betsy Rath and their three children in a suburb in Westport, Connecticut. Notwithstanding that the setting of the novel is in the North East and Williams’s play is in the South, this example offers two important points: first, a demonstration that the reality of suburbia rarely matches up to the dream of the ideal environment for the middle-class family; and second, it indicates that the crack in Tom’s house is similar to the rubble in Ralph’s bungalow, symbolising that suburban life can be unsettling or even unsafe. The rubble also implies the emotional distance in the marital relationships for both couples in Williams’s Adjustment.

The play is set during the festive season, which is emotionally supposed to be a familial occasion, but Ralph Bates, a man in his thirties with a “boyish-looking” face, appears alone with a dog in the living room watching TV. He “is one of those rare people that have the capacity of heart to truly care, and care deeply, about other
people” (Act One, p. 130). He is left by his wife Dorothea because he quit his job in her father’s company. The arrival of the other newlywed couple, George and Isabel Haverstick, to Ralph’s cottage and his conversation with Isabel reveal his emotional capacity that enables him to keep the integrity of a six-year dull marriage. Ralph’s triangulation with the Haversticks also stabilises their emotional system as will be discussed later on in this section.

The Bateses’ nuclear family consists of Ralph and Dorothea ‘Dotty’ Bates and their son. Their marital relationship could be diagnosed as dysfunctional in one spouse. Ralph reveals his emotions towards his wife Dorothea through a long conversation with Isabel in Act One. Ralph is characterised as “detached, considering, thinking, and over his face comes that characteristic look of a gentle gravity which is the heart of RALPH”. He believes that “marriage is an economic arrangement in many ways” (Act I, p. 143), which he confirms to George:

I done a despicable thing. I married a girl that had no attraction for me excepting I felt sorry for her and her old man’s money! I got what I should have gotten: nothing! Just a goddam desk job at Regal Dairy Products, one of her daddy’s business operations in Memphis, at eighty-five lousy rutten dollars a week! (Act Two, p.174).

Ralph’s speech combines his thoughts that marriage is an economic transaction, and between his feelings of sorrow about the millionaire’s daughter. He even confesses to Isabel that he sacrificed his youth for the sake of his father-in-law’s wealth rather than a matter of attraction to Dorothea, who is offered to him rather than chosen by him. Nancy Tischler compares his “cool understanding and mechanical talent” to Jim O’Connor, the gentleman caller in Menagerie (Tischler, 1961, p. 283). By marrying the only daughter of a millionaire, Ralph “has sold his life for security” (p. 283). As Jim positions himself as Laura’s psychoanalyst, Ralph also does as Dorothea’s psychiatrist. Ralph understands Dorothea’s case more than the psychiatrist, who misdiagnoses her shakes as “psychological frigidity”, and who charges her father fifty dollars a session. Dorothea’s buck teeth and shaking body make her feel that she is unattractive, but Ralph’s emotional aptitude helps her to build up her self-confidence and calms down her shivers.
It is apparent that Ralph’s and Dorothea’s levels of differentiation of self varies. As we have seen, according to Bowen theory, a person tends to choose a spouse with an equal level of differentiation. It could be contended that although Ralph’s interest in Dorothea is economic, he unconsciously or unwittingly has chosen a partner with the same level of differentiation of self. However, it could be equally debated that they are more likely to have different levels of differentiation of self because Ralph is interested in his father-in-law’s money rather than Dorothea’s personality. As such, Ralph could be classified within the 50-75 range of the scale of differentiation of self, specifically 50-60. He realises emotionally that he *likes* Dorothea rather than *loves* her. He admits to George that although the bedroom seems sweet and tender, he does not feel that tenderness with her.

Although Ralph realises the difference between his thoughts and emotions, he still responds to his wife. This corresponds with Bowen’s idea that people in the 50-75 range of the scale “are sufficiently free of the control of the feeling system to have a choice between intimate emotional closeness and goal directed activity, and they can derive satisfaction and pleasure from either” (Bowen 1978, p. 202). Accordingly, by marrying an unattractive girl for purely economic reasons, Ralph *chooses* the “goal directed activity” that he *thinks* will give him pleasure. However, as an ambitious person, Ralph gives the impression that he is unsatisfied by the “goal directed” choice of his marital situation, and he confesses to George that his life is an “affliction” because he dreams of being “*the first man in a moon rocket*” (Act II, p. 199). The fact that he lives a routine life in a sinking Spanish-type cottage does not please his ambitious thoughts. Hirsch demonstrates that Ralph and George do not feel comfortable “of the masculine roles their society expects them to fulfil”, therefore they both “plan for a rural life far removed from the plastic suburbia” (Hirsch, 1979, p. 65). The conventional masculine role in the South demand them to have “pretty wives, important jobs, and impressive houses” (p. 64). Although he has a job, house, and wife, Ralph seems to pursue the wrong dream. Second, by feeling guilty about Dorothea, Ralph is still responsive to her emotionally and his goal-directed choice does not please him emotionally. This indicates that the Bateses still function within the family emotional system, which guides them to behave in particular ways towards each other.

Dorothea’s basic level of differentiation of self before she marries Ralph could be 0-25, before her functional improving to the 25-50 range. In this way, she is
reminiscent of Laura Wingfield in *Menagerie* in the sense that they both suffer from emotional dysfunction due to their physical appearance. Dorothea’s shakes can also be compared with George’s shakes because their cause is emotional rather than physical. They are both recommended to see a psychiatrist. Isabel tells Ralph that “no physical basis for the tremor, perfect physical health, suggested – a psychiatry to him [George]!” (Act I, p. 139). As mentioned in Chapter 1, the usual psychiatric procedure towards people in the lowest part of the scale (0-25) is to connect them to another family member or friend whose level of differentiation is higher than theirs. It is likely that Ralph tries and succeeds in improving his wife’s level of differentiation of self by making her feel that she is attractive: “Dotty, you used to be homely but you improved in appearance” (Act Three, p. 245). Moreover, most of Dorothea’s energy is spent merely in “loving” Ralph and their son, and “being loved” by Ralph. All that she has achieved in six years of marriage is to have a nose job and her front teeth extracted, and throughout she remains homely.

However, the familial emotional functioning improves by her overcoming her shakes and by building a stronger self-image. When Isabel uses Dorothea’s “Pepto-Bismol”, Ralph tells her that Dorothea used to get acid stomach but he cured her of it. Isabel explains Dorothea’s medical case as “the human stomach is an emotional barometer with some people. Some get headaches, others get upset stomachs (Act II, pp. 179). This could be seen to show how Dorothea’s dysfunction is emotional rather than physical before her marriage. In his speech with Dorothea’s parents, Ralph reveals that her psychological problems stem from her parents’ attitude towards her, as will be discussed later in this chapter. By investigating the Bateses’ level of differentiation of self, the key point to emphasise is that this difference could be an exception to Bowen theory. In this instance, Williams’s interest in idiosyncratic relationships offers a challenge to the normative elements of Bowen theory.

In Ralph and Dorothea’s nuclear family, two mechanisms appear in their relationship: emotional distance and a dysfunction in one spouse, because it seems that Ralph is the dominant overfunctioning spouse and Dorothea is the submissive or adaptive underfunctioning one, mainly due to their level of differentiation. In this case, the self of the submissive partner fuses and integrates into the self of the responsible dominant one, and to a degree that both selves adapt to each other. Likewise, Thomas P. Adler demonstrates that the Bateses’ problem is “with maintaining one’s self-image and
independence as two attempt to become one” (Adler, 1994, p. 164). This union (what Bowen names the “we-ness”) is not only the Bateses’ problem but that of any other married couple, and it is particularly relevant for the Bateses because Ralph functions for the twosome. Louise Blackwell categorises Dorothea, Stella Kowalski and Heavenly Finely as Williams’s women “who have subordinated themselves to a domineering and often inferior person in an effort to attain reality and meaning through communication with another person” (Blackwell, 1970, p. 11, emphasis in original). However, Blackwell’s classification of subordinate-dominant is based on superior-inferior social class rather than a matter of emotional functioning in the nuclear family. In the emotional system, being dominant or subordinate is not a matter of social class, economic state or even gender, but rather emotional interaction that depends on the partners’ level of differentiation and anxiety.

Kerr and Bowen argue that higher levels of differentiation of self indicate less emotional fusion, therefore the conjugal relationship “is reinforced by elements such as trust, integrity, and mutual respect” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 170). Accordingly, the Bateses’ marriage is enhanced by respect and trust due to Ralph’s emotional maturity. In his argument with his father-in-law, Mr McGillicuddy, Ralph asserts that he respects Dorothea and sympathises with her. When the McGillicuddys come to clear up Dorothea’s belongings after they have heard that Ralph intends “to make a quick cash sale of everything in the house and skip out of Dixon” (Act Three, p. 218), Ralph is sure that Dorothea would “never agree to a piece of cheapness like this” (Act III, p. 219). On this evidence, although Dorothea’s basic level of differentiation is low, Ralph’s functional level of differentiation decreases the anxiety. On this point, it is useful to keep in mind that the “counterbalancing reciprocal functioning” and “emotional complementarity” can improve the functioning of the spouses and contribute to the harmony of the relationship, therefore reducing the family’s opportunities of emotional disintegration. The reciprocal functioning between Ralph and Dorothea indicates that Ralph is ambitious, responsible and full of energy, while Dorothea is dependant with limited energy that is spent on her house and family. Consequently, the dysfunction in the underfunctioning wife is compensated by the overfunctioning husband, who assumes responsibility for the pair.

The overfunctioning-underfunctioning mechanism in times of calmness stabilises the relationship between spouses. Conversely, in times of stress, chronic
anxiety destabilises this dynamic and leads to the development of dysfunction in the more adaptive spouse. At first glance, it seems that Dorothea is apt to develop symptoms, especially that she feels “VIOLENTLY SICK AT HER STOMACH”, as her mother dramatically states. On the contrary, Ralph is more vulnerable to develop physical, emotional, or social symptoms in this situation for several reasons. First, Kerr and Bowen state that it can be either the underfunctioning or the overfunctioning spouse who develops symptoms (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 186). Second, Ralph adapts himself the most in order to live with an unattractive woman, thus tying himself to a plain desk job after a long glorious history of flying in two wars with over “seventy bombing missions” in Korea “and responds to Dorothea’s emotional needs by having two separate beds for “His” and “Hers”. Consequently, and although he occupies the responsible overfunctioning position, he develops social symptoms, corresponding with Kerr and Bowen’s view that the “spouse who develops social symptoms is the one who has adapted the most to the togetherness pressure of the family” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 186). Ralph’s particular social dysfunction might be said to be irresponsible financial conduct because he sacrifices his youth to marry a millionaire’s daughter that he chooses for economic reasons. Further, he quits his job with Dorothea’s father, clears up his savings account, and decides overnight to sell some household appliances at the wrong time when their “savings account is at a very low ebb” (Act III, p. 231).

The relationship between Ralph and Dorothea is interspersed by periods of emotional distance. Although they have been living with each other for six years, they seem to experience a long phase of emotional distance, as summarised by Ralph:

Isabel: There is such a tender atmosphere in this sweet house, especially this little bedroom […]

Ralph [in a slow, sad drawl]: The colour scheme in this bedroom is battleship gray. And will you notice the cute inscriptions on the twin beds? “His” on this one, “Hers” on that one? The linen’s marked his and hers, too. Well. The space between the two beds was no-man’s land for a while (Act II, p. 180).

Two main points can be concluded here. First, the tender ambience of Ralph’s house can be interpreted to be the familial emotional responses that both Ralph and Dorothea try to manage by the dominant-subordinate mechanism. Kerr and Bowen comment that
values, attitudes, beliefs, and emotional reactions in the nuclear family together create the “emotional atmosphere” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 194). Second, because the emotional distance intertwines with the emotional functioning of the nuclear family, it appears clearly from Ralph’s description that there is a physical and an emotional distance between them. In fact, the gray colour of their bedroom indicates that their emotional relationship is neither black nor white, but rather in-between. This in-between zone corresponds to Ralph liking Dorothea, rather than loving or hating her, as well as the physical and emotional distance between their separate beds.

The second nuclear family is the Haversticks. Isabel appears on the stage as “small and white-faced with fatigue, eyes dark-circled, manner dazed and uncertain” (Act I, p. 131). Isabel is one of Williams’s genteel sensitive Southern characters, like Blanche in Streetcar, although not as emotionally unstable. Her way of talking contrasts with her “pretty, childlike appearance”. She talks “quickly, shrilly” like “an outraged spinster” (Act I, p. 137). In this connection, Isabel could be compared with the Puritanical Alma in Smoke, in that both of them have a spinster’s manner, and Isabel “has a prim, severe manner that disguises her prettiness” (p. 137). Michael Hooper calls attention to the fact that in Smoke Williams explores the theme of repressed desires and the role that is sharply assigned to women in small Southern communities in the early twentieth century (Hooper, 2012, p. 177). Hooper also adds that Williams’s recurring theme of sexual repression is also portrayed in Adjustment through the two conflictual marriages.

Isabel is a very tender character who clings emotionally to her very “strict but devoted” father who objects to her becoming a nurse, but her wish to pursue nursing as a profession is more important to her than obeying her father. She admits to Ralph, her husband’s army buddy that her experience in life is very limited because she is the “too protected” only child, who grew up in a small town and was not allowed to date until her last year of high school. Moreover, her father’s strict rules govern her lifestyle: for example, if he smells the liquor on the breath of any boy with whom she goes out, he would not allow the boy to enter the home. Tischler states that Williams’s characterisation of Isabel is derived from his interest in the Electra complex (Tischler, 1965, p. 284). This is because Isabel’s morals and thoughts about men are centred on her father’s idealism, and she touches that warmth and gentility in Ralph’s character rather than her husband. In her quarrel with George, he mentions that “I didn’t expect to
marry a girl in love with her father” (Act II, p. 188). From a Bowenian view, this is because her father affects her level of differentiation of self, and Isabel’s love of her father stems from the unresolved emotional attachment between the generations.

Her conversation with Ralph reveals how she met George at Barnes Hospital in St Louis where she was a student nurse and George was a neurological patient. She admits to Ralph that she was very touched by George and has a “romantic commitment” to him. Isabel’s choice for her husband arises from feelings of sympathy towards him. When she mentions that there is a timidity between both of them, she implicitly points to the interchangeable shyness and hesitation in their relationship. This is also an implication of a similar level of differentiation of self. Although George later accuses her of temptation, they both extend the emotional gap between themselves, lack the ability to understand the other, and neither of them absorbs the anxiety of the other. Thus, “in a conflictual marriage each spouse is convinced that it is the other spouse who needs to do the changing” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p.187). Isabel believes that it is George who should start to change because she makes her “inhibitions” clear to him and she thinks that an understanding husband should treat her gently rather than spending the wedding night in a cold “tourist cabin, after a long – silent – ride!” (Act I, p. 161). George, in turn, is convinced that Isabel should respond to his anxious and disappointing intimacy because she knows his neurological profile.

Isabel is wounded emotionally on her wedding night. Her husband tells her that he has quit his job as a ground mechanic at Lambert’s Airfield in Saint Louis just one hour after their marriage. He accompanies her in a heaterless funeral-like Cadillac limousine in a snowstorm. He ignores her the whole way from Saint Louis to Dixon, drinking and listening to the radio as if she is not present while she cries and pretends to look out the window. Then they spend the night in “the Old Man River Motel, as dreary a place as [one] could find on this earth! The electric heater in [their] cabin lit up but gave no heat!” (Act I, p. 160). Furthermore, when they arrive at Ralph’s bungalow George leaves his wife without saying a word. Later, when he arrives at Ralph’s bungalow, he does not acknowledge Isabel’s existence and speaks with Ralph as if there is no-one else there, which increases Isabel’s anxiety. This could be seen as the first phase of marital conflict. They begin their life with an automatic physical and emotional distance that increases their anxiety whilst simultaneously gives them a chance to listen
to Ralph who gradually succeeds in absorbing their tension and explains to both of them that couples go through a usual period of adjustment to each other.

Ralph tells Isabel that he has known George since they both were in the Sisters of Mercy Orphans’ Home in Mobile, Alabama and they have “been through two wars together, took basic training together and officer’s training together” (Act I, p. 137). This sense of togetherness between Ralph and George represents the male bonds that were forged amongst many in the American armed forces during World War II and the Korean War. These bonds tip over into homoeroticism in the play, even though Ralph and George are not noticeably heterosexual. In Ralph’s opinion, “George is a high-strung boy” (p. 139), and he “always bluffs about his ferocious treatment of women” (p. 159). Ralph adds that when they were both in Korea, Tokyo, and Hong Kong, George “didn’t come on as strong with those dolls […] as he liked to pretend to” (p. 159). Hirsch points out that George “is a self-advertised ladies’ man who is really afraid of women, being much more comfortable in masculine company, where he can boast of his conquests” (Hirsch, 1979, p. 64).

Ralph finds a sensible excuse for George, and he tries to influence and convince Isabel emotionally that although George mistreats her, he is a “wonderful” person who supposedly values love and family life more than any other person because he grew up in an orphanage. When Isabel asks him if orphans value love more, Ralph responds by saying that orphans “get it [love] less easy. To get it, they have to give it” (p. 152). Ralph believes that an orphan does not find love easily in order to give it: this is to say that the deprived has nothing to offer, or a man can do no more than he can. Growing up in an orphanage raises the question about Ralph and George’s levels of differentiation of self. Bowen supposes that children have similar levels of differentiation of self to their parents. Thus, orphans function in a relationship system that consists of surrogate parents and families that either enhance or undermine their basic level of differentiation of self. Because Ralph and George grew up as brothers within the same family (the orphanage), and because Ralph’s level of differentiation of self is higher than that of George, it could be deduced that George is the projected child, who develops emotional and social symptoms.

The conflict that develops between the Haversticks centres around which of them is responsible for the conflict, and neither of them gives in to the other. This
conflict continues until the end of the play. In marital conflict both spouses are highly reactive to each other. Papero explains that “the thoughts of one or both are focused on the ‘obstinate, uncaring unreasonable’ qualities of the other” (Papero, 1999, p. 53). In the Haversticks’ case they both focus on each other’s negative traits: she puts him down, and he hates and tortures her. As the marital conflict has degrees of conflict from moderate to severe, in some cases the problem expands to triangulate a third member. This can be a child, a member of the extended family, or a friend. During the confrontation between Isabel and George, Ralph sits in the adjacent living room. As a third corner of the triangle, Ralph’s role is to mitigate the couple’s tension by encouraging Isabel to “get that cross look off [her] face and give [George] a loving expression” (Act Two, p. 171); “that boy [George] isn’t well. Make some allowances for him” (p. 185); and “you’re both nice kids, both of you, wonderful people” (p. 185). The tension between Isabel and George ebbs and flows in the second phase of their marital conflict and emotional distance.

Isabel and George discover that they are “opposite types”, and when Isabel asserts this to George he agrees. By reference to Bowen theory, spouses choose partners with the same level of differentiation. In the emotional system, being “opposite types” does not indicate different levels of differentiation of self. However, as mentioned previously, this can take the form of emotional complementarity. As such, low-energy people often marry high-energy people, calm people often marry active people, and so on. In the Haversticks’ situation, Isabel is romantic and “naturally gentle” and George is apparently violent, but in reality both are very vulnerable and highly sensitive. She is dismissed politely from her job because she fainted when the doctor made an incision in a patient, whilst he quits his job as a ground mechanic because his shakes get “worse than ever” and he cannot hold the necessary tools. George is scared of women and Isabel “is a sheltered daddy’s girl who is also terrified of sex” (Hirsch, 1979, p. 64). They both reflect each other’s emotional images.

George desperately confesses to Ralph that the shakes are symptoms of a deep affliction that affects his work and intimate relationship. This is an implication that George’s level of differentiation of self is very low; first, because he developed this tremor perhaps even before his marriage to Isabel, and second because people with high level of differentiation of self can develop symptoms but they recover quickly. In George’s case, his emotional reactivity to the tremor is exaggerated in his mind. He
tells Ralph that even his “voice is got the shakes too” (Act II, p. 212). Ralph plays the role of psychiatrist who understands George’s case. He analyses it as a fear of impotence that increases his anxiety and shakes, while Isabel’s anxiety is related to George’s “sexual violence” towards her (Act III, p. 211). There is a similar case in Smoke, when John tells Alma “I’m more afraid of your soul than you’re afraid of my body” (Scene Eight, p. 624).

In George and Isabel’s situation, there is not an underfunctioning-overfunctioning or dominant-subordinate spouse. In other words, it is not a dysfunction in one spouse but rather a two-way marital conflict. Neither one of them would like to give in to the other one, or confess his or her fault, or adjust in order to avoid conflict. Kerr and Bowen argue that such issues as money, children, and sex do not cause marital conflicts, but rather that such tensions are caused by the “emotional immaturity” that stimulates different reactions to a specific issue (Kerr and Bowen 1988, p. 188). They also add “[w]hile both [husband and wife] believe that for the marriage to improve it is the other that needs to change, in reality each contributes to the problem equally” (p. 189). As a matter of fact, Isabel and George’s emotional reactivity to their problem and their undifferentiation participates correspondingly to increase the conflict. Consequently, it could be claimed that they both have a similar level of differentiation of self, 25-50 on the scale (as explained in the previous chapter). Accordingly, the family’s level of differentiation is less than 50, and therefore the very thing that increases chronic anxiety also decreases the family’s flexibility to change.

The Haversticks’ marital conflict develops in three stages: firstly, George and Isabel were emotionally close before getting married. Then, secondly, they have a period of emotional distance in which each one tries to avoid a conflict, corresponding with Bowen’s model. Whilst each one of them believes that the other should start to change, they increase the emotional distance and the emotional gap between themselves. George has a moderate ability to differentiate between his thoughts and feelings, but he does not want to confess his fears. He understands that his tremor comes to him only when he feels anxious; he even feels that this tremor will disappear if he sets up a new business raising cattle in Texas. The third phase in their two-day marriage comes when Isabel hears Ralph confront George of the fact that the latter is sexually violent and he has never touched women as he always pretend to be experienced. Isabel “sits down on the bed again, raises her hands to either side of her face, slowly shaking
her head with a gradual comprehension” (Act III, p. 211). By the end of the play, they try to get on with each other and they seem to regain a sense of emotional closeness, and Isabel starts to call George “baby” and “sweetheart”:

George: … I wish I had that – little electric buzzer I – had at – Barnes [Hospital]

Isabel: You don’t need a buzzer. I’m not way down at the end of the corridor, baby. If you call me, I will hear you (Act III, p. 245).

Isabel makes it clear that she has the ability to absorb her husband’s anxiety and become the responsible spouse. At this point, the marital conflict cycle could repeat itself in their relationship because the “intensity of the anger and negative feeling in the conflict is as the positive feeling” (Bowen, 1978, p. 378). Throughout George and Isabel’s marriage, Williams’s dramatically portrays these three stages of marital conflict in order to give his characters several chances to function in a systematic way, thereby adding a practical example to Bowen’s model of marital conflict.

Williams’s Adjustments portrays two similar social marriages that have different nuclear family emotional mechanisms. It could be argued that the cavern appearance symbolises the couples’ emotional cases. Although everything looks very sweet on the surface, there are some emotional cracks or tremors that keep them in a state of emotional distance. Moreover, the play represents two familial emotional cases in which the couples try to adjust themselves to each other. In spite of the fact that the play is supposed to be a comedy, it is a challenging drama that evaluates real marital relationships within the family system. Hirsch points out that “Williams has always tried to write emotionally complex plays in which he placed his characters within a cosmic frame” (Hirsch, 1979, p. 4). Thereby, in addition to the fact that Williams’s Adjustments deals with two cases of shaky marriages, it clarifies and facilitates the understanding of two complex emotional systems. Isabel summarises that “cosmic frame” and tells George “[i]nside or outside, they’ve all got a nervous tremor of some kind, […] The world’s a big neurological ward and I am a student nurse in it” (Act III, p. 244). Francis Donahue comments that by dramatizing the neurological ward in the hospital, Williams suggests that “the world is a hospital in which all of us are attempting to work out an adjustment to the roles assigned” (Donahue, 1964, p. 133).
Isabel’s words suggest that not only do spouses pass through a period of adjustment, but also other people outside the emotional systems are assigned to their social roles.

**Family Projection Process**

As noted in the previous section of this chapter, the three mechanisms of the nuclear family emotional system focus on the relationship between spouses. However, this section concentrates on the parent-child relationship. Family projection process is considered a major concept in Bowen theory and the fourth mechanism in the nuclear family emotional system. This process is a substantial concept rather than a sub-mechanism due to its significance in the overall human issue. Bowen argues that family projection process “is so universal it is present to some degree in all families” (Bowen, 1978, p. 379). He also defines this process as “the pattern in which parents operate as a we-ness to project the undifferentiation to one or more children” (p. 379). Papero explains that this concept “describes the basic process by which parental problems can be projected onto a child or children” (Papero, 1990, p. 58). The family projection process could be compared with the children scapegoating process in emotionally disturbed families as described by Norman W. Bell and Ezra F. Vogel as the process in which children are selected as the most appropriate object to deal with the parents’ anxiety in the emotionally disturbed family (Bell and Vogel 1986, p. 415). Kerr and Bowen also clarify that:

> The word “projection” implies a psychological process. While psychological processes are important in the transmission of parental anxieties and immaturities, the deeper (phylogenetically older) emotional attachment between mother and child is the most basic component of the transmission process (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 201).

On this view, Kerr and Bowen emphasise that although this kind of projection has psychological implications, the concept involves the emotional role of a caretaker, which is the mother in most cases. However, it is simple enough to say that family projection process is the emotional transmission of father-mother anxiety to either include or weaken the function of the child. A differentiation should be made between psychological projection and emotional projection process. Psychological projection is one of the stress-reducing and defence mechanisms that include repression, isolation, denial, and displacement to name a few. Davis S. Holmes defines projection as “the
process by which persons attribute personality traits, characteristics, or motivations to other persons as a function of their own personality traits, characteristics, or motivations” (Holmes, 1978, p. 677). As a defence mechanism, people ascribe their undesirable and negative traits to other people, including dishonesty, pessimism, rudeness, or infidelity.

It is important to keep in mind (as mentioned above) that some families’ undifferentiation and anxiety can spread over one of the four mechanisms or a combination of all of them. For example, the Haversticks’ anxiety and undifferentiation in Adjustment spreads over two areas: marital conflict and emotional distance. In contrast, the Bateses’ anxiety absorbs the three mechanisms: dysfunction in a spouse, emotional distance, and impairment of a child (as will be discussed later in this section). The absorbed amount of undifferentiation and anxiety in one area reduces the intensity of the other one. The more the undifferentiation is absorbed in marital conflicts and dysfunction in a spouse, the less the absorbed undifferentiation impairs a child. Accordingly, conflictual marriage can result in a dysfunction in one or more children, and it is usually the child most emotionally fused with his or her mother. Bowen demonstrates that a special child, the first son or daughter, an only son or daughter, and a defective child are apt to be projected or triangulated in the family emotional process (Bowen, 1978, pp. 380-1). Likewise, Vogel and Bell argue that selecting the scapegoated child is not a random case, but such a dependent, physically dysfunctional, or only child can be easily attracted to the scapegoating process (Vogel and Bell, 1968, pp. 415-18). These are the most common options, but it could be pointed out that any child in times of stress and anxiety is prone to the family projection process; if the anxiety is so intense in a family then it involves all children to some extent.

The family projection process has its emotional roots when the mother’s anxiety transmits to the child during the latter’s infancy stages. Parents’ level of anxiety and the degree of isolation or cutoff from the family of origin or other important people in the relationships affect the intensity of the projection process. The mother misinterprets her child’s anxiety and she directs most of her “sympathetic, oversolicitous, overprotective energy” to mitigate her child’s anxiety instead of alleviating her own anxiety (Bowen, 1978, p. 205). The father’s role here could be either to help and support the mother’s attachment to the child or to withdraw from it (Papero, 1990, p. 58). The mother wants her child to be independent, but at the same time she impairs the child’s functioning and
does not allow him to break out of her control. The act of the father’s withdrawal often increases the mother’s anxiety that is then focused on the child.

Symptoms of the projection process develop through childhood and increase during adolescence when the child functions away from the parents. Michael Hooper argues that “the Freudian self-diagnosis that made his [Williams] distance from masculine role models significant meant also that his affinity with women was attributable to their company from a young age” (Hooper, 2012, p. 173). Hooper means to say that Williams’s female characters emotionally originate from his childhood attachment to his mother, Edwina, his sister, Rose, and the family’s black housemaid, Ozzie. From this point, it could be claimed that Williams’s anxiety is emotionally rooted in his parents, especially his mother, due to the emotional and physical absence of his father, Cornelius. Further, the marital conflict between his mismatched parents impaired and was projected upon both Williams and Rose.

The family projection process implies a social, physical, or emotional impairment of a child in the mother-father-child triangle. Furthermore, it is primarily a mother-child-centred process, because the mother is always considered the first caretaker of the child. A number of sociological and psychological studies of the time placed emphasis on the primary role of the mother such as Philip Wylie’s Generation of Vipers (1942), Edward A. Strecker’s Their Mothers’ Sons: The Psychiatrist Examines an American Problem (1946), and more recently Rebecca Jo Plant’s Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America (2010). In this regard, Strecker demonstrates that “[t]he future social behaviour of a child has its beginning and is patterned in the conflicting sensations and emotions that arise from the early relationship between the mother and the child” (Strecker, 1946, p. 24). Strecker emphasises that the child’s future behaviour is correlated with his or her early maternal relationship and finds that mother-child consistency is the strongest relationship in the world. However, following Wylie’s use of the critical term “momism”, in the years following the end of World War II many were worried that the mother-son bond was too intense and was not allowing young men to separate themselves fully from the maternal relationship.

Hall argues that the “most pervasive pattern of projection in families in the United States is close bonding between mother and child, with the father supporting the
mother’s overinvolvement” (Hall, 1981, p. 81). This point is valid to some degree because this pattern of mother-child emotional reactivity is not only noticed in the United States – especially in the immediate postwar period – but also in most families in different parts of the world. In order to provide two examples of this process at work, the next part of this chapter will examine two cases of projection in *Adjustment* and *Smoke*. In the earlier discussion of *Adjustment* the three patterns of the nuclear family emotional system are examined, and the final section will develop these ideas in relation to this play and *Smoke*.

**Family Projection Process in Period of Adjustment**

In *Adjustment* two cases of family projection process are evident. The first one is the projection of Dorothea in the McGillicuddys’ emotional process, and the second is the projection of Ralph Jr. in the Bateses’ emotional system. As has been discussed earlier, the amount of undifferentiation that is absorbed in the nuclear family appears through four main mechanisms, including family projection process. Although Williams does not provide information about the conjugal relationship between Mr and Mrs McGillicuddy, enough information can be inferred from Dorothea’s emotional impairment. Mr McGillicuddy is “an old millionaire with diabetes and gallstones and one kidney” (Act I, p. 144). He suggests that if Ralph marries his lonely daughter then he will inherit the McGillicuddys’ wealth. Consequently, Ralph describes him as “mean-minded, small-hearted, and CHEAP!” (Act III, p. 227). Mrs McGillicuddy seems to follow her husband in treating Ralph in an inferior manner, but she does not listen to her husband. As a millionaire and the owner of several companies – one of them being Regal Dairy Products where Ralph works – Mr McGillicuddy thinks that his son-in-law, Ralph, is offered a “a splendid chance in the world which [he] spit on by [his] disrespect”, and his superior attitudes towards his father-in-law (p. 224).

There is not enough background about Mr and Mrs McGillicuddy to examine the mechanism that guides their functioning in the nuclear family emotional system. But, according to Bowen theory, it is simple enough to say that the amount of the McGillicuddys’ undifferentiation could be absorbed either by marital conflict or a dysfunction in one spouse, with the anxiety most often projected onto Dorothea as the only child. Ralph confirms that his parents-in-law weaken Dorothea’s functioning in the family system:
Ralph: [...] You don’t love Dotty. She let you down by having psychological problems that you brought on her, that you an’ Mrs Mac gave her by pushing her socially past her endowments. [...] Dotty was never cut out to boost your social position in this city. Which you expected her to. You made her feel inferior all her life (Act III, p. 224).

In this argument Ralph outlines the negative emotional effect Dorothea’s parents have had on her and provides essential facets of Dorothea’s projection process. First, the McGillicuddys think that they are doing Ralph a favour by providing him with a job when he marries their only daughter. Correspondingly, and according to what Ralph argues, he does them a favour by marrying Dorothea who is not a nice-looking woman and is a half-year older than him. Second, Ralph believes that his parents-in-law do not care about or love their daughter because she has “psychological problems” that decrease their social position in Dixon. Third, and most importantly, Ralph believes that his parents-in-law cause Dorothea’s psychological problems. This is a valid point because the McGillicuddys’ social and emotional anxieties of having an unattractive daughter with psychological problems transmit to Dorothea. According to the family projection process, not only does the psychiatrist misunderstand Dorothea’s problem, but her parents push her to fulfil the role of a millionaire’s daughter. Instead of building up her self-confidence, they impair her functioning to the degree that she develops an inferiority complex.

In spite of the fact that Dorothea gets married, has a child, and despises her father’s attitude, she remains emotionally involved in her parents’ emotional system, which defines her dysfunction in her married life. Her anxiety is transferred to her three-year-old son who, in Ralph’s opinion, has turned into a sissy as a result of Dorothea’s overprotective behaviour:

Ralph: [...] and provided her with an – offspring. Maybe not much of an offspring, but an offspring, a male one, at least it started a male one. I can’t help it if she’s turnin’ him into a sissy (Act III, p. 225).

Dorothea’s excessive care of her son is a reminiscent of Philip Wylie’s “momism”. Dorothea’s mothering anxiety is directed towards the son, and Ralph is sensitive to his wife’s anxiety but he is incapable of helping. According to the family projection process, Ralph’s role is either to support Dorothea’s emotional attachment to their son
or to withdraw from it. It looks as if Ralph likely withdraws and he will interfere at a suitable time to help his son as he mentions to George:

*I* like the kid, I mean I – would suffer worse than he would if the neighbourhood gang called him “Sissy!” I’m tolerant. By nature. But if I git partial custody of the kid, even one month in summer, I will correct the sissy tendency in him (Act II, p. 178).

Dorothea has an emotional grasp on the child and Ralph waits until he has a chance to reinforce his son’s masculine attitude. In this connection, Papero clarifies that the “dysfunction of the parents as a unit leads to the inclusion of the child in the emotional process between them” (Papero, 1990, p. 58). In other words, Ralph and Dorothea’s anxiety and emotional dysfunction contributes in projecting upon and impairing their son. Ralph and Dorothea have different points of view of how to react to the emotional and actual needs of their child, and each one of them believes that he or she has the right idea. Consequently, their parental dysfunction as one unit impairs their son’s ability to differentiate his role in the family system. Accordingly, both Dorothea and Ralph are equally responsible for the sissy tendency in their child. These are only general ideas about the family projection process. However, more details will be provided in reference to *Smoke* because Williams characterises Alma and John from their childhood.

**Family Projection Process in Summer and Smoke**

In comparison with *Adjustment*, *Smoke* also deals with the theme of marriage and emotional complementarity as the basis for an idealised family life. Williams developed *Smoke* from “The Yellow Bird”, a short story published in 1947, which he then modified to *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale*, a similar three-act play written in 1951 and published in 1964. Despite the fact that Williams considers *Smoke* and *Nightingale* to be different from each other, the central events of both plays revolve around Alma Winemiller and John Buchanan. Family projection process is concealed behind the main events of the play that revolve around two qualitatively conflictual characters; one of them is typically serious and Southern whilst the other is irresponsible and precipitous. Studying Alma and John within a relationship system will provide an understanding of both characters’ intrapsychic and interpersonal functioning.
Like most of Williams’s plays, *Smoke* covers autobiographical elements of his life. The play is set in Glorious Hill, Mississippi in a year shortly before World War I. The play is set where Williams grew up, in the shadow of the rectory where he lived with his maternal grandparents, the Dakins. The Reverend Winemiller is a portrayal of Williams’s grandfather, the Reverend Dakin, and Alma represents Williams’s mother Edwina Dakin Williams, the minister’s daughter. Williams also mentions that “Alma of Summer and Smoke is my favorite – because I came out so late and so did Alma, and she had the greatest struggle” (Williams, 1973, cited in Devlin 1986, p. 228). Alma’s character is drawn from Williams’s journey of self-knowledge and transformation from puritanism to profligacy. Tischler perceives the play as a conflict between opposites, “Puritanism in battle with Lawrencian sex” (Tischler, 1965, p. 152). W. David Sievers finds *Smoke* to be “a fine and revealing portrait of the hysterical repression of sex into conversion symptoms in the South” (Sievers, 1955, p. 382). Sievers finds in Alma and Blanche the same devastating conflict between desires and a very strict super-ego, which is represented by strict cultural Southern values.

The interaction of the Winemillers’ nuclear family could be predicted from Alma’s impairment in the family system. The Reverend Winemiller, the Episcopal minister of Glorious Hill, does not interact with his wife Mrs Winemiller due to the fact that she is psychotic and suffered a breakdown while Alma was still in high school, when she was sixteen or seventeen-years-old. This is to say that Mr and Mrs Winemiller certainly had a specific nuclear family mechanism for sixteen years before the latter suffered her breakdown. From this point, I theorise that the undifferentiation of the Winemiller nuclear family is high, to the extent that it absorbs the four mechanisms. It could be emotional distance and marital conflict that lead to the most exaggerated form of dysfunctions, Mrs Winemiller’s mental breakdown, then obvious dysfunction in a spouse and impairment of a child.

Although it appears that Mrs Winemiller is the subordinate dysfunctional spouse and Mr Winemiller is the dominant overfunctioning spouse, Kerr and Bowen mention that appearance is misleading because the dominant spouse may adapt his or her behaviour and make decisions according to the needs of the subordinate one (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 172). In the Winemillers’ case, Mr Winemiller is the dominant one who adapts himself to the behaviour of his subordinate wife. In the first situation she keeps shouting that she wants ice cream, and Mr Winemiller responds *fiercely* “mother
we’re attracting attention”, then he *propels her forcibly away* (Scene One, p. 579). In another situation she picks up a white plumed hat from the shop, and the shopkeeper tells Alma that he pretends as if he does not notice in order to save Mr Winemiller the embarrassment. Mr Winemiller “*retires despairingly from the room*” when he hears that from Alma and complains “what an insufferable cross we have to bear” (Scene Two, p. 590).

Williams makes it clear that Mr Winemiller’s anxiety transmits to Alma. He feels humiliated and his dignity is hurt because Mrs Winemiller had previously stopped in front of the pharmacy and refused to move until he agreed to buy her an ice cream cone. Then she walked “home licking it every step of the way! – just – just to humble Mr Winemiller (Scene Nine, p. 625). Then, “*Mr Winemiller’s irritation shifts to Alma*” (p. 625). At this moment, Mr Winemiller’s anxiety is high because his wife’s behaviour is not acceptable according to his norms as a minister. Further, he immediately starts to ask Alma to get dressed because it hurts him to see her “setting around like this, day in, day out, like an invalid” (p. 626). Like her counterpart, Tom Wingfield, Alma assumes the parent’s role in her family:

> Alma: I have made the beds and washed the breakfast dishes and phoned the market […]. What more do you want?

> Mr Winemiller (*sharply*): I want you to either get dressed or stay in your room (Scene Nine, p. 626).

Alma has to play her mother’s role and to act in accordance with her father’s wishes. Alma behaves as a mother in her emotional system. Even this is reflected on her behaviour in the outside relationship system. For example, she sympathise with her youngest student Nellie Ewell whom later John decides to marry because she “feel[s] that one has a duty to perform toward children in such – circumstances” (Scene One, p. 584). The Winemiller family retains a sense of togetherness but does not allow Alma to maintain a healthy sense of individuality. This is to say that they maintain a sense of family integrity and harmony at the expense of Alma. Blackwell mentions that Alma does not have a specific role to play for herself. Rather, she has “multiple roles”: her mother’s sister and parent, and her father’s social head of the household (Blackwell, 1970, p. 10). Similarly, Hooper points out that Alma’s behaviour originates from her
strict religious context and “a mother who herself needs mothering” (Hooper, 2012, p. 179).

Because Alma is the only child of Mrs and Mr Winemiller, such a parent-child relationship in most cases is problematic because parents’ anxiety and undifferentiation can be mainly focused on the child. Kerr and Bowen mention that level of chronic anxiety and differentiation of self are the major variables that contribute to a social, physical, or emotional dysfunction in one or more children (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 193). On this point, they also add that the “person with the most direct influence on a child’s differentiation is the one who is most emotionally significant to the child” (p. 196) and that person is usually the mother. Moreover, “[i]f a mother dies, leaves the family, or becomes dysfunctional when a child is very young, then a father, a grandparent, or some other person will substitute for her and be the most direct influence on the child’s differentiation” (p. 196). These cases will be noticed latter in Sweet Bird of Youth in the situation of Heavenly whose aunt Nonnie becomes her caretaker, and Hanna with her grandfather in The Night of the Iguana. Mrs Winemiller is described as “a spoiled and selfish girl who evaded the responsibilities of the later life by slipping into a state of perverse childishness” (Scene One, p. 575). The point is that Mrs Winemiller has a detrimental role in Alma’s level of differentiation of self and impairment and her anxieties transfer to Alma. Further, family projection process work within the mother-father-child triangle.

Alma is also described as “[having] an adult quality as a child and now, in her middle twenties, there is something prematurely spinsterish about her” (p. 577). This is because she has grown up mostly in the company of her elders. Alma’s behaviour as a mature child with a spinsterish attitude in her twenties indicates that her basic level of differentiation is above 50 and she has well-established thoughts and feelings. From her childhood, when she was ten-years-old, she had a really deep-rooted level of differentiation of self and she speaks with John as a highly mature child. For example, she sympathises with John Buchanan, Alma’s next-door neighbour whom she loves, by leaving him a box of handkerchiefs on his desk, telling him “you don’t have a mother to take care of such things for you” (Prologue, p. 572). This indicates that Alma realises that a mother is the primary carer.
However, when she is characterised as “her true nature is still hidden even from herself” (p. 577), we question her true level of differentiation of self and her emotional maturity. Moreover, Alma’s personality as the “Preacher’s daughter” suggests that her father is emotionally significant for her, and he affects her attitude and level of differentiation. Kerr and Bowen point out in the family projection process if the “mother is present but functions as a ‘no-self’, [then] the direct influence of a father and others on the child also increases” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 196). This is a valid point in Alma’s case because, although Mrs Winemiller is available, she is emotionally dysfunctional. Her role in affecting Alma’s functional level of differentiation is not completely eliminated, but rather this serves to increase the anxiety of the family.

Alma’s relationship with her father shows a great understanding to his position in society. All what Mr Winemiller cares about is his reputation. For example, he does not want Alma to take Nellie as pupil because she is the daughter of the ostracized merry widow who makes the acquaintance of travelling salesmen. Further, when John calls Alma, Mr Winemiller thinks that Alma should be out of her mind to accept this call because of John’s reputation in Glorious Hill. In her relationship with John, Alma seems to contradict herself and even cannot differentiate between what she thinks and feels of John: she tells Nellie that all John cares about is in indulging his senses. Later, trying to convince her father that John “has been grossly misjudged and misrepresented by old busybodies who’re envious of his youth and brilliance and charm” (Scene Five, p. 608).

Bowen states that the family projection process often “alleviates the anxiety of undifferentiation in the present generation at the expense of the next generation” (Bowen, 1978, p. 205). Alma mentions that she sacrifices her youth to preserve the family’s togetherness. Thus, Alma mitigates her father’s anxiety at the expense of her own life. During the conversation between Alma and Nellie about John, Mrs Winemiller interrupts:

Mrs Winemiller (suddenly): Show Nellie how you spy on him!

Alma (frantically): Mother! […] You act like a child, but you have the devil in you. […] I’m tired of your malice and your self-indulgence. People wonder why I am tied down here! They pity me – think of me as
an old maid already! In spite of I’m young. Still young! It’s you – it’s you, you’ve taken my youth away from me! (Scene Two, pp. 595-6).

Alma’s anger at her mother designates several points. First, Mrs Winemiller pretends to be and enjoys being a child and, at the same time, she is described as being malicious in her selfish attitude towards her daughter. Second, Alma rebukes her mother in a mirror image of the daughter-mother roles. Third, in spite of the fact that family projection process absorbs much of the parents’ anxiety, the Winemillers’ projection process reduces the chances of family disintegration but at the expense of the triangulated child, Alma. She realises that her youth has been sacrificed as a result of her mother’s breakdown, and as she tells John “I am not a recluse by any manner of means. Being a minister’s daughter I have to be more selective than most girls about the – society I keep” (Scene One, p. 587). Fourth, and most of all, the amount of anxiety in the Winemillers’ nuclear family is absorbed by Alma as a result of the emotional and social dysfunction of Mrs Winemiller and the dynamics of the family projection process. Fifth, Mrs Winemiller seems to be more Alma’s cross to bear than that of Mr Winemiller, who in one way or another also projects his problem on Alma. As such, she has two crosses to bear: an unstable mentally ill mother and a strict socially busy father.

It could be argued that Alma’s functional level of differentiation drops to an average of 25-50. Individuals in this range of scale are guided by religion, books, physicians (she believes that to be a physician is more religious than being a preacher), cultural values, and creating a good impression as a minister’s daughter (like Amanda Wingfield in Menagerie). Alma is an apt student of “facial expression, gestures, tone of voice” and she is “for the most part, in lifelong pursuit of the ideal close relationship” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 103). She is accused of having put-on accent and people of the town imitate her way of singing and her facial gestures at a wedding. Nevertheless, although she has well-established thoughts and principles in life, Alma still has a moderate ability to differentiate between her thoughts to save her family social situation and father’s reputation on the one hand, and her hidden feelings towards John on the other hand. Further, and like those people under 50 on Bowen’s scale, she still follows a socio-religious life course.

Sievers understands Alma’s social prudishness, emotional nervous laugh, and the physical symptoms – rapid palpitations, frozen fingers, and swallowing air – as self-
defence mechanisms against her repressed sexuality (Sievers, 1955, p. 381). Tischler understands Alma’s case as a hypochondria that makes her subject to hysterical attacks (Tischler, 1965, p. 153). John diagnoses her case as having only a “functional disturbance” because she has “a lot of feeling in [her] heart, and that’s a rare thing. It makes [her] too easily hurt” (Scene Four, pp. 604-5). John’s analysis to Alma indicates that she is mainly guided by her feelings in the emotional system. Alma also classifies herself as “one of those weak and divided people” and John as one of those “solid strong ones” (Scene Eleven, p. 636). She confesses the division and disintegration between her thoughts and feelings. From Bowenian perspective: Mr and Mrs Winemiller’s level of differentiation of self and anxiety impair Alma’s level of differentiation of self and project on her emotionally, socially, and physically. In the final scene, Alma appears to be flirting with a young travelling salesman, thus indicating her emotional emptiness. She tells Nellie that “as for retiring from the world … it’s more a case of the world retiring from me” (Scene Ten, p. 630). Alma cuts herself off not only from her family but also withdraws from her ideal world. Socially, she is no longer interested in her father’s reputation and offers the travelling salesman to go with her to Moon Lake Casino. She is physically exhausted, suffering from insomnia and thus heavily dependent on sleeping tablets. Her transition represents the deterioration of her functional level of differentiation of self, and by the end of the play she follows the same self-destructive relationship with strangers as Blanche. By catching a young salesman, Alma is attempting to reclaim her youth.

John Buchanan could be seen as another case of the projection process and also as a scapegoat within his family and society. His mother died when he was a young child and his father is a respectable physician in the town. Williams characterises John as “a Promethean figure, brilliantly and restlessly alive in a stagnant society” (Scene One, p. 575). John’s character represents masculinity and physical attraction: “The excess of his power has not yet found a channel. If it remains without one, it will burn him up” (p. 575). John’s intrapsychic case takes the form of destructive energy that is expressed in drinking, gambling, and promiscuity. As a child, John is forced to witness the death of his mother, who “caught hold of [his] hand”, but he “screamed and hit her” because he could not bear to see her terrible face. So, they called him a “devil”, and he was left neglected and motherless. As a ten-year-old boy talking to Alma near the fountain, he discloses the following:
He [Dr Buchanan] wants to send me to college to study to be a doctor but I wouldn’t be a doctor for the world. And have to go in a room and watch people dying. […] I’d rather be a devil, like they called me and go to South America on a boat! (Prologue, p. 574)

John is pressured by his father to be a doctor, despite the fact that John views the medical profession as intricately connected with death. Even when he comes back to the town as a young man he tells Alma that he thinks of giving up his medical career because a “doctor’s life is walled in by sickness and misery and death” (Scene Five, p. 610). This is what Williams means when he describes John as “unmarked by the dissipations in which he relieves his demoniac unrest” (p. 575). This overindulgence is the escape from that “demoniac unrest” that accompanies him from childhood. Dr Buchanan is John’s custodian, and appears to be as strict as Reverend Winemiller. Dr Buchanan expresses his discontent with John’s behaviour by saying “I brought over five hundred children into this world before I had one of my own. And by God it looks like I’ve given myself the rottenest one of the lot” (Scene One, p. 576). He also warns John that “there isn’t any room in the medical profession for wasters, drunkards and wasters” (p. 576). Dr Buchanan’s anxieties and his thoughts as a doctor with a mission to succeed contradict with John’s wishes to be free and his desire to travel to South America.

Alma thinks that John is as “awfully confused” as she is, “but in a different way” (Scene Six, p. 611). After his father is shot by Gonzales, she tells John that “sometimes it takes a tragedy like this to make a weak person strong” (Scene Eight, p. 623). John’s weakness resides in his self-indulgence. Having lost money by gambling, his only way to pay his debt is to give himself to Rosa Gonzales, the daughter of the owner of Moon Lake Casino. The point is that John’s social, emotional, and physical dysfunctions could be considered as symptoms of his impairment in the family emotional system. However, it could be hypothesised that even though John’s level of differentiation of self is moderate, at 50-60 it is nevertheless higher than that of Alma. People’s intellectual system in this range “is sufficiently developed to make a few decisions of its own” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 106). Alma asserts that John is intellectually capable of making decisions, stating that “most of us have no choice but to lead useless lives! But you have a gift of scientific research! You have a chance to serve humanity” (Scene One, p. 587). Further, in his relationship with Alma, he is aware of
the difference between his thoughts and feelings towards her. He keeps calling her Miss Alma and tells her that he *likes* her, thus indicating emotional distance between them.

People with a low or high level of differentiation of self can both develop symptoms, but those with high levels usually find relief fairly quickly from social, emotional, or physical symptoms. Indicating that he is aware of his emotional self-disintegration, John asks Rosa “did anyone ever slide downhill as fast as I have this summer?” (Scene Seven, p. 618). By the end of the play, John completes his father’s work, and his choice to marry Nellie, who represents a compromise between the spiritual Alma and the sensual Rosa Gonzales, indicates that he reaches a point of self-reconciliation. Because Alma and John have differing levels of differentiation of self, according to Bowen theory their emotional processes do not mirror each other. Sievers argues that Alma becomes identified as John’s mother-image because he finds in her the maternal tenderness and pureness for which he longs (Sievers, 1955, p. 382). In Sievers’ opinion this feeling is “the projection of yearning for maternal affection which has been frustrated in him” (p. 382). Alma could be compared with her student Nellie Ewell. Although she is the only child of Mrs Ewell (following fleeting relationships), Nellie differentiates herself from her mother by learning to be independent at Sophie Newcombe School, where girls are prepared to be young ladies in society.

Donald Spoto mentions that it is “Williams’s most poignant assertion that balanced unions between the right mates are very rare indeed”, adding that they “should complement one another, but complementarity is rare” (Spoto, 1997, p. 151). Spoto suggests that Alma and John are suitable marriage partners, but despite their mutual attraction to each other, particularly Alma’s admiration of John’s “singleness” and “strength” and his appreciation of and inspiration from her, they have different levels of differentiation of self. As mentioned earlier, emotional complementarity leads to a harmonious relationship, but in Alma and John’s case this is only acceptance of each other’s way of thinking, which for Alma comes too late. She is either completely spiritual or completely physical, whereas John is not as polarised. Rather, his case could be seen as a self-balance between thoughts and feelings. At the beginning John prioritises individuality over unity to the point of extreme self-indulgence and irresponsibility, which leads to his father’s murder by Gonzales. Alma, in contrast, devotes her life to the unity of her family and ignores her own individuality. Ultimately, John seems to balance between individuality and togetherness and Alma’s functional
level in the family seems to deteriorate because she again prioritises individuality over togetherness.

C. W. E. Bigsby comments that “Passion is balanced by spirit, spirit by passion. The emotional truth and the dramatic focus, however, reside in the neurotic, vulnerable outcast or the brutally direct and vital Promethean figure, and not in a kind of moral harmony” (Bigsby, 1984, p. 69). In comparing Alma with John and Blanche with Stanley, Williams suggests that emotional truth is not to be found in “moral harmony” but in the encounter between the weak, anxious castaway and the rebellious and vibrant Promethean character. It is noticeable that in these encounters, Stanley and John survive while Blanche and Alma disintegrate. From a Bowenian standpoint, although Alma stands for Southern morals including chastity, purity, prudishness, and devotion, and John for self-involvement, depravity, hedonism, defiance, and boldness, the emotional truth resides in the difference between high or low levels of differentiation of self and being emotionally mature or immature, emotionally fit or unfit, and functional or dysfunctional in the family emotional system. Although the highly differentiated individuals seem unemotional and impassive in some cases, as a matter of fact they possess firm emotional bonds in their family system. The emotional truth is not a matter of physicality over spirituality, or vice versa, but is rather about the ability to differentiate the self in the relationship system and at the same time to play the assigned role in the family emotional system. While John starts to integrate emotionally in a harmonious relationship, Alma starts to disintegrate within her family emotional system.

To summarise this chapter, Adjustment and Smoke explore the structures and tensions of family life in the early and middle twentieth century. Adjustment is an emotional marital drama that reflects and helps to develop Bowen’s theories of the nuclear family emotional system and its mechanisms. These mechanisms also explain the ways in which the Bateses and the Haversticks deal unconsciously with their emotional anxieties and undifferentiation that save their families from disintegration. Emotional distance, therefore, enables partners to think of each other positively. Marital conflict, in its three aforementioned stages, qualifies the partners emotionally to appreciate being close or distanced from each other. What seems like dysfunction within a spousal pattern can also play an affirmative role by maintaining family integrity by reducing anxiety and balancing functioning between spouses. The key point
is that although these mechanisms on the surface seem dysfunctional, conflicted, or impaired, they can also have a reasonable effect on the emotional integrity of the family.

In *Smoke* John resembles Alma in that both of them are forced to adhere to the cultural expectations of Southern society. Furthermore, both are dominated by patriarchal principles, both are the only child in their families, and thus both are consequently the object of the family projection process. Still, because the Winemillers’ level of anxiety and undifferentiation is high in the emotional system, Alma’s level of differentiation makes her more vulnerable within the family projection process and, thus, her dysfunction is more severe than John’s is. The overall point is that the emotional dynamic of Williams’s two plays can be seen to pivot on Bowen’s two concepts of the nuclear family emotional system and family projection process. In terms of my thesis argument that Bowen theory helps to explain the family structures in Williams’s plays, although *Period of Adjustment* and *Summer and Smoke* help to develop Bowen’s concepts of the nuclear family emotional systems and projection process, these two plays also challenge Bowen’s ideas in some ways, such as the similarity of spouses’ levels of differentiation of self – a topic that will be examined more specifically in the next chapter.
Chapter 3

Sibling Position and Multigenerational Transmission Process in 

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Sweet Bird of Youth*

*The human is a narcissistic creature who lives in the present and who is more interested in his own square inch of real estate, and more devoted to fighting for his rights, than in the multigenerational meaning of life itself.*

*(Bowen, cited in Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 385)*

In order to deepen my exploration of the relationship between Bowen theory and Williams’s plays, in this chapter Bowen’s fifth and sixth concepts, sibling position and multigenerational transmission process, will be examined and applied to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959). These two concepts expand the emotional system from the circle of the nuclear family to a larger circle of grandparents and extended family. Apart from the common themes of the two plays such as decay, mendacity, and patriarchal authoritarianism, both plays signify two noticeable generations representing the transmission of the Southern heritage intergenerationally on both emotional and cultural levels. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (hereafter in this chapter *Cat*) is distinct within Williams’s body of work as it is structured to include grandparents, parents, children, in-laws, friends, uncles, aunts, and cousins. The result of these multiple familial connections is both to make the audience more emotionally attached to the characters and to chart the dynasty and psychological legacy of a large Southern family. This is particularly the case because *Cat* has three generations of characters and Bowen’s concept of multigenerational transmission process demands at least three generations. This focus therefore enables me to investigate both Bowen’s abstract ideas about the family and Williams’s more specific representation of the theme of extended American family disintegration in the mid-twentieth century. Family dynamics in *Cat*, consisting of emotional functioning of three generations, make it the most useful play to explore Bowen’s concepts of sibling position and multigenerational transmission process, as well as to explore the theme of cultural inheritance which is underrepresented in Bowen theory.
Sweet Bird of Youth (hereafter in this chapter Sweet Bird) also includes two generations and three sibling position profiles: the only male child, the youngest sister of male siblings, and the oldest brother of female siblings. As two of these profiles are affected by the projection process it enables me to read the play from a Bowenian perspective. In the multigenerational transmission process Bowen theory supposes that children have a similar level of differentiation of self to their parents. Therefore, and accordingly, the levels of differentiation of self in two generations (Boss Finley and his children Tom Junior and Heavenly) will be examined in Sweet Bird. Moreover, the effect of sibling position and the multigenerational process and their effect on family integrity will also be discussed.

In both plays Williams characterises key individuals as animals – Maggie as a cat and Chance as a bird – to symbolise the theme of entrapment in the emotional system. Maggie is trapped on the Pollitts’ roof as she tries to recover her relationship with her husband and to win the family inheritance, whereas Chance escapes from his town only to become entangled on the wrong side of the tracks. The main feature that makes Williams’s Cat and Sweet Bird driving forces behind explaining Bowen’s study of the emotional system is that this system can be applied to all living things including lower forms of life (as mentioned in the introduction of the thesis). Further, Cat with Sweet Bird both embody other examples of the disintegration of the structure of the typical white Southern family in the 1950s.

For the purpose of this chapter I will consider the original Act Three of Cat from 1955, not the modified Broadway version that director Elia Kazan suggested, because the original version is more emotionally convincing in terms of the Pollitts’ multigenerational process. In order to explain these two aspects of Bowen’s theory, the first part of this chapter will discuss the concept of sibling position, illustrate some examples within Williams’s plays, and highlight the prominence of Walter Toman’s sibling profiles within the broader framework of Bowen theory.

Sibling Position

In developing his concept of sibling position, Bowen relied on the Austrian psychologist Walter Toman’s modifications and knowledge of sibling profiles in his book Family Constellation: Theory and Practice of a Psychological Game, published in 1961. Toman established his theory after a decade of psychological work with and evaluation
of 400 individuals and their families. He introduces eleven types of sibling position profiles of normal families, the characteristics of each type, the expectation of their behavioural patterns, their philosophical and religious orientations, and their relations to their parents. These profiles include twins, the only child, and the full range of older, intermediary, and younger sibling positions. Toman focuses upon rank, age, and the sex of siblings in the family in classifying these functional profiles.

Toman’s overall assumption is that children who grow up in the same sibling position have similar functional characteristics, although undoubtedly with slight differences. Generally speaking, from a structuralist perspective the oldest children have the tendency to assume the role of domination, guidance, and responsibility in the family, while youngest children are likely to be more dependant and submissive, and in-between children often have an amalgamation of the youngest and oldest siblings’ functional characteristics. However, from daily life experiences and to some extent, in different cultures I would argue that despite this system of profiles, there are variances between families and cultural practices, depending on family tensions, the nature of the generation gap, and other social, emotional, and religious variables. Furthermore, it is not a matter of fact that the youngest are the most submissive or subordinate, and that the eldest are the most responsible or overfunctioning. These matters vary due to the levels of differentiation of self and anxiety in the family. For example, Laura Wingfield in Menagerie is the oldest sister of a brother and according to Toman’s profile she is supposed to assume responsibility and a guidance role. However, her level of differentiation, being the most protected child in the family due to her disability, alters some of the assumed sibling roles within the household.

Toman’s sibling profiles are accurately compatible with what Bowen predicts about the role of sibling position in the emotional system, except that they exclude children within the triangle of family projection process. Toman’s sibling profiles facilitate making predictions about the future, restructuring former generations’ emotional processes, and explaining present nuclear and multigenerational family emotional processes (Bowen, 1978, p. 206), as well as predicting points of family weakness and strength (p. 308). In the emotional system, sibling position distribution has a substantial influence on a sibling’s differentiation of self, liability to projection, generational transmission, and predicting interactions of the family (Hall, 1981, pp. 111-12). In spite of the fact that Bowen does not elaborate on this concept, he finds
Toman’s profiles, together with differentiation of self and projection process, helpful for understanding the dynamics of the nuclear and multigenerational family. As will be investigated in this chapter, Toman’s profiles along with Bowen’s concept of sibling position enable us to enhance our knowledge of the family, and predict the inter-dynamics of Williams’s nuclear and extended family, as well as a predictable dynamic for choosing a partner. To investigate sibling position profiles, Chance Wayne in *Sweet Bird* will be discussed as an example of the only male child, whilst Gooper and Brick Pollitt’s levels of differentiation of self and sibling profiles as oldest and youngest siblings will be also explored carefully in the next section of this chapter.

**Sibling Position in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof***

*Cat*, along with *Streetcar* and *Menagerie*, is often hailed as being one of the most effective dramas in American theatre, winning two awards: the Pulitzer Prize and the Drama Critics’ Circle Award. *Cat* is set in the bed-sitting-room of the Pollitts’ estate in the Mississippi Delta. As in most of Williams’s plays, some of *Cat’s* characters are basically constructed from the short story “Three Players of a Summer Game” published in 1952, including the alcoholic plantation owner Brick Pollitt and his wife Margaret (in the short story), who dedicates her life to the plantation and her husband, who in turn loves his friend’s widow. Both the play and the short story indicate two main points: Brick’s alcoholism and his problematic unhappy marriage. John S. Bak finds that Williams means to “articulate the uncertainty of Brick’s Cold War masculinity, the vagueness with which he, given the various contradictory rules and mores of his society, does or does not understand the limits of his male desire” (Bak 2004, p. 227). As Thomas Adler observes, Williams in *Cat* “gives voice to one of the central literary themes of the postwar period: the difficulty, and yet the inescapable need for, communication between individuals” (Adler 1994, p. 154). The communication between the family members is lost as a result of their misunderstanding and mistrust of each other. David Savran mentions that *Cat* “focuses on the death throes of an old regime and dramatizes the conflict between two generations and two social classes for the ownership of a rich estate” (Savran, 1992, p. 100). For David A. Davis, *Cat* depicts the conflict between wives and husbands, between parents and children, and between siblings (Davis 2002). Apart from several readings and criticisms of the play that focus commonly on homosexuality, heterosexuality, mendacity, and inheritance conflicts, Gerald M. Berkowitz adds that *Cat’s* “audience will find the play in the emotional
journeys of Maggie and Brick rather than in the question of inheritance” (Berkowitz, 1992, p. 93). Yet, it could be added that Cat not only explores the emotional system of Brick and Maggie, but also the Pollitts’ multigenerational emotional process.

Williams’s Cat reveals some aspects of the emotional system in which members of the family do not function or behave separately, but within the circle and context of the system that shapes their feelings, thoughts, values, and functions. In his theatrical notes, Williams mentions that “The bird that I hope to catch in the net of this play [Cat] is not the solution of one man’s psychological problem” (Act One, p. 75). Williams clarifies that the purpose of this play is not to highlight Brick’s psychological state only, but rather “the true quality of experience in a group of people” (Act II, p. 75), and the individual’s experience among that group. George W. Crandell discerns that Williams’s drama portrays “a group of people in conflict, the result of a psychological crisis experienced by one of the group members” (Crandell, 1999, p. 429), illustrating his point with examples such as Alma in Smoke, Blanche in Streetcar, Laura in Menagerie and Brick in Cat. Chance in Sweet Bird of Youth, Catherine in Suddenly Last Summer, and Shannon in The Night of the Iguana can all be added to the list. Martin Halliwell also emphasises that Williams interrogates his characters’ relationships under severe anxiety (Halliwell, 2007, p. 92). Halliwell’s opinion provides evidence that Williams’s drama is introduced by a relationship system under what Williams names “the thundercloud of a common crisis” (p. 75). At the same time it supports the idea that Williams’s theatre is compatible with Bowen theory in which an individual’s behaviour is examined in terms of roles within the family emotional system. In this regard, there is a parallel between Bowen’s theories and Williams’s style in developing the main themes in Cat; Williams in his poetic expressions suggests a perceptive understanding of human psychology when he mentions the “interplay of live human beings” (p. 75).

It seems to the reader as if Williams speaks with the voice of a psychiatrist, investigating the emotional back story and predictable solutions of Brick’s conditions within the inter-dynamics of the Pollitt family. Williams confirms that “some mystery should be left in the revelation of character in the play” (p. 75), particularly because Brick’s homosexuality remains the implicit mystery of the play and leaves open the possibility that critics can analyse his character in different ways. As mentioned previously, the major trend in American psychiatry of the 1950s shifted from individuality to family systems therapy by investigating the interpersonal dynamics
among the family members. *Cat* presupposes a different reading of the play from an emotional system’s perspective. Williams does not merely write about characters that move and act on the theatrical stage, but rather he situates profound emotional cases within daily life experiences, providing evidence that his drama could be considered as a real familial psychodrama inspiring the study of Bowen theory in its natural context. Moreover, it could be claimed that the “bird that [Williams] hope[s] to catch in the net of [Cat]” is also Chance’s emotional entrapment in the Finley family’s emotional and social system in *Sweet Bird*.

In this part of this chapter, two characters in the play will be examined according to Toman’s sibling position profiles: Brick Pollitt as the youngest brother of a male sibling and Gooper Pollitt as the oldest brother of a male sibling. Brick is a former football hero turned sports announcer. Brick’s sibling profile as the youngest brother of a male sibling is an inclusive example of how family projection process and level of differentiation of self affect his personality and motivations. According to Toman the youngest brother of a male sibling is often capricious but determined. Although he ostensibly seeks independence, he cannot stand life without interaction with other people. He believes that anyone “can reach for a pie in the sky” if he has not “trepidation about it” (p. 37). Getting what he hopes for does not surprise him, but achieving it is more important. The oldest sister of brother(s) would possibly be convenient as a wife because she is acquainted with guiding younger males. Moreover, the youngest brother of male siblings can easily accept her authority and, at the same time, be a kind gentleman with her (Toman, 1961, pp. 34-43). Thus, Brick’s wife, Margaret (Maggie), could be an oldest sister of a male sibling.

Brick is twenty-seven years old, he “is still slim and firm as a boy.” We are told that “his liquor hasn’t started tearing him down outside” (Act I, pp. 18-19), but is as fragile and crippled emotionally and physically as Laura Wingfield in *Menagerie*. The night before the beginning of the play he breaks his ankle by jumping the hurdles in an effort to remember his previous athletic heroism. Brick is also accused by his family of having a homosexual relationship with his deceased friend, Skipper, who committed suicide following a telephone conversation between the two men in which Skipper confesses his love for Brick. This causes Brick to withdraw emotionally and physically from his wife Maggie, from his family, and from society at large by drinking and quitting his work. John M. Clum finds that “Brick’s homophobia is the core of his
sexual and emotional malaise” and he is terrified of being called “queer” because he occupies what was once the bedroom of a homosexual couple, the original owners of the plantation, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello (Clum, 1994, p. 156). Brick is the product of the same environment as Blanche: both symbolise the disintegration and decline of the plantation, both turn to alcohol, and both have emotional disturbance linked to male homosexuality (Robert Heilman, cited in Stephen Stanton, 1977, p. 23).

Brick is indifferent to what happens around him regarding the family inheritance and Big Daddy’s cancer. In comparison with most of the events of the play that circle around him, Brick is very calm and even his reactions occur in slow motion: for example, Marian Price points out that Brick is the “silent, motionless centre of a whole family’s storm and stress, coming to life only for a moment to lash out at Maggie and Big Daddy when they denigrate Skipper” (Price, 1995, p. 326). He listens to the family more than he speaks, except when stressed about his relationship with Skipper. While Brick seems uninterested in Maggie’s talk about Mae and Gooper’s behaviour, he aggressively silences Maggie by throwing his crutch towards her when she talks about Skipper. Maggie labels him as having “the charm of the defeated”, the aspect that makes the others accuse him loudly of homosexuality.

In Toman’s opinion, the youngest brother of a male sibling is a kind gentleman with women “even where he plays the tough one or cynic” (Toman, 1961, p. 37). In this respect, and in addition to the fact that Brick’s behaviour could be considered as a kind of Southern gentility, in Act Three “Brick appears in gallery doors with Margaret behind him” (p. 88), then he “smiles and bows slightly, making a burlesque gesture of gallantry for Maggie to pass before him into the room” (p. 89). However, all the youngest brother of a male sibling wants “is to be understood himself” by women rather than understand them (Toman, 1961, p. 37). Correspondingly, the youngest brother of male siblings accepts the authority of male and motherly females. Surprisingly, according to Toman, in male friendship the youngest brother of a male sibling “will sometimes be willing to sacrifice a girl in order to keep a boy […] He will plead for his male friends and make his girl or wife like them and their friendship” (Toman, 1961, p. 40). From this perspective, Skipper’s friendship is more important to Brick than his relationship with Maggie; Brick denies he is in love with Maggie, whereas his “friendship with Skipper was that one great true thing” (Act I, p. 42).
Toman mentions that the youngest brother of a male sibling does not think of death; nonetheless, if he loses one of his parents, family members, or a dear person, he passes through a case of “turmoil and confusion” and “deep mourning” (Toman, 1961, p. 43). This also explains Brick’s alcoholism following the death of Skipper, and as Big Mama says, Brick “is just broken up over Skipper’s death” (Act III, p. 88). As the youngest child of the Pollitt family, Brick is more prone to family projection process than his older brother, Gooper. Gooper’s feeling towards Brick is obvious because the former wants to control the plantation due both to his older brother’s sibling position and his belief that Brick is irresponsible when it comes to dealing with financial matters. However, for Brick it is not a matter of irresponsibility but rather a lack of interest; because to be liked, humanitarian, gentle, and noble are all more important for him than material possessions.

It could be argued that Brick’s basic level of differentiation is less than 50 on Bowen’s scale, and he is projected by his family to the extent that they all impair his functional level of differentiation, making it seem to be less than 25 at times. It is important here to recall what is mentioned in Chapter 1: that 25 is the low end of the differentiation of self scale and people at that end lack the capability to differentiate between thoughts and feelings. In contrast, people above 50 have the ability to distinguish between their feelings and thoughts and they are mainly guided by the latter. The family’s expectations of Brick contribute to the weakening of his level of differentiation of self: Big Daddy keeps repeating his own history of making the plantation; Big Mama makes it clear that Brick is her and Big Daddy’s favourite and pampered son who is supposed to be like Big Daddy; and Maggie is ‘fond’ of Big Daddy whom she looks at as the model of ‘a Mississippi red neck’, and wishes her husband to resemble Big Daddy in order to win the plantation. Brick “has the additional charm of that cool air of detachment” possessed by “people who have given up the struggle” (Act One, pp. 18-19). Although he detaches himself by drinking, Brick is not able to free himself either emotionally or physically as a result of his level of differentiation of self and family projection process.

Accordingly, Brick’s level of differentiation of self can be interpreted as in the 0-25 range because he has a high level of chronic anxiety in some respects, and lacks the ability to differentiate between his feelings and thoughts towards his wife and Skipper. Douglas Arrell persuasively sees Brick as “someone who cannot face the truth,
about himself, his relationship with Skipper, and his responsibility for Skipper’s death. His thinking is strongly influenced by social pressures” (Arrell, 2008, p. 62). As such, he is totally responsive to what Big Daddy, Maggie, Mae, and Gooper suggest about his relationship with Skipper. Susan Koprince finds that Skipper’s name explains Brick’s fragile emotional state, and Philip Kolin comments that Skipper also epitomises Brick’s physical state in the play, crippled and skipping due to the use of his crutch (Koprince cited in Kolin 2002, p. 215). It could also be suggested that Skipper is Brick’s fragile self-image, with the latter reluctant to reveal the truth of their relationship.

Foster Hirsch demonstrates that Brick “is a case of arrested development since he still wants to think he’s a football hero” (Hirsch 1979, p. 48). Similarly, Mark Royden Winchell points out that Brick and Skipper, from the perspective of Gooper and Mae, are examples of “arrested development” in that they are unable to undertake mature responsibilities (Winchell, 2006, p. 177). This is especially true when Mae highlights Brick’s irresponsibility, saying that he “never carried a thing in his life but a football or a highball” and “kept living in his past glory at college” (Act III, p. 96). Likewise, Arrell contends that Freudians saw “immaturity” and “arrested development” as synonymous with homosexuality in the 1950s, and the Pollitt family, in their concentration on Brick, is a conventional familial atmosphere to create a homosexual member (Arrell, 2008, p. 67). Arrell justifies this claim because Brick is emotionally troubled and Big Mama flirts with him, saying “Give Big Mama a kiss, you bad boy”. Moreover, Arrell adds that alcoholism, voluntary joblessness, and the inability to sustain a wife were indicators of homosexuality for many psychiatrists in the 1950s (Arrell, 2008, p. 67). Barbara Ehrenreich also provides evidence that during this decade psychologists developed a schema for male pathology, indicating that “immaturity shaded into infantilism” (Ehrenreich, 1983, p. 20). Ehrenreich clarifies that infantilism is “a manifestation of unnatural fixation on the mother, and the entire complex of symptomatology reached its clinical climax in the diagnosis of homosexuality” (p. 20).

From a Bowenian reading, the word “immaturity” is equivalent to “undifferentiation” or the inability to differentiate between thoughts and feelings. Monica McGoldrick and Betty Carter persuasively argue that Bowen equates “maturity” with “differentiation” because differentiation is commonly misused and misquoted as if it meant autonomy, separateness, or disconnectedness” (McGoldrick and Carter, 2001, p. 285). On this reading, Brick’s irresponsibility and immaturity can be understood as
emotional disturbance and the inability to differentiate the self. As Bigsby notes, “it is less a potential homosexuality which is the heart of Brick’s dilemma than his fear of life, his desire to resist a process which pulls him into the world of sexual and emotional maturity with its tensions, its profound ambivalences and its causal implications” (Bigsby, 1992, p. 93). This is because when *Cat* was written in 1955 when there were strong homophobic currents in the US to treat gays and communists as threats to national security, particularly in the early 1950s during Joseph McCarthy’s crusade to vilify outsiders as a threat to conservative American values. In this connection, David Savran points out that McCarthy’s crusade affected the most noted figures of postwar American theatre including Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, “the alleged Communist and the proven queer”. Savran argues that both American playwrights were afflicted by the politics of anticommunism and homophobia of the 1950s and their work offer an “emotionally charged field in which to explore the packaging and marketing of Cold War masculinity for an impassioned consumer culture” (Savran, 1992, p. 6).

Regardless of whether Brick is a homosexual, faithful friend, or a case of arrested development, the argument is that, first, these readings of *Cat* support that Brick’s level of differentiation is under 25 in the scale of differentiation and he is emotionally immature. Second, they confirm the idea that the family projection process impairs Brick’s functioning in the family. Further, and according to psychologists and psychiatrists, homosexuality was considered a mental illness in the early and mid-twentieth century (John Spurlock, 2002, p. 39), until the view was challenged in the late 1960s. From Bowen’s perspective, then, Brick’s homosexuality (characterised as a mental illness) is a result of the dysfunctional patterns and family projection process repeated through generations in his family emotional system. His functioning is impaired and it includes physical, emotional, and social symptoms. His tendency to drink excessively pushes him below a level of 25, given Bowen’s view that “alcoholics and incorrigible drug addicts usually have basic levels below 25” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 101). Further, he cuts himself off physically and emotionally from his nuclear family and emotionally from his extended family, which is common towards the bottom of Bowen’s scale. Tellingly, Big Daddy shouts at him: “finish that remark you were makin’ before you cut off” (Act II, p. 82).

By way of contrast, as the oldest brother of a male sibling, Gooper is “an autocrat” and “Victorian father”, governed by rules and strict orders (Toman, 1961, p.
Although his relationship with his children is not apparent in the play, the multigenerational transmission process indicates that his children’s levels of differentiation of self are similar to his level. Gooper has not had any direct encounter with Brick as a sibling, except when he asks Brick to ‘shut up’ twice in the most crucial moments in the final act: first, before doctor Baugh starts explaining that Big Daddy is dying of cancer, and the second time, when Brick sings whilst the others are calming down Big Mama’s anxiety after hearing the truth of Big Daddy’s report. Brick responds to his older brother submissively and without any comments, simply saying ‘sorry’.

The final act of the play discloses the aspects of Gooper’s character. In spite of the fact that Gooper is a lawyer and is supposed to know when to negotiate, his wife Mae obviously directs him in most of the situations in the drama. Mae could be an oldest sister of brother(s) who typically acts as a wise sister to her husband, views her children as “the most precious possessions” (Toman, 1961, p. 85) and “would like children regardless of the match she has made” (p. 87). Big Daddy mentions to Brick that one should admit that Mae is ‘a good breeder’ and ‘fertile’. Unpredictably, the oldest brother of male siblings would be among the poorest matches for her, but Mae’s high level of differentiation of self and sibling position qualify her “to take care of not only her husband but also of any number of children she decides to have” (p. 87). This is a sign of the nature of Mae and Gooper’s nuclear family emotional system, which will be examined in light of multigenerational transmission discussed in this chapter.

As the oldest brother of a male sibling, with eight years separating them, Gooper is skilful in leadership at home and business, and tolerates all males and knows very well how to guide and direct them, except if they are older brothers themselves (Toman, 1961, p. 24). Gooper protests about the way he has been treated “since Brick was born, and the way [he’s] been treated like [he] was just barely good enough to spit on and sometimes not even good enough for that” (Act III, p. 97). Nevertheless, and because the oldest brother of a male sibling “is a person who builds up property – spiritual, industrial, agricultural, financial, and domestic” (Toman, 1961, p. 26), he “has given himself body and soul to keeping [the] place up for the past five years since Big Daddy’s health started failing. … [and he] never think of it as duty” (Act III, p. 96). The family structure pushes Gooper, as the eldest brother, to carry more responsibilities than the spoiled Brick. Furthermore, in comparison with the oldest brother of a male sibling, Brick “does not create nor even preserve property and estates to any great extent”
(Toman 1961, p. 37). This is possibly accurate in Brick’s case: he was born “and found that [he] had a mouth full of cotton” (Act II, p. 59), and he is the youngest child in the Pollitt family.

Big Mama is insistent in most situations, even in the climax of her anxious phase (when she knows that Big Daddy is dying of cancer), that Brick is her ‘precious baby’, ‘sweetheart’, and the ‘only son’. Gooper and Mae remind Big Mama that Gooper is her “first-born” and supposed to be her favourite, only for Gooper to stand “behind her, tense with sibling envy” when she embraces Brick (Act III, p. 100). Big Mama’s statement that Brick is her only son shocks and provokes Mae and Gooper’s feelings of tension and jealousy, however their high levels of differentiation enable them to control their anxiety. This also reveals that the most emotionally attached child to the mother is the most vulnerable member to family projection process.

Contrary to the usual expectations of the youngest brother of a male sibling, who thinks that the entrance of children in his life “would be hard for him to take” (Toman, 1961, p. 39), having children and a family makes “life easier for the oldest brother of brother(s), under all circumstances […] with plans ranging way into the future” (p. 29). So, when Gooper protests over his mother calling Brick the only son, Mae tells Gooper that makes him a “sober responsible man with five precious children! – Six!” (Act III, p. 92). Accordingly, Gooper has the ability to manage his family and himself, even if he fails to obtain the plantation. The fact that Big Daddy is dying of cancer does not disturb him because the death of any member of the family “will be ‘handled’ efficiently and in good composure” (Toman, 1961, p. 32).

Gooper’s level of differentiation of self resembles that of Big Daddy, and is similarly situated in the 50-75 range. He possesses an ability to differentiate between his feelings and his well-organised thoughts of how to retain emotional equilibrium in his nuclear family and how to gain the largest portion of the extended family inheritance. Although Gooper is troubled by Big Daddy and Mama’s apparent ignorance of his existence, he mentions “I don’t give a goddam if Big Daddy likes me or don’t like me or did or never did or will or never! I am just appealing to a sense of common decency and fair play” (Act III, p. 97). However, he chooses to be governed by his intellect rather than his feelings, which are entirely disregarded by his parents, sibling and sister in-law.
Gooper and Brick’s sibling profiles, along with their levels of differentiation of self, facilitate an understanding of their functioning in the emotional system; Brick’s sibling position as the youngest brother of a male sibling, his level of differentiation of self, and family projection process are considered variables that contribute to his dysfunctional role in the family system. However, if Gooper is the main object within the family projection process, then he is more likely to be irresponsible and consequently Brick would undertake the characteristics of the oldest son. Accordingly, sibling order keeps the integrity and emotional equilibrium in the Pollitt family because a change in the functioning of a family member will be followed by a compensatory functioning within the whole system. With this recalibration of sibling roles in mind, the only male child sibling profile will be examined in Sweet Bird to support Bowen’s theories of sibling position in the emotional system.

Sibling Position in Sweet Bird of Youth

As with Williams’s other major plays, Sweet Bird (published in 1959 by New Directions) is developed from a one-act play The Enemy: Time. Sweet Bird focuses on the dilemma of Chance Wayne in his attempt to retrieve his youth, as represented by Heavenly Finley. Chance is one of Williams’s lost characters in search of the self, such as Laura in Menagerie, Blanche in Streetcar, Brick in Cat, and Alma in Smoke. George Niesen finds the play’s theme is “one of destruction, castration, and impotence” (Niesen, cited in Jac Tharpe, 1980, p. 101). C. W. Bigsby reads the play from a social, political, and cultural perspective and interprets it as Williams’s response to “a cultural neurosis, a sense of lost values and the collapse of high hopes, which he witnessed in America in the 1950s” (Bigsby, 1984, p. 104). Nancy Tischler points out that Chance’s faded youth, the disintegration of his morals, the ineffectiveness of his dreams, and his castration are all confirmed from the beginning of the play (Tischler 1965, p. 271). Clum argues that Sweet Bird is structured around two triangles: the Princess-Chance-Heavenly triangle and the Boss-Chance-Heavenly triangle (Clum, cited in Matthew Roudane, 1997, p. 140). In Clum’s opinion the first triangle is more important than the second because Chance’s emotional and physical experiences are provided by both Heavenly and the Princess Alexandra Del Lago (Kosmonopolis). Hirsch suggests that the Princess serves as “a thematic reinforcement of Chance’s lust for success and his fear of growing older” (Hirsch 1979, p. 61). Nonetheless, and according to the family emotional system, the Boss-Chance-Heavenly triangle, as the main characters in the
play, is more significant to this discussion. Although the Princess is included in Chance’s emotional system, only Chance’s relationship with the Finleys will be highlighted for the purpose of this chapter. It enables me to focus upon Chance’s sibling profile and level of differentiation of self as an example of the only male child profile.

*Sweet Bird* is set in St. Cloud, a small Southern town on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Chance “is in his late twenties and his face looks slightly older than that” (Act I, p. 14). He left the town in search of fame, abandoning his poor ill mother both emotionally and physically, only to return eventually as a gigolo. On returning to St. Cloud, he immediately asks Dr George Scudder about Heavenly, but not his mother. Even his reaction is emotionless when he hears that his mother died and the church has taken “a collection for her hospital and funeral expenses” (Act I, p. 16). Scudder and the others in the town know that Chance had no interest in his mother. Nothing is mentioned directly about Chance being the only child, but such a conclusion can be drawn from the depiction of his mother’s funeral arrangement. She is treated with respect and buried by the people of the town, “especially people who knew her in church” (p. 16). While in the cocktail lounge of the Royal Palms Hotel, Scotty, one of Chance’s old friends in St. Cloud, blames Chance for his emotional, familial and social irresponsibility towards his mother. Scotty reproaches Chance by saying “if my mother died, I’d bury her myself; I wouldn’t let a church take up a collection to do it” (Act II, p. 94). Accordingly, if Chance had other siblings then the people of the town would not blame him, or at least, the other sibling could take care of her instead of Chance. Nothing is mentioned about his father in the play, indicating that he was raised by a single parent who became “sick at heart as well as sick in her body” when Chance left home (Act I, Scene One, p. 17).

Toman divides the ‘only child’ category into two subcategories, the only *male* child and the only *female* child. The only male child tends to identify with his father’s sibling position, copying his father’s relationships and behaviour because he can stand parents but not a peer. Toman points out that an only male or only female child “remains a child often way into adulthood” (Toman, 1961, p. 114). If the only child is a male, he is usually his parents’ favourite, the centre of their sympathy and concern (p. 115). He also establishes in his mind that he is the centre of attention of his superiors and peers at work as well as at home and rarely admits his deficiencies and mistakes (p. 115). Chance is called ‘son’ or ‘baby’ by the three middle-aged women in the play: the
Princess, Miss Lucy (Boss Finley’s mistress), and Aunt Nonnie (the substitute mother of Heavenly). They all treat him in a sympathetic motherly manner and warn him to leave St. Cloud to rescue himself from Boss Finley’s destruction, and offer to help him escape. Toman corroborates that such a child is not completely prepared to have relationships with women or male friendships as he will “be looking for mother and father figures respectively” (Toman, 1961, p. 116).

Chance had tried to be the centre of the town’s attention since he was seventeen and harbours a wish to be different from the others. In this connection, Linda Schulte-Sasse mentions that although Chance is raised in poverty, his “looks, charm, and adeptness at marketing his personality have helped him to become one of the town’s popular figures” (Schulte-Sasse, 1999, p. 16). Chance wants to impress the people of St. Cloud by being accompanied by a well-known old movie star. However, he takes a false contract from the Princess “to flash in the faces of various people that called [him] washed up” (Act I, p. 54). He also borrows the Princess’ Cadillac “to be seen […] on the street of St. Cloud. Drive all around town in it, blowing those long silver trumpets and dressed in the fine clothes” (p. 53). Chance’s view of youth and wealth correlates with appearance.

Historically, sociologist Thorstein Veblen’s Theory of the Leisure Class (1899) was very important for identifying the idea of “conspicuous consumption” in terms of visibly displaying wealth. According to Veblen, “conspicuous consumption of valuable goods is a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure. […] The leisure class stands at the head of the social structure in point of reputability; and its manner of life and its standards of worth therefore afford the norm of reputability for the community” (Veblen, 1899, pp. 46, 52). Veblen criticises the rise of new wealth after the American Civil War in which wealth determines people’s position in society, referring particularly to those consumers who buy goods for ostentatious purposes rather than genuine necessity. Veblen also mentions that:

As wealth accumulates, the leisure class develops further in function and structure, and there arises a differentiation within the class […] This differentiation is furthered by the inheritance of wealth and the consequent inheritance of gentility. […] Gentle blood may be
transmitted without goods enough to afford a reputably free consumption at one’s ease. (Veblen 1899, p. 48)

Veblen’s argument is that those who are newly rich like to show off their wealth more than those who inherit wealth over a longer period of time, and the newly rich people are more likely to be drawn towards conspicuous consumption. Bigsby points out that Chance’s failure is that “he has internalised the values of those he despises. He has agreed to judge things by their standards” (Bigsby, 1992, p. 105). Likewise, Alice Griffin explains that “Chance’s own misguided ideals bring about his downfall” (Griffin 1995, p. 205). Chance thinks that fame and beauty will bring him good fortune, but the ideals and morals of Boss Finley (power, money and authority) ultimately cause his destruction. However, Chance is neither a member of the leisure class nor truly rich, but rather shows off to gain the respect of members of the leisure class. On this point, and according to Toman, Chance is not interested in money, but if “indeed, his talents do make him a star, he can be found dictating his own prices arbitrarily and accumulating possessions or money in conspicuous quantities” (Toman, 1961, pp. 115-16). Consequently, Chance’s sibling position is complicated when he imitates the behaviour of the upper-class in his community to attract attention and to convince others that he has become rich. Class and region could complicate Toman’s sibling profiles and Bowen theory, and certainly the tracing of multiple generations is likely to lead to more specific family characteristics.

Although Chance sometimes differentiates between his thoughts and feelings, in other respects he lacks this ability. Chance believes that love is not something that can be bought, but that a great love exists between Heavenly and him. He upholds love as the principle that can differentiate between wealthy and needy, good and bad. Although love is a great value in life, other principles as virtue, understanding and well-defined purposes are also of great importance. Chance’s level of differentiation of self could be either above 50 or under 25 for various reasons. Firstly, his level of differentiation of self could be under 25 because he becomes a gigolo and drug addict simply because he does not have the ability to live according to his values and, instead, he lives according to what other people in his emotional system want him to be. He is also “incapable of more differentiated ‘I’ statements such as ‘I believe, I am, I will do’” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 101). In this regard, Aunt Nonnie reproaches Chance:
Aunt Nonnie: Chance, even now, if you came back here simply saying, “I couldn’t remember the lines, I lost the contest, I failed,” but you’ve just come back again here again (Act II, p. 82).

Aunt Nonnie’s interpretation of Chance’s ‘I’ statements imply his weakness and inability to function properly even after his attempt to regain his relationship with Heavenly. Chance could be compared with Brick, who is treated in his family as the “only son”. Crandell argues that Brick in Cat is similar to the mythological Narcissus in his self-destructive behaviour, feeling of self-importance, position as the centre of attention, and his imaginary ideals of love, beauty, and success (Crandell, 1999, pp. 429-430). Likewise, Chance follows the same self-destructive behaviour even though he is not homosexual.

Comparing Brick with Chance supports the argument that Chance’s level of differentiation of self is under 25. Moreover, Kerr and Bowen argue that the basic level of differentiation of self of an individual is greatly determined by the multigenerational process (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 98). However, there is not enough specific information about Chance’s family, except some hints about his mother, who “never had any luck” (Act I, p. 17). In the case of Chance as the only male child who identifies with his father’s sibling profiles, knowledge about his parents’ sibling profiles in the extended family can provide a clue to understanding the adult child’s behaviour, adaptation to stresses, and the multigenerational process. Even if it is difficult to determine whether Chance’s emotional and social dysfunction are the results of a line of multigenerational transmission process, we can predict his level of differentiation of self from his functioning in the Finley family’s emotional system.

Secondly, it could be argued that Chance’s level of differentiation of self is above 50. Although he spends his youth as a gigolo, Chance’s emotional capacity enables him to understand different people’s needs and emotions. He mentions that “I gave people more than I took. Middle-aged people I gave back a feeling of youth. Lonely girls? Understanding, appreciation! (Act I, pp. 47-8). However, his ambitions for stardom and functioning considerably surpass his abilities and talents. Still, understanding other people’s needs does not necessarily indicate a high level of differentiation of self. Chance’s relationship with these people is destructive and leads to increase emotional emptiness. Because basic level of differentiation, as mentioned in
Chapter 1, “is fairly well established by the time a child reaches adolescence” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 98), and because the functional level of differentiation of self can rise or decline due to the circumstances of the relationship system and anxiety, it could be argued that Chance has a fairly basic level of differentiation of self up to 50. When Chance was nineteen, he was “the finest, nicest, and sweetest boy in St. Louis” (Act II, p. 63), but the circumstances of the relationship system in which he is involved makes him function lower than his basic level of differentiation of self. As Clum notices, Chance’s “corruption is caused by his entrapment within a materialistic system” (Clum, cited in Roudane, 1997, p. 142). His involvement in the Finley family’s emotional system has a damaging social and physical impact upon his functioning.

Heavenly reprimands her father for compelling Chance to deviate from the rightful route: “Chance went away. Tried to compete, make himself big as these shots you wanted to use me for a bond with” (Act II, p. 68). When Aunt Nonnie asks Chance about the reason behind his change, Chance answers her: “have you forgotten what was expected of me?” (p. 80). “Influence, power, and money – money that can open all doors” (p. 80) are what society, represented by Boss Finley, expects from Chance. Toman mentions that despite that fact that property, possessions, and wealth are unimportant for the only male child, things may be different “if, for one reason or another, material possessions have captured his fancy, or if they turn out to be instrumental to longed for pleasures and experiences, or if they throw the necessary light on the stage of his existence” (Toman 1961, p. 116). Accordingly, Chance’s interest in money and his desire “to be different” derive from his need to assert his existence in a society that is influenced by such a powerful demagogue, Boss Finley.

In another comparison between Chance and Brick, Clum argues that “Chance, figuratively, is the black-sheep brother of Brick” (Clum, cited in Roudane, 1997, p. 140). Similarly, Chance is the undesirable ‘black-sheep’ in his society, epitomised by the dominant Boss Finley who not only impairs his children’s functioning, but also Chance as the most vulnerable member of societal emotional projection. As narcissistic figures, both Brick and Chance can be aligned with sociologist Christopher Lasch’s comment that narcissists “wish for eternal youth, for the same reason they no longer care to reproduce themselves” (Lasch, 1979, p. 211). Brick is forced to have a baby and grudgingly submits to Maggie and Chance yields to castration by Boss Finley’s men, ending any possibility of a new Wayne generation.
Chance as the only child and Brick as the youngest brother of a male sibling confirm Bowen theory to a certain extent, because Toman’s profiles are always about the average or typical member’s birth-order and position in the family. A key point to emphasise here is that Chance’s sibling position as the only child aligns him to a social projection process. The political, social and economic system in *Sweet Bird* complicates Bowen scales of differentiation because (as mentioned in Chapter 1) differentiation of self has social consequences but social class does not influence levels of differentiation of self. However, if we recall that Chance descends from a rich family, does his sibling profile or functional level of differentiation differ from his present level in the play? To simplify this: a high level of differentiation of self indicates an autonomous and responsible behaviour rather than economic status. Further, economic status (associated with external pressure) in the family can raise levels of anxiety that, in turn, affect functional level of differentiation of self (associated with internal pressure). For example, John Buchannan in *Summer and Smoke* is also an only male child in his family, but his socioeconomic status neither influences his sibling position nor his level of differentiation of self. Sebastian Venable in *Suddenly Last Summer* is another example of a wealthy only male child, and will be examined in more detail in Chapter 4 in relation to his level of differentiation of self and the way it affects the degree of emotional cutoff from his family. In addition to the mechanism of the multigenerational process, two other sibling profiles in the Finley family’s emotional system will also be examined in the following section of this chapter to explore the relationship between sibling positions and multigenerational process.

**Multigenerational Transmission Process**

The multigenerational or extended family refers sociologically to the “extension of the parent-child relationships through three or more generations, thus including grandparents, grandchildren, cousins, uncles, and aunts” (Queen et al., 1985, p. 11). Bryan S. Turner finds that “patriarchy remained a popular conceptual framework for understanding the family in the early parts of the twentieth century” (Turner, 1998, p. 9), indicating the presence of the multigenerational family during this time. Robert Campbell demonstrates that while the nuclear family consists of children and their parents, the extended family also includes other members who are “united by kinship [such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins] or marital ties [such as in-laws]” (Campbell, 2004, p. 145). Sociologically, Vern L. Bengtson’s study corroborates that
the multigenerational relationships differ in function and structure and are becoming increasingly important for the well-being of the family in American society (Bengtson, 2001, p. 13).

According to Bowen, the emotional transmission process through generations “defines the principle of varying degrees of immaturity (undifferentiation) to different children when the process is repeated over a number of generations” (Bowen, 1978, p. 205). Bowen assumes two main points in the multigenerational process: the first is that children’s levels of differentiation of self develop according to their parents’ differentiation of self, while their parents’ level of differentiation follows the same patterns as their parents and grandparents, and so on. The second is that children tend to choose spouses with similar levels of differentiation of self, a topic examined in the previous chapter and which will be also discussed at length here. Bowen hypothesises that the least-differentiated person is the product of a line of multiple generations as well as the well-differentiated one. The multigenerational process is a repetition of emotional functioning through generations of the same family. Multigenerational process does not indicate that all family members should have the same basic level of differentiation, but rather tend to slight upwards and downwards changes. The upwards and downwards possibilities of level of differentiation indicate that some children could have less, more, or the same level as their parents.

Kerr and Bowen also demonstrate that the emotional transmission through generations “is anchored in the emotional system and includes emotions, feelings, and subjectively determined attitudes, values, and beliefs that are transmitted from one generation to the next” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 224). Generally speaking, it is agreed in the field of social sciences that individuals throughout history inherit the values, ideals, beliefs, and traditions of their parents and grandparents. People also inherit some natural genetic characteristics such as eyes and skin colour. Consequently, Hall clarifies that in this process particular emotional mechanisms are being concentrated on in the multigenerational transmission process, therefore affecting levels of differentiation of self through generations, rather than explaining “biological inheritance” in genetic terms (Hall, 1981, p. 101). Kerr and Bowen mention that although genes are part of the emotional system, they are not responsible for the nuclear family emotional mechanisms (dysfunction in a spouse, marital conflict or family projection process) or the way in which they transmit through generations (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, pp. 224-5).
From this perspective, differentiation of self, triangles, nuclear family emotional system, and family projection process, as well as sibling position, are all essential aspects of the multigenerational emotional process.

However, the main concern of Bowen’s concept of transmission process through generations of the same family is that the schizophrenic child is the product of a line of low level of differentiations across eight to ten generations (Bowen, 1978, p. 384). Schizophrenia (previously named schizophrenic reaction in the first edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders of 1952, commonly called DSM-I), according to the American Psychiatric Association (APA), includes different types of disorders characterised by unexpected thoughts, distractions, emotional disharmony with apathy towards others, regressive or deteriorative behaviour, and a propensity to withdraw from reality (DSM-I 1952, p. 26; DSM-II 1968, p. 33). From a Bowenian perspective, schizophrenia is considered one of the outcomes “of the marked impairment in adaptiveness that can occur in an individual and in a nuclear family as a result of the multigenerational emotional process” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 236). Not only schizophrenia, but also the most extreme forms of homosexuality and alcoholism, tend to “develop over the course of at least several generations” (p. 241). Homosexuality was considered a serious mental disorder and was not removed officially from the mental disorders list of DSM until 1973. The APA substituted the nomenclature of “homosexuality” to “sexual orientation disturbance” as a result of the pressure “of activist homosexuals who defensively attempt[ed] to prove that they [were] not sick, and would tend to discourage homosexuals from seeking much-needed treatment” and because the psychiatrists agreed that “homosexuality by itself does not meet the criteria for being considered a psychiatric disorder” (APA, 1973, p. 44).

There are three main outcomes of the multigenerational process: social, physical, and emotional dysfunction. The nuclear family in any part of the scale of differentiation produces dysfunction if it faces high levels of stress or anxiety. However, the most serious dysfunction is the outcome of a linear downward multigenerational functioning. On this model, the more differentiated the nuclear family across generations, the more stable the emotional transmission process, and therefore the more people become aware of their functioning in the present generation and predict the functioning of the future generation. Murder, violence, social irresponsibility, alcoholism, schizophrenia, homosexuality, cancer, and diabetes are examples of
multigenerational dysfunctions that can be transmitted through the generations (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, pp. 236-51). Nonetheless, it was evidently known in the 1930s that some physical illnesses, especially diabetes, are genetically transmitted generationally to others, but this was not proved until 1974. It is common nowadays to hear about families that have a long history of a specific disease that is transmitted from one generation to the next. Kerr and Bowen argue that in spite of the fact that some diseases are linked to genes, “the clinical course of that disease in different family members is assumed to be significantly related to family emotional process” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 248). According to family systems theory, first the emotional system is assumed to be inherited by ancestors and considered to be an automatic process that members of the family cannot control and which exists above and beyond specific contexts (p. 248); and, second, if a specific disease develops across generations, it is considered to be a symptom of the emotional process that is the core of the family functioning (p. 250).

Multigenerational transmission process supposes that nuclear family emotional patterns in one generation (nuclear family) are predictably the same as those patterns that existed and will exist in the previous and future generations. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the amount of anxiety and undifferentiation of the nuclear family could be absorbed in three main areas: dysfunction in a spouse, impairment of a child/children, and marital conflict. The same emotional cycle repeats itself in the second generation and is correlated with anxiety and level of differentiation. Consequently, that amount of undifferentiation is responsible for defining children’s level of differentiation, therefore affecting mate selection and creating a new nuclear family with the same level of differentiation. Phillip Klever’s study generally supports Bowen theories of transmission of the nuclear family emotional patterns (dysfunction in a spouse, marital conflict, and projection process) through generations. Klever also provides evidence that emotional, social, and physical symptoms in the multigenerational family are correlated with the same areas of symptomology in the nuclear family and can be transmitted intergenerationally (Klever, 2004, p. 348). In order to illustrate the relevance of multigenerational process in Williams’s work, in the following part of this chapter the levels of differentiation of self, nuclear family emotional systems, family projection process, and the transitional process through
generations will be investigated in *Cat*, thereby integrating a number of basic processes in Bowen theory.

For the purpose of this chapter, three generations will be examined in Williams’s *Cat*, because Bowen mentions that a minimum of three generations of the same family are required as a “starting point” to explain the function or dysfunction of a child in the multigenerational process (Bowen, 1978, p. 384). However, Hall points out that if the behaviour of more than three linear generations from the same family is tested, the multigenerational process would be more obvious (Hall, 1981, p. 101). Nevertheless, three generations are adequate for the purpose of analysing the multigenerational transmission process and its role in producing integrated or disintegrated families in this chapter.

**Multigenerational Emotional Transmission in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof***

*Cat* is William’s only multigenerational play of the 1950s and 1960s, being structured around three central characters (Big Daddy, Brick Pollitt, and the latter’s wife Margaret (Maggie the cat), and three additional main ones (Big Mama, Gooper and his wife Mae). Most readings of the play focus on Brick’s sexuality, Maggie and Big Daddy, and it is therefore hard to find specific readings about Big Mama, Gooper and Mae. It should be remembered that the division of the Pollitts’ triangles does not depend on the main and minor characters, but rather the relationships between them. The hierarchal structure of the play comprises three generational relationships: the grandparents (Big Daddy and Big Mama), the parents, aunts, and uncles (Gooper/Mae and Brick/Maggie), and the children (Gooper and Mae’s five children). As previously mentioned, the multigenerational transmission process includes three aspects: first, children’s level of differentiation is slightly similar to that of their parents, and second, individuals typically choose spouses with a similar level of differentiation. Third, emotional patterns in the nuclear family are also repeated through generations. Accordingly, the levels of differentiation of self and the nuclear family mechanisms of the three couples in *Cat* will be interrogated.

Big Daddy is one of the most powerful characters in Williams’s drama, symbolising Southern patriarchy, masculinity and supremacy that harks back to the Old South. He is the owner of a plantation estate of twenty-eight-thousand acres in the Mississippi Delta. He initially appears as “a tall man with a fierce, anxious look, moving
carefully not to betray his weakness even, or especially, to himself” (Act II, p. 46). Although he enters the scene nervously, Big Daddy hides in himself the fragile patient who is frightened by illness and the sense that he might be losing the patriarchal authority over his family and plantation. His rough treatment of Big Mama in front of her children embarrasses and hurts her, and it indicates that he does not sympathise with her. Being a successful planter has been Big Daddy’s life purpose and all of his success is the result of his individual effort and great ambition. Big Daddy does not provide any information about his family’s origins, but it can be concluded that his family was poor. He has an old maid sister, Miss Sally, who has a fairly minor role in the play. He quits school for unidentified reasons at the age of ten to work in the fields, then gradually rose to be an overseer for a pair of old bachelors and the genuine owners of the plantation, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, finally becoming the owner of the estate upon their deaths. He is autonomous, wise, and “a loud-mouthed man [and] aggressively frank” (Donahue, 1964, p. 72), and his hard nature could be the result of his difficult life. It is very difficult for him to accept that he is dying of cancer. E. Martin Browne, in an editorial note in *Cat*, points out that Big Daddy “has the same warmth of the soil in him. The best poetry of the play is in his speeches, which distil the wisdom of primitive human nature” (Browne, Editorial Notes, p. 15).

Big Daddy’s wisdom appears in his self-recognition, indicating a thoughtful realisation of life and an intuitive awareness that his ten million dollars in cash and twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest land of the Nile valley are incapable of buying good health. He also mentions to Brick that thinking in this way is “a very sobering thought, and that’s a thought that [he] was turning over in [his] head” (Act II, p. 60). The fact that he is dying of cancer pushes him to recount several issues in his life and makes him “wiser and sadder”. He realises also that “the human animal is a beast that dies but the fact that he’s dying don’t give him pity for others” (p. 61). Big Daddy mentions to Brick that the “thing you can grow on a big place more important than cotton! – is tolerance” (Act II, p. 78).

At first glance, one could consider classifying Big Daddy towards the top of the differentiation of self scale, in the 75-100 range, because he is autonomous, tolerant, realistic and goal-directed, and he has the ability to assume responsibility for both himself and others. Nonetheless, what excludes him from this part of the scale is that his “level of chronic anxiety is [not] very low and he can [not] adapt to most stresses
without developing symptoms” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 107). Big Daddy has a high level of anxiety and develops a physical symptom, cancer, which according to Bowen is a result of a dysfunction in the emotional system. Although Big Daddy is one of Williams’s most influential characters, this does not necessarily mean that he is very well-differentiated. He can differentiate between his thoughts as being the “boss” of the plantation and the head of the family and his feelings towards the other members of his family. Through his emotional conversation, Big Daddy confesses to Brick that he lives mendaciously, meaning “to pretend stuff you don’t think or feel” (Act II, p. 72, my emphasis). This indicates Big Daddy’s awareness of the difference between thoughts and feelings, whilst still choosing to pretend to care and love for Big Mama and Gooper throughout his life.

Big Daddy admits that his life with Big Mama has been a lie. Savran comments that Big Daddy exemplifies the conventional heterosexual masculinity of the 1950s that degrades and desires women all at once (Savran, 1992, p. 101). He cannot stand Gooper and Mae and their five children; he is only sincere with Brick and devoted to being a successful planter. Big Daddy lives in a constant struggle between his feelings and thoughts, saying to Brick that “I couldn’t make up my mind” because he realises the difference between a responsible and successful but hated son and an irresponsible and alcoholic but loved one. Nevertheless, Big Daddy waits to see if Brick can pull himself together before drawing up his will for the estate. This supports the fact that Big Daddy’s “intellect recognizes that a bit of discipline is needed to overrule the emotional system” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 106).

Big Daddy relates the reason of his illness to Big Mama as if he is a psychiatrist who analyses his own case. Two points can be concluded from this perspective: first, Big Daddy’s level of differentiation is below 50, as he possesses an average ability to differentiate between his thoughts and feelings living in “disgust” with Big Mama. This is because in most situations he “has been regarding her [Big Mama] with a steady grimace of chronic annoyance” (Act II, p. 48). Second, and more likely, Big Daddy’s capacity to distinguish between his thoughts and feelings, like Ralph Bates in Period of Adjustment, enables him to coexist with and care about Big Mama. This also could be the emotional reason that contributes to his severe cancer. So, he has the choice of whether to be governed by either his feelings or thoughts. Accordingly, Big Daddy could be classified as 50-75 in the scale of differentiation of self because since his
adolescence he has developed a set of well-defined beliefs of the most critical issues in his life and most of his energy is consumed by goal-directed matters. It could be argued that Big Daddy’s marriage is based on economic conditions, especially because Big Mama’s family “was maybe a little superior to Big Daddy’s but not much” (Act I, p. 32). He treats Big Mama as if she is one of his possessions that he can discard or retain whenever he wants.

Big Mama is as wise as Big Daddy but more tolerant than him, and as such they both complete each other. A careful analysis of her character and her emotional complementary role with Big Daddy reveals her role in maintaining the family integrity. Big Mama “is a short, stout woman; her sixty years and 170 pounds have left her somewhat breathless most of the time” and “very sincere” (Act I, p. 32). She is devoted to her family and she is honest in her love for Big Daddy who “is famous for his jokes at Big Mama’s expense, and nobody laughs louder at these jokes than Big Mama herself, though sometimes they’re pretty cruel” (Act II, p. 47). This indicates that she is both wise and patient in absorbing her husband’s insults, or perhaps that she does not have an easy alternative as a Southern woman of her generation. Nancy Tischler comments that Big Mama’s acceptance of Big Daddy’s cruel jokes by laughing at herself and tolerating his hurtfulness makes her ample-bosomed, devoted, and “a beautiful, strong study in unfulfilled love” (Tischler, 1965, pp. 200-1). When the family receive the false report that Big Daddy is diagnosed with a “spastic colon”, Big Mama’s reaction indicates a sincere love of him. She tells Maggie and Brick that this news makes her shout, cry, and fall down on her knees.

Big Mama has a strong ability to differentiate between her thoughts and feelings regardless of the fact that her appearance and behaviour do not make this obvious. Her appearance suggests the features of an imprudent and superficial rich woman, but inside her there is an uncomplicated faithful wife and mother. Sobbing, she says to Big Daddy: “In all these years you never believed that I loved you? … And I did, I did so much, I did love you!” (Act II, p. 55). In this respect, Big Mama could have a greater emotional capacity than her husband because she recognises his reactions, rigidity and hate. It is obvious that her interest in Big Daddy is not based on material purposes, but rather on love and recognition. Although he insults her, she justifies to them all that Big Daddy “loves his family, he loves to have them around him, but it’s strain in his nerves” (Act III, p. 85) that makes him behave anxiously. When the family doctor informs her in
front of her sons and daughters-in-law that Big Daddy actually has malignant cancer, she displays a deep devotion to him. She sadly rises, cries, and “reviews the history of her forty-five years with Big Daddy” (p. 90). Williams characterises Big Mama interestingly as “true-hearted” and “simple-minded devotion to Big Daddy” (p. 90), and this does not confuse her position on Bowen’s scale of differentiation of self. On the contrary, her emotional reactivity in the most serious situations in the play indicates an emotional maturity and a choice to be governed by simple thoughts or passionate feelings. She also shows great understanding of what Big Daddy aims to do with the plantation, and even uses his language in his absence. Even her feelings towards Brick, Gooper, and Mae resemble Big Daddy’s frank thoughts and feelings. She makes it clear that she follows Big Daddy’s steps in controlling the house and remaining the head of it. Big Mama will not allow Gooper to take hold of the estate, realising that Brick is the right son to take hold of the estate if he straightens out himself.

Comparable with her maternal Southern counterpart Amanda Wingfield in *Menagerie*, Big Mama realises the importance of patriarchal lineage, so she is the one who feels most sad in losing Big Daddy as he is her supporter in keeping the family integrity. She admits to herself that Big Daddy is the central pillar of the family, and if he dies the family balance will deteriorate. She also believes that the family should “love each other an’ stay together” (p. 100). Big Mama could be categorised in the 50-75 range due to her emotional ability to distinguish between her thoughts and feelings, to absorb and calm anxiety, and to save the emotional stability of the family, as well as to avoid developing emotional, social, or physical symptoms. She seems to consciously choose to be dominated and submit to Big Daddy. Accordingly, the nuclear family emotional system in Big Daddy and Mama’s marriage could be classified as an emotional distance and dysfunction in a spouse. Regardless of the fact that Big Daddy develops a severe symptom (cancer), Big Mama is still the subordinate spouse, who adapts herself to absorb the family’s anxiety. The emotional complementarity enables them to keep their family together for more than forty years: Big Daddy is the nervous anxious father and Big Mama is the calm patient mother. Nonetheless, the result of their dysfunctional marriage is transmitted to Brick and causes his projection and dysfunction, as will be discussed later on in this chapter.

The second couple in the Pollitt family is Gooper and Mae Pollitt, and their seemingly harmonious marriage results in five children. Both Gooper and Mae have
similar levels of differentiation of self, and they are both referred to in the play as one identity; wherever Gooper is mentioned, Mae is mentioned too. Gooper’s parents are well-known, but there are some hints about Mae’s family background. Mae and Maggie’s “catty talks” in the play disclose several facts about both of them. Mae Flynn, the cotton carnival queen, is the daughter of the Memphis Flynns who were very rich but they lost their money and no longer rate in Memphis society. According to Maggie’s investigations, Mae and Gooper relinquish their summer trip and start their plans to gain the plantation because they are pretty sure that Big Daddy’s final reports indicate that he is dying of cancer. Maggie describes them as a couple of “cardsharps”. They both behave as if they are two faces of the same coin. Big Daddy exposes Mae and Gooper’s habit of spying and accuses them of being a couple of “peek-hole spies”. This repetition of unity confirms that they are a very compatible and well-matched couple and have the same basic level of differentiation of self in the 50-75 range.

Big Daddy and Brick agree that Mae and Maggie are similar: both are nervous, not peaceful, and look like “a couple of cats on a hot tin roof” (Act I, p. 56). Mae is keen to remind Maggie of her poor family and drunk father, and Maggie tries to dig deeper into Mae’s rich family who lost their money. They both use the same strategy with Big Daddy and Big Mama by imploring their sympathy and attracting their attention; Mae through her five children and Maggie by her determination and discernment. However, in Big Daddy’s opinion, although Mae and Maggie share similar behaviour, Maggie’s physical appearance is better than that of Mae, whereas Mae is more fertile than Maggie. Big Daddy cannot believe that Brick and Gooper “being so different would pick out the same type of woman”, and Brick answers him that both of them “married in society” (p. 56). This signposts three main points: first, Gooper and Brick have different levels of differentiation of self; second, and more obviously, Mae and Maggie have the same level of differentiation of self; and, third, Gooper and Brick’s method of choosing a partner is the same as that of their father, and thus all married for social, rather than personal, reasons.

Although Gooper and Mae’s marriage seems harmonious, it is noticeable that their nuclear family emotional mechanism is a dysfunction in a spouse: in this case Gooper. In their conversation Mae gives the impression that she is repeating her husband’s words, but in fact she guides his speech. For example, before revealing Big Daddy’s report, she kisses and hugs Big Mama to stimulate the matriarch’s curiosity.
Then when Gooper starts to explain, “For some reason she gives Gooper a violent poke as she goes past him. He slaps at her hand without removing his eyes from his mother’s face” (Act III, p. 91). In several situations, Mae appears to be completing her husband’s words, whereas she is actually attempting to remind him of what he should say. Further, when Gooper discusses with Big Mama his goal to control the plantation, Mae argues with Big Mama more than he does, which provides evidence that she is the dominant spouse and Gooper is the subordinate one.

Gooper’s five children are labelled by Maggie as “no-neck-monsters”. The oldest, Dixie, bursts into Brick and Maggie’s room “wearing an Indian war bonnet and firing a cap pistol at Margaret and shouting: ‘Bang, bang, bang’” (Act I, p. 44). Williams reminds us of the child’s vindictive nature when Dixie says to Maggie, after speaking with Brick about his broken ankle, “with a precocious instinct for the cruellest thing: You’re jealous! You’re just jealous because you can’t have babies!” (p. 45). Dixie reflects her parents’ emotional state, and repeats unconsciously what her parents say in front of her. Dixie knows that Brick and Maggie are childless and has a feeling that her parents do not like Maggie. Accordingly, Dixie’s basic level of differentiation of self is shaped according to her parents’ moods, thoughts and feelings. Consequently, and according to Bowen’s dynamic of the transmission process through generations, not only does Dixie develop an analogous level of differentiation of self to her parents, but so too do the other four siblings, albeit with slight differences. So, Dixie is incorporated in the emotional system and she is likely to repeat her parents’ functioning in the future in her nuclear family.

The third couple worthy of analysis is Brick and Maggie. Maggie’s character is as central to the play as Big Daddy. She could even be perceived as the implicit voice of Big Daddy. From a Bowenian perspective, Brick and Maggie’s emotional anxiety is the driving force behind their marital dysfunction. Maggie struggles to keep her own family destroying itself, and being childless and emotionally, as well as physically, distanced from Brick cause her high levels of anxiety. Although Maggie seems calm and controlling, Williams describes her as a “pretty woman, with anxious lines in her face” (Act I, p. 17). She is a complex presence on stage, combining anxiety, emotional longing, tenacity, solidarity, liveliness, love, charm, and determination. Hirsch describes her as one of Williams’s “healthiest characters”, despite this complexity, and she is a “normal, likable woman, who loves her distracted husband” (Hirsch, 1979, pp. 47-48).
She does not fit into one or other of Williams’s female types: she is neither the puritan Amanda or Alma nor the fragile Laura or Blanche. Maggie is more genuine than Mae in her feelings towards Big Daddy and Mama, blessing their “ole soul” (Act I, p. 22). She has a quiet capacity to differentiate between her thoughts about being childless and how to retrieve her intimate relationship with her husband on the one hand and her feelings of emotional loneliness and ignorance on the other hand. She stresses that she would not like to live alone, but as she tells Brick “living with someone you love can be lonelier – than living entirely alone!” (p. 24).

Maggie is as wise and patient as Big Daddy and tries to control her feelings of being emotionally and physically distanced from her husband. However, she mentions to Brick that although he does not love her, she is “determined to win” (Act I, p. 26). Her determination to redeem the relationship with her husband and to inherit the estate do not stem from a vacuum; it develops from her earlier experience of poverty and of her father who “fell in love with his liquor” (p. 40), leaving her mother with a modest salary. She differentiates herself from her family of origin in an attempt to rid herself of poverty. She had previously a harmonious marital relationship with Brick despite their arguments and her belief that Brick dated and married her just to make a respectable social impression. However, he may not love Maggie, but his social position as the son of the richest Southern family forces him to marry and have a family regardless of this, exactly like Big Daddy’s marriage to Big Mama.

According to Bowen (as mentioned in the previous chapter) there are conscious (concerns and principles) and unconscious (emotions) dynamics that contribute in choosing a partner. Consequently, Maggie honestly loves Brick and marries him for economic purposes, similarly to Ralph Bates who marries Dorothea for economic purposes in *Period of Adjustment*, while Brick marries Maggie for social concerns. Big Daddy and Mama’s nuclear family emotional system is repeated through Brick’s marriage. Accordingly, and because the nuclear family of the grandparents is the “architecture” that shapes the behaviour, functioning, and thoughts of the next generation, Big Daddy’s dysfunctional marriage and his anxiety is repeated through the multigenerational process and transmitted through Brick’s marriage. So Maggie and Brick’s nuclear family emotional system is characterised by an emotional distance and a dysfunction in a spouse. Maggie declares to Brick what she thinks:
Maggie: Brick, I used to think that you were stronger than me and I didn’t want to be overpowered by you. But now, since you’ve taken to liquor – you know what? – I guess it’s bad, but now I’m stronger than you and I can love you more truly! (Act III, p. 104)

From this perspective, it seems that Maggie and Brick’s nuclear family emotional system is a marital conflict because both of them refuse to give in to the other at the beginning of their conjugal life. However, the adaptive pattern in Brick’s nuclear family emotional system contributes to marital conflict, emotional and physical distance, and a social and emotional dysfunction (Brick’s alcoholism) in a spouse. Further, Maggie’s level of differentiation of self and emotional capacity enables her to absorb the anxiety in the nuclear family and be the overfunctioning (dominant) spouse because Brick withdraws and submits to his liquor, which she understands to be linked to the death of Skipper.

It could be argued that Maggie is Big Daddy’s self-image despite not being blood related, and she is his emotional successor and the symbol of family integrity. Christopher Weimer, mentions that Maggie represents a “woman notable for her hunger for motherhood, sensuality, sense of integrity, and unbreakable determination that ultimately gives her the strength necessary for self-empowerment” (Weimer, 1992, p. 522). They are the most dynamic characters in the Pollitt family’s emotional system even though Big Daddy is dying of cancer. Bigsby demonstrates that Big Daddy and Maggie have the ability to love “but in neither case is that love entirely separate from their own ambitions” as both of them would like to live on through Brick (Bigsby, 1984, p. 83). Alice Griffin finds that Big Daddy and Maggie’s material and emotional possessiveness stems from their poor backgrounds (Griffin, 1995, p. 152). Maggie unconsciously compares Big Daddy with her father, who instead of building up property wasted his money on liquor. The transmission process makes Maggie determined and well differentiated. She refuses to repeat her mother’s experience with an alcoholic husband. Maggie affirms to Brick that she was “born poor, raised poor, [and] expect[s] to die poor” unless Big Daddy’s inheritance helps them to change their lives (Act I, p. 44). This suggests that Maggie’s desire to inherit overrides her feelings for Brick, therefore providing evidence that her functioning in the emotional system is governed mainly by her thoughts rather than feelings.
By examining the Pollitt family’s level of differentiation, it has been noticed that Big Daddy, Big Mama, Gooper, Mae, and Maggie all have fairly good levels of differentiation (above 50), whereas Brick has a level of differentiation under 25. The reason behind this is that Brick’s sibling position as the youngest son, and the one most attached to the parents, impairs his functioning in the emotional system and makes him the most vulnerable member to family anxieties, family projection process, and multigenerational transmission process. When Big Mama tells Big Daddy that she loves him he talks to himself “wouldn’t it be funny if that was true?” (Act II, p. 55). Similarly, before the end of the play Maggie confirms her love to Brick, to which he responds sadly “wouldn’t it be funny if that was true?” (Act III, p. 105). Both Big Daddy and Brick are emotionally distanced from their wives, as if Williams wants to indicate that Big Daddy’s miserable marriage continually repeats itself in Brick’s. Further, Big Daddy’s nuclear family system is classified as dysfunction in a spouse, emotional distance, and impairment of a child (Brick). Likewise, both Gooper and Brick’s nuclear systems involve dysfunction in a spouse.

From a Bowenian viewpoint, alcoholism, homosexuality (both of which are listed in DSM-I (1952, pp. 38-9) and DSM-II (1968, pp. 25, 44) as psychiatric disorders), physical illness (such as Big Daddy’s cancer), and social irresponsibility are symptoms of dysfunctional patterns repeated through the generations. Bowen mentions that “the symptom of excessive drinking occurs when family anxiety is high” (Bowen, 1978, p. 259). He also adds that alcoholism is considered as a dysfunction “in the context of an imbalance in functioning in the total family system” (p. 262). From this standpoint, the whole family contributed to Brick’s alcoholism by accusing him of homosexuality. What increases Brick’s reputation of homosexuality is that Brick and Maggie occupy the former room of the old homosexual bachelors, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello. In this connection, David Savran states that Big Daddy, structurally, “functions as the carrier of homosexuality” (Savran, 1992, p. 100). Indicating implicitly that Big Daddy’s bowel cancer could be the result of sodomy in his youth, Savran explains that Big Daddy involuntarily passes the homosexual desires to Brick through the family male line. Williams mentions that Brick and Maggie’s bedroom is “haunted by a relationship that must have involved a tenderness which was uncommon” (Notes for the Designer). This uncommon tenderness transmits emotionally to Brick and raises questions about his relationship with Skipper. Dean Shackelford also supports the idea
that Big Daddy becomes the surrogate son of Jack and Peter (Shackelford 1998, p. 114). From a Bowenian perception, the previous owners of the plantation are included mechanically within the Pollitts’ emotional system, and accordingly, the previous generation’s reputation transmits to Brick emotionally. As a means of comparison to the Pollitt family, in the following part of this chapter the multigenerational transmission process will be examined in the Finley family in Williams’s Sweet Bird.

**Multigenerational Transmission Process in Sweet Bird of Youth**

In *Sweet Bird* the multigenerational transmission process will be discussed through Heavenly and Tom Finley’s sibling position and through two generations for several reasons. The first of these is to find the correlation between sibling position and multigenerational process. Second, investigating the Finley’s level of differentiation is adequate to find if parents and children have similar levels. Third, family in the United States in the early twentieth century changed towards smaller family structures: the members of the family became more limited in number and kinship groups turned into autonomous nuclear families (Sirjamaki, 1959, pp. 100-2; Del Mar, 2011, p. 84). The multigenerational process does not necessitate that the nuclear family should be attached or isolated from the extended family. Although the nuclear family model was challenged by different types of family organisation (for example homosexual and non-married partners) that became more common into the 1960s (and led Christopher Lasch to criticise the demise of the American family in the mid-1970s), for the purpose of this chapter the nuclear family will be treated as a subsystem (consisting of parents and their children) of the multigenerational system regardless of the number of children in it. Fourth, and as mentioned previously, Kerr and Bowen point out that the two spouses (first generation) become the “architects” who design the emotional system of the nuclear family, as well as rear the next generation of children (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 225). Accordingly, the level of differentiation of the two siblings in the Finley family will be examined to support Bowen’s theory of multigenerational transmission process, and how Boss Finley’s functioning, attitude and behaviour affects his children. Further, Heavenly’s level of differentiation will be compared with that of Chance, even though they could not marry, to investigate Bowen’s assumption that partners have the same level of differentiation of self.
Boss Finley is comparable with Big Daddy, since both of them represent the patriarchy of the Old South. R. Barton Palmer persuasively observes that “Sweet Bird, like Cat, makes interesting use of what might be called the plantation myth”, even though it “thoroughly rejects the more socially conservative configuration of that myth in Cat” (Palmer, 2000, p. 33). In Cat, we notice the Southern conventional extended family living on the plantation, whereas in Sweet Bird, although Boss builds a family, wealth, and power, his role is “dysfunctional” within the terms of the patriarchal myth. Boss’s political role is represented in his mission to preserve the purity of white southern blood. Tischler sees Boss as a combination of Big Daddy and Huey Long Jr, who was famous in his slogan “Every Man is a King” (before being assassinated in the mid-1930s). Boss epitomises “fanaticism, fascism, and hatred” (Tischler 1965, p. 273) and his character embodies Southern bigotry towards African Americans, especially under the political circumstances represented by the racial segregation laws of Jim Crow (which divided the South from the rest of the nation between the 1880s and 1954), which meant the formal separation of African-Americans from white Americans in almost all aspects of public life. Bowen finds that “for over a century, [the] Negro has been object of the [social] projection process to minority groups” (Bowen, 1978, p. 445). As he observes, any society always finds a new target of “unfortunate” or disadvantaged people for the projection process such as the poor and the welfare recipient (p. 445). Chance represents this “unfortunate” minority in Sweet Bird.

As Sweet Bird was written in 1952, before the Civil Rights Movement formally began in the mid-1950s, Chance Wayne can be seen as the white-outcast who is treated like African Americans in the South. Boss Finley and his men call Chance a “criminal degenerate” because he infects Heavenly with a venereal disease, and he is punished the same way as a black man would be, castrated for polluting white blood. In other words, as Hirsch states, he is a disease that must be removed to preserve the health of the society (Hirsch 1979, p. 59). Scotty, one of Chance’s contemporaries in St. Cloud, tells him that Boss Finley’s men “picked out a nigger at random and castrated the bastard to show they mean business above white women’s protection in this state” (Act II, p. 89), and Boss Finley wants to explain his position from that story in front of the media.

Boss Finley is a self-righteous person who claims that he heard the “voice of God” when he was fifteen that convinced him to “execute this mission” (p. 106). Nonetheless, he denies his involvement in the black man’s emasculation because he
claims to “understand the emotions that lay behind” that “deplorable” incident (p. 107). He continues in a self-justifying vein, saying that the “passion to protect by this violent emotion [is] something that we hold sacred: our purity of our own blood!” (p. 107). Boss’ desire to enhance his social power is analogous to his authority in the family emotional system, and his corrupted thoughts, emotions, hatred, violence, and racism transmit to his son, Tom Junior. Thus, he refuses to let Heavenly marry Chance because Boss “figured his daughter rated someone a hundred, a thousand per cent better than [him]” (Act I, p. 51), driving Chance out of St. Cloud and later ordering his men to castrate him.

Williams depicts in Boss “the danger of a corrupt, power-hungry politician who will destroy anything that stands in his way and anyone who threatens his public image” (Griffin, 1995, p. 209). His men beat Heckler, a protester who interrupts Boss during his campaign to ask about Heavenly’s operation. He even prevents Heavenly from entering a convent, because they live in “a Protestant region and a daughter in a convent would politically ruin [him]” (Act II, p. 71). Further, Tom Junior confesses that when his father “is upset he hits out at anyone near him” (Act II, p. 58). Boss’s level of differentiation is probably not more than 50. In spite of Boss’s dominant personality and his deceitful nature, he retains some ability to distinguish between his thoughts and feelings that politically are charged by domination, violence, and despising others. Further, his violence and social irresponsibility are considered a social dysfunction repeated through generations.

Heavenly Finley is the youngest sister of a male sibling, Tom Junior. Tom’s age is not revealed, but when he has an encounter with Chance about the venereal disease that the latter passes to Heavenly, Tom mentions: “My little sister, Heavenly, didn’t know about the diseases and operations of whores, till she had to be cleaned and cured” (Act II, p. 103). The youngest sister of brother(s) is described by Toman as “feminine, friendly, and kind; sensitive and tactful; submissive without being subservient, devoted; a good companion of men” (Toman, 1961, p. 94). Heavenly’s delicacy stems from her family experience. As such, Heavenly is the most emotionally fragile member of her family, largely due to the death of her mother leading her to be cared for by her maternal Aunt Nonnie.
For the youngest sister of a male sibling, death or the loss of a family member is utterly devastating, and the death of the mother could be more severe than the loss of any other family member for the youngest sister of a male sibling, especially in her childhood (Toman, 1960, p. 102). On this model, if her mother dies when she is older, her father, brother(s), or other women can replace the mother’s position (p. 102). Heavenly is mothered by Aunt Nonnie, the sibling of Heavenly’s real mother. However old Heavenly becomes, as the youngest sister of a male sibling she “remain[s] the little darling of her parents, particularly her father” (Toman, 1961, p. 99). Boss Finley is emotionally concerned and anxious about his daughter, and he tries to please her and calls her ‘honey’, ‘my little girl’, and ‘sugar’. This is in line with the family systems view, in which the family of the youngest sister of a male sibling guide and preclude her from having the wrong partner (Toman 1961, p. 94). In this connection, Boss rejects Chance as a son-in-law because he does not view him as the right partner for Heavenly.

The death of her mother, catching a venereal disease from Chance, having a hysterectomy while still in the peak of her youth, and Boss’s expectations of her to marry one of those rich men decrease Heavenly’s functional level of differentiation of self and make her vulnerable to the family projection process. Nevertheless, she has average level of differentiation of self. On the one hand, she distinguishes between her thoughts as the daughter of the domineering politician who wants her to marry one of those rich bargains, Dr George Scudder. On the other hand, she is aware that although she loves Chance she does not trust him anymore. However, she is still emotionally reactive to her relationships in the family system. Material possessions, money, and property often mean nothing to the youngest sister of male siblings, notwithstanding that they are granted to her more generously and easily than to others (Toman, 1961, p. 96). Boss bestows money generously, thinking that it could compensate for her emotional deprivation. He asks her to go to the Maison Blanche store to buy furs, jewellery and whatever else she wants. Heavenly’s sensitivity to the family emotional system makes her realise that her hysterectomy brings embarrassment to her father and she thus attempts to enter a convent.

Heavenly’s sibling position can be compared with that of Brick Pollitt in Cat. As both of them occupy the youngest sibling position, they are more vulnerable to family projection and are likely to have the least level of differentiation of self within the family. She reveals to her father how she feels deeply sad when Dr Scudder “cut[s] the
youth out of my body, made me an old childless woman. Dry, cold, empty like an old woman” (Act II, p. 71). Her dysfunction is both social and emotional. Although the youngest sister of a male sibling is guided by her feelings, she recognises that Chance was virtuous and pure and that it is her father who leads him to deterioration. Chance mentions that “after each disappointment, each failure, at something, I’d come back to her like going to hospital” (Act One, p. 50). This implies that Heavenly has an emotional capacity to cope with life and to alleviate the anxiety of others. She could be perceived as the innocent bird that is entrapped in the cage of the emotional system and cannot fly or be free.

Tom Finley Junior’s first encounter with his father reveals his behaviour as the oldest son of a rich politician. However, at the time that both Boss and his son claim that they want to purify the white blood, they both realise each other’s corruption and dishonesty. In Tom’s opinion, he devotes himself to organise the “Youth for Tom Finley” club, and he is proud that he has more newspaper coverage than his father. Boss, in turn, admits firstly that this club is merely “gangs of juvenile delinquents”, wearing badges of Boss Finley’s photograph and name. Secondly, Boss reveals the corruption of his son, who is a drunk, promiscuous, college failure who has to cheat in examinations by bribing the others to obtain the answers. This corruption is a kind of societal emotional process that will be investigated in Chapter 4. Both the son and the father are corrupted and accuse each other of promiscuity. Tom asks his father, “How about your well-known promiscuity, Papa? How about your Miss Lucy?” (Act II, p. 64), whereas as the oldest brother of female sibling Tom “is a friend of the girls and ladies … Love of the tender sex is the most important of all concerns” (Toman, 1961, p. 44). In his encounter with Tom Junior, Chance reveals that he used to give Tom a motorcycle and got him a girl to ride in the buddy seat. Like any other oldest sibling position, the oldest brother of sister(s) “prefers a leading position to a subordinate one” (p. 44).

Politically, and according to Toman, the “the oldest brother of sister(s) tends to prefer a moderately conservative government, party, or style of administration, as well as non-interference with business, family life, private and internal affairs, and a person’s ways of thinking” (p. 50). However, this pattern does not match Tom Junior’s character, in the respect that Tom is not as moderately conservative as he is supposed to be. Instead, he is as corrupted and radical as his father, leading him to interfere in his family
and their way of thinking. Nevertheless, politics by themselves are not of concern to the oldest brother of female siblings, except if they are part of his business (p. 51). In this regard, Tom could be the scapegoat of his father’s despotism and even he is more projected than Heavenly because he develops more severe symptoms than her. His dysfunction is anchored in his social irresponsibility, violence and bribes. For example, he has newspaper coverage “Once for drunk drivin’, one for a stag party [he] thrown in Capitol City that cost [Boss] five thousand dollars to hush it up” (Act II, p. 64). Accordingly, Tom’s basic level of differentiation of self could be under 25. Boss Finley involves Tom Junior and Heavenly in his business and political system, exploiting them to support his mission to preserve his idea of the purity of the South. He uses his children to bring in young voters for his crusade, and as “examples of white southern youth – in danger” (Act II, p. 72). Heavenly, in contrast, mentions to her father that he has “an illusion of power”, leading her to avoid his path by withdrawing through a process of intrapsychic cutoff from the family (this particular process will be discussed in chapter 4). Boss interferes with his children and expects them to live the way he is convinced is appropriate. This point corresponds with R. Barton Palmer’s view: “Unlike Cat’s patriarch, Boss Finley obstructs the emergence of any successor, keeping his son in a state of perpetual subordination and preventing his daughter from marrying Chance and thus making possible a new generation.” (Palmer, 2000, p. 33).

It could be argued that Aunt Nonnie, Heavenly’s surrogate mother, identifies with her sister’s level of differentiation of self for two reasons: first, in the multigenerational emotional process, members of the family have nearly the same level of differentiation of self. Boss Finley labels her as ‘gullible’ as her dead sister (his wife) just because she advises Tom Junior to avoid violence because it “never solves young people’s problems” (Act Two, Scene One, p. 62). Accordingly, Aunt Nonnie behaves not only as Heavenly’s mother but also as that of Tom Junior. Boss tells her “you favoured Chance Wayne, encouraged, aided and abetted him in his corruption of Heavenly over a long, long time” (Act II, p. 63). Mrs Finley’s level of differentiation of self could be average of 50 because, according to the multigenerational process, siblings have nearly the same level of differentiation of self and Aunt Nonnie resembles her sister. Second, because Mrs Finley died many years before the beginning of the play, Aunt Nonnie is included in the Finleys’ emotional system. Accordingly, her perceptions are transmitted to her niece.
Likewise, it could be argued that Heavenly and Chance have the same basic level of differentiation according to the multigenerational transmission process. In spite of the fact that Chance and Heavenly could not marry, Bowen argues that a comprehensive observation of spouses’ levels of differentiation of self is offered by courtship, dating and engagement (Bowen, 1978, p. 376). Thus, the Finley family’s emotional system encompasses Aunt Nonnie and triangulates with Chance as an outsider. Further, Boss Finley’s nuclear family emotional system, which resembles Big Daddy’s, could be seen to represent an impairment of two children and a dysfunction of a spouse (in this case Mrs Finley). This is because Boss Finley had a mistress even before his wife died. Boss Finley’s marital relationship could be said to mirror Big Daddy’s relationship with Big Mama, because the latter mentions to Brick that he will find a mistress. Thus, Heavenly and Brick as the youngest siblings, the most fragile, and the most sensitive in their families, reflect the same sibling position. Similarly, Tom Junior and Gooper, as the oldest siblings, possess positions that enable them to assume the guidance role in the family.

From this analysis we can see that sibling position profiles shape the expected behavioural patterns within the family. Comparing individuals’ actual and predictable behaviour helps to assign the specific level of differentiation of self. If the functioning of a sibling is better than the expected level of sibling functioning, then this indicates a high level of differentiation of self (Hall, 1981, p. 116). For example, Heavenly’s responsibility and awareness in the family system as a youngest sister of brother predicts a higher level of differentiation of self than Brick as a youngest brother of brother. Gooper as the oldest brother shows more responsibility and maturity than Tom, indicating Gooper’s high level of differentiation and Tom’s low one.

To summarise this chapter, the level of differentiation of self has a significant role in affecting the sibling profile. Correspondingly, sibling position profiles provide another criterion of the predictable patterns of family dynamics at the levels of sibling-sibling, sibling-parent and sibling-spouse. As this chapter has shown, *Cat* is the best of Williams’s plays to reflect Bowen theory of dysfunctions that transmit through generations. Further, Toman’s sibling profiles provide a well-organised way to interrogate and analyse siblings within *normal* family circumstances. Higher levels of functioning than those which sibling position predicts lead to a more flexible and less symptomatic multigenerational transmission process. Conversely, lower functioning
than the expected sibling position indicates more emotional reactivity and more intense multigenerational process. Both Bowen’s theories and Williams’s plays (in which some family details are provided and some are withheld) show that the more information we have about earlier generations sibling position then the more precise can be the predictions about the characteristics of future generations.

Multigenerational process is not only responsible for dysfunctions or moral transgressions, but also for enhancing positive characteristics that keep family integrity and the system’s emotional and social equilibrium through generations. Accordingly, raising the level of differentiation of the family members increases their awareness and decreases their emotional reactivity. This dynamic enables them to cope with the circumstances of their relationship to each other, choosing partners with high levels of differentiation of self and producing well-differentiated generations and so on. In this regard, it could be deduced that the multigenerational transmission process underlines Brick’s, Chance’s and Heavenly’s dysfunctions as products of inherited patterns repeated through generations. At the same time, Big Daddy’s ability to adapt to stress transmits to Gooper and enables him to avoid the family anxiety and to some extent control his role within the emotional system. Maggie’s original family transmission process enhances her ability to differentiate between her thoughts and feelings, and increases her determination to win the plantation, to redeem her relationship with her husband, and to keep her nuclear family integrity without developing any symptoms.

In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, we are left with Maggie’s victory and her efforts to turn the lie of pregnancy into truth and as she says: “What is the victory of a cat on a hot tin roof? – I wish I knew … Just staying on it, I guess, as long as she can” (Act I, p. 26). Although Big Daddy, the pillar of the family and the icon of its integrity, is dying of cancer, Big Mama’s devotion and Maggie’s determination to have a baby (a representative of a new generation representing Big Daddy’s heir) and thus alleviate the sense of family disintegration. In *Sweet Bird of Youth*, there is a sense of family emotional and structural desolation because Boss represents the self-destructive father who transmits his violence to Tom and deprives Heavenly of living her youth. Chance follows the routes of corruption, lost his youth and Heavenly, and finally submits to the Boss’s men and is castrated emotionally and physically.
As I have demonstrated in this chapter, Murray Bowen relies on Walter Toman’s division of sibling profiles to underpin his fifth concept in his theory. He gains by this in understanding the structural dynamics of the family, but the downside is their theories remain abstract and general and neither of them takes into consideration the cultural variables that can shift predictable family roles. This is particularly the case for the two Williams’s plays examined here because patriarchal Southern values, morals, and culture all play an important role in shaping individual’s behaviour and family’s lifestyle, therefore deepening the understanding of the multigenerational process.
Chapter 4
Emotional Cutoff and Societal Emotional Process in Suddenly Last Summer
and The Night of the Iguana

The crying, almost screaming, need of a great worldwide human effort to know ourselves and each other a great deal better, well enough to concede that no man has a monopoly of right or virtue any more than any man has a corner on duplicity and evil and so forth. If people, and races and nations would start with that self-manifest truth, then I think that the world would side-step the sort of corruption which I have involuntarily chosen as the basic, allegorical theme of my plays as a whole.

(Tennessee Williams, 1957, The Observer)

Alongside the six concepts discussed in the previous three chapters, believing his system was incomplete Bowen added two more in the 1970s. In 1975 he added his seventh concept, emotional cutoff, to describe an emotional process between generations that had not previously been described in his theory. Although this was not a separate concept he did refer to it in his existing framework as emotional distance, a part of the nuclear family emotional system (Chapter 2). The eighth and final concept, societal emotional process, was introduced formally in 1972 but not added to the theory until 1975, after a long-term effort (since 1940s) to associate emotional process in family with emotional process in society, and to proceed reasonably from the family circle to the larger society arena. These two concepts will be investigated through a reading of Tennessee Williams’s Suddenly Last Summer (1958; hereafter Suddenly) and The Night of the Iguana (1962; hereafter Iguana), the latter of which is often seen as marking the end of his major phase as a playwright. The concept of societal emotional process in Williams’s Iguana is a worthy example of the fact that the nuclear family is the basic unit of social organisation, and Williams’s later phase does not easily fit the Bowen model because we see the family unit after it has broken down, especially in his dramatic productions of the 1960s and 1970s, and the social structure cannot be reconstituted from the fragmentary relationships that are left behind.
Suddenly is closely connected to *Iguana* in this chapter because they share common themes such as a crisis of faith, self-destruction, and escape from reality (considered as a form of emotional cutoff). Further, they represent emotional cutoff and emotional process in society and their role in family disintegration, especially since the family in *Suddenly* is in a condition of destruction, while in *Iguana* the main character (Shannon) in the play functions as a result of the adverse side-effects of an emotional cutoff from his family. Although *Suddenly* was published in 1958, it is set in the 1930s and reveals Williams’s fears of the lobotomisation of his beloved sister Rose in 1943 and the negative outcomes in terms of her institutionalisation. Similarly, *Iguana* was written and published in 1962 but set in the summer of 1940, recalling Williams’s experience in Mexico and evoking the emotional influence of World War II on society. Linking the two plays chronologically epitomises both the early and middle phases of Williams’s dramaturgical canon.

A study of Bowen’s concepts of emotional cutoff and societal emotional process through Williams’s plays will reflect the effect of the family on the functioning of its members and highlight some important issues: homophobia in postwar American culture; emotional disorders, corruption, chaos, and social crimes in America in 1940s and 1950s; and the effect of rapid technology on the emotional process in society after World War II. Further, Williams’s *Suddenly* and *Iguana* will provide evidence of the emotional force that leads people to distance themselves from their families and to engage in other social relationships. *Suddenly* and *Iguana* are unique in that both of them address some cases of exaggerated emotional cutoff that cause the disruption of the family and society. This activates Bowen’s concept of emotional cutoff as a mechanism for dealing with emotional reactivity and anxiety, and provides evidence of social regression. These cases are presented through the emotionally disturbed characters of Sebastian Venable in *Suddenly* and the Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon in *Iguana*. To investigate these ideas, the next section will introduce the concept of emotional cutoff and underline both the positive side and the limitations of this concept and its role in family integration and disintegration.

**Emotional Cutoff**

Before explaining the concept of emotional cutoff, it is fundamentally important to mention that in addition to the previous main references (Bowen, 1978 and Kerr and
Bowen, 1988), emotional cutoff will be also explained using Peter Titelman’s *Emotional Cutoff: Bowen Family Systems Theory Perspective* which responds to and extends Bowen’s ideas. Kerr and Bowen define emotional cutoff as “the way people manage the undifferentiation (and emotional intensity associated with it) that exists between generations” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 271). In other words, emotional cutoff refers to the mechanism by which people isolate themselves from the previous generations to start a new life and to manage the *unresolved emotional attachment* or fusion with their parents (Bowen, 1978, p. 382). In this connection, Titelman appropriately clarifies that “unresolved attachment” refers to the individual’s inability to free the self from the parent-child fusion (Titelman, 2003, p. 22). Bowen points out that although *cutoff* is not a word that is formally included in his overarching theory, he finds it the most precise word to describe the process of denying the importance of the family of origin by abandonment, estrangement, withdrawal, or separation (Bowen, 1978, p. 382). Daniel V. Papero mentions that cutoff not only occurs between people and their parents, but also from other important family members such as siblings (Papero, 1990, p. 62). Likewise, Titelman suggests that there is a primary (direct) cutoff that can arise within the parent-child triangle, and a secondary (indirect) cutoff transpiring between an individual and other members from other interlocking triangles such as cousins, uncles, grandparents, and siblings (Titelman, 2003, p. 25). The mechanisms of cutoff usually take three forms: an external process involving physical distance from the family; an internal process involving emotional withdrawal while remaining in the same geographical area as the family; or a combination of both emotional and geographical isolation.

In emotional cutoff one should differentiate between such concepts as emotional distance and emotional attachment, fusion, and undifferentiation in order to keep consistency in understanding the emotional cutoff process. Further, emotional cutoff and fusion are interconnected concepts of (un)differentiation. Titelman recapitulates the connection between these expressions by saying that “cutoff is emotional distance that regulates the discomfort of emotionally stuck-together fusion between the generations” and emotional attachment or fusion are alternative words (Titelman, 2003, p. 22). However, undifferentiation is the inability to differentiate between thoughts and feelings, or as Kerr and Bowen name it a “total lack of self” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 368). Undifferentiated individuals are those at the lower end of the scale of
differentiation of self, as explained in Chapter 1. Therefore, undifferentiation is responsible for extreme fusion and cutoff because the fused or cutoff individual reacts as a result of a chronically low level of differentiation of self (Johnson and Waldo, 1998, pp. 406-7). Accordingly, a well differentiated individual keeps equilibrium in their relationships with other family members, neither fused nor cutoff.

Emotional distance, as discussed in Chapter 2, is one mechanism of the nuclear family emotional system through which spouses avoid each other in times of tension and anxiety in order to prevent conflict. However, it could be understood that cutoff also manifests as emotional distance but not between spouses rather individuals from their parents, siblings, and other important nonfamily members. In this connection, Kerr and Bowen assert that emotional distance and cutoff between generations are equivalent in their meaning, but Bowen separates out the concept of cutoff to describe accurately the emotional process by which individuals manage the undifferentiation between generations (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 271). According to Bowen theory, emotional distance most often occurs in marital relationships, but emotional cutoff processes occur between generations as well. Pointing out that cutoff is a manifestation of emotional distance, Titelman adds that “cutoff refers to many variations of emotional distancing that occur among individuals both within and outside their family systems” (Titelman, 2003, p. 23). Nonetheless, it could be argued that both emotional distance and emotional cutoff not only happen in the family system, but also in any other systems such as workplaces or schools.

Emotional fusion is the “stuck-togetherness” between the individual and other family or nonfamily members included in the emotional system, such as parents, siblings, extended family members, and spouses (Titelman, 2003, pp. 21-2). C. Margaret Hall points out that cutoff is the “counterpart” of fusion (Hall, 1981, p. 93), and Mary Ann Crossno also mentions that cutoff is the other face of the fusion coin, “expressing allergic reactivity to emotional closeness” (Crossno, cited in Metcalf, 2011, p. 47). There is a dependable relationship between emotional fusion and cutoff; the greater the degree of fusion between family members, the greater the tendency to cut off from the emotional system to avoid emotional reactivity (McGoldrick and Carter, 2001, p. 285; Titelman, 2003, p. 21). The more intense the cutoff from past generations the greater the predictable fusion in the future, and also the more likelihood that the previous generation’s cutoff pattern will be duplicated in future relationships.
Furthermore, “cutoff is one automatic response to fusion” (Titelman, 2003, p. 32). In this connection, Papero points out that emotional or physical distance in order to manage the unresolved attachment in the emotional system is “the safety valve” in times of emotional intensity and anxiety (Papero, 1990, pp. 62-3). In spite of the fact that emotional cutoff “may relieve immediate pressure and lower anxiety, the person’s basic vulnerabilities to intense relationships remain unchanged” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 272). This is because although cutoff may resolve a temporary conflict in the extended or nuclear family, it also keeps individuals vulnerable to other relationships in the nuclear family or outside the family. To explain further, emotional cutoff can occur and transfer from the parent-child triangle to other interlocking triangles such as siblings, spouses, in-laws, and members of the extended family such as aunts or uncles, or even friends.

Bowen postulates that severe cutoff between the individual and his or her parents correlates with more intense adult-child cutoff in the next generation. This is because an individual’s problems in the family of origin will be repeated and could be exaggerated in his/her marriage (Bowen, 1978, p. 382). This suggests a conservative model of family relationships in which it is hard for the child to assert independence from the patterns he or she inherits from the parents and previous generations. In this respect, Titelman also adds that “cutoff is rooted in the emotional process of the family as a multigenerational unit” (Titelman, 2003, p. 23). There is a way out of this cycle of repetition, though. Because differentiation of self is the core of Bowen theory, if parents have a high level of differentiation of self, they can keep the emotional stability of the family. Consequently, their children can live autonomously and less responsively to emotional reactivity in the future, and live separately without being emotionally cutoff from the system. In contrast, low levels of differentiation of self indicate more emotional reactivity and emotional fusion, or an intense cutoff between parents and their adult children, in which a cycle of repetition is more likely to continue without the family members being fully aware of it.

Titelman arguably simplifies the understanding of cutoff as “the emotional process of separation between an individual and his or her parents when an individual starts a new nuclear family or otherwise sets up an independent living situation” (Titelman, 2003, p. 23). From this perspective, and according to Titelman’s knowledge of cutoff, emotional cutoff is a process through which all people pass. However, the
term *cutoff* of its own accord sounds contradictory to what Titelman and, originally, Bowen intended. There is a confusion between the term and process of emotional cutoff because it can erroneously imply a complete discontinuation of something, at least initially. This controversy refocuses attention towards a basic assumption of the emotional system: namely, to live autonomously and, at the same time, remain an active part in the family emotional system. As a matter of fact, Bowen does not leave it a blind spot, assuming on the contrary that emotional cutoff has degrees. Kerr and Bowen comment that all people cutoff, to varying degrees, in order to maintain the unresolved attachment to their parents or family of origins (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 273). Emotional cutoff varies among families or members of the same family according to level of differentiation of self, degrees of anxiety, and one’s ability to see himself or herself as part of the system.

Higher levels of differentiation of self relate to lower degrees of anxiety. Therefore, the least severe is the emotional cutoff between family members. Arguing that independency of the family does not mean differentiation of self, Kerr and Bowen mention that “people who claim to be ‘independent’ of their families have ‘broken away’ from them rather than ‘growing away’ from them” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 272). From this perspective, Kerr and Bowen differentiate between three behavioural patterns of separation from the past generation: growing away, broken away (or tearing away), and cutoff. Following Bowen’s scale of differentiation of self, Titelman classifies levels of the cutoff process as high, middle, and low functioning (Titelman, 2003, p. 24). People with the highest level of functioning have the ability to be independent and at the same time maintain lines of communication with their family of origin, and this process is called “growing away” (p. 24). Even so, this presupposes that growing away indicates the “minimal” breaking away and withdrawal from the emotional system (p. 24). Individuals who have a medium level of differentiation of self maintain a distance from their parents or family of origin, avoiding any direct (face-to-face) communication with them, so this process is referred to as “tearing away” (p.24). If an individual collapses or withdraws as a result of an intense unresolved emotional attachment to the parents, then he or she is emotionally cutoff (p. 24). Those people are characterised by a low level of differentiation of self and a high level of emotional attachment (fusion) with the parents. In addition, Bowen refers to the word ‘cutoff’ as people’s immature isolation from each other (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 346).
Emotional cutoff could be understood as a mechanism for individuals to achieve autonomy, defensiveness, purposefulness, protection, or self-assertion. According to my understanding of the concept, it could be claimed that there are two kinds of emotional cutoff: healthy and unhealthy. The healthy cutoff is required in order to keep and maintain the integrity of the emotional system because everyone separates from his or her family of origin as it is a human necessity to be independent and to build a new and distinct family. The unhealthy cutoff is intense physical and emotional isolation that causes dysfunction, physical illness, depression, collapse, internal withdrawal, or escape from the family emotional system. Accordingly, the healthiest person is someone who can make the most of minimising the severity of the cutoff. As Bowen clarifies, transforming cutoff into “orderly differentiation” is the main therapeutic purpose in the process to re-establish contact between generations (Bowen, 1978, p. 384). Turning, then, from this seventh concept to Williams’s plays, Suddenly provides a clear illustration of a case of emotional cutoff in which Sebastian Venable remains a major part of the play even after his death, and the Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon is another example of an exaggerated case of emotional and physical cutoff in Iguana. Both cases will be explored in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

Emotional Cutoff in Suddenly Last Summer

Suddenly was first published in 1958 by New Directions, along with the one-act play Something Unspoken, which was written earlier in 1953. Suddenly shares the theme of homosexuality and cannibalism with the short story “Desire and the Black Masseur” that Williams published in his One Arm collection in 1948. Suddenly is classified as one of Williams’s late 1950s shocking plays. Foster Hirsch suggests that Suddenly, Sweet Bird of Youth, and Orpheus Descending are Williams’s “dark plays” because of their apparent violence and sex (Hirsch, 1979, p. 53). Nonetheless, in comparison with the violence in the other two plays, Sebastian’s horrible death is arguably the darkest and most striking scene. Nancy Tischler points out that for Williams “the cannibalism episode is no more than a transcription in physical terms of what people do to one another emotionally every day” (Tischler, 1965, p. 259). Marilyn Claire Ford mentions that Suddenly, by Williams’s own confession, is a manifestation of the playwright’s “emotional trauma” (Ford, cited in Kolin, 1998, p. 126). In addition to the fact that Williams wrote the play during his psychoanalysis period, the story also reveals his emotional regret about his sister’s lobotomy. It is generally agreed that the play is the
product of Williams’s own psychological experience (Donahue, 1964, p. 94; Hirsch, 1979, p. 58; Kolin, 1998, p. 126). Donahue explicates that after the failure of Orpheus Descending, Williams consulted a psychoanalyst to find a solution for his anxiety of claustrophobia and writer’s block (Donahue, 1964, p. 93). However, he failed to find emotional relief or solace from psychoanalysis, admitting that:

It is true you get to know yourself better through psychoanalysis but perhaps that is a doubtful privilege. Psychiatry represents the scientific approach. It is anti-romantic, anti-emotional […] it has a mystique of its own but I am not sure that it is suited to the creative writer. Moreover, on the practical side, I like to travel rather than spend my life in a psychiatrist’s office. (Williams, cited in Donahue, 1964, p. 95).

From this perspective, Williams thinks that psychoanalysis is important for any person to obtain better self recognition. However, he also believes in his own ability and status as a creative writer, and therefore perceives such a scientific approach as psychiatry as an inappropriate therapy in his situation. It could be said that Bowen theory bridges the scientific approach of psychiatry with the artistic emotional approach of drama, epitomised by Williams’s work which probes the relationship between families and their individual parts and by defining family as an emotional unit.

As with most of Williams’s plays, Suddenly has an absent character, the homosexual poet Sebastian Venable, the only child of Mrs Violet Venable. George Niesen finds that Sebastian is one of Williams’s ‘artist’ characters (either an actual artist or artist-like), who is inventive, sensitive, but also rather destructive for himself, his family, and the people around him (Niesen, cited in Tharpe, 1980, p. 81). He resembles Allan Grey, Blanche’s homosexual husband in A Streetcar Named Desire, and Skipper, Brick’s homosexual friend, who committed suicide in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. Susan Koprince argues that the unseen character on Williams’s stage “often explains the fragile emotional states of Williams’s protagonists” (Susan Koprince, cited in Harold Bloom, 2002, p. 79). For example, Blanche’s husband’s suicide causes her emotional trauma, and likewise Sebastian’s loss is traumatic for both his mother, who loves him, and for Catharine, who witnessed his death.

Suddenly includes some autobiographical elements: Catharine resembles Rose Williams who was lobotomised in 1943, and Sebastian is a characterisation of Williams
himself. Brian Parker also observes that by characterising Sebastian, “Williams was criticizing aspects of himself: not only such superficial resemblances as his penchant for white suits, fear of heart trouble, and hypochondriacal pill popping, but also, more basically, his new resentment against his mother, prompted by sessions with a psychoanalyst” (Parker, 2000, p. 657). This resentment is because Rose was lobotomised under her mother’s insistence and authorisation. In order to understand the nature of Sebastian’s emotional cutoff process, his level of differentiation of self and his family lifestyle should be examined because, as Bowen asserts, “from the lifestyle in the family, and from the intensity and type of symptom, it [should be] possible to establish a fairly accurate functional level of differentiation by estimating the total family rather than the individual” (Bowen, cited in Sagar, 1997, p. 215). Further, the degree of anxiety and level of differentiation of self determine the intensity or flexibility of the emotional cutoff process.

Sebastian is murdered by cannibals at the age of forty while on a summer trip to Cabeza de Lobo, Spain. This is witnessed by his cousin Catharine Holly, who replaces his mother as a substitute travelling companion. All information about his character is collected from his mother and from his cousin. The controversy about his death and homosexuality remains central to the events of the play. Robert F. Gross categorises the play into two main “plot triangles”. The first is Dr Cukrowicz (Dr Sugar), the psychiatrist who will decide upon Catharine’s lobotomy, Violet, and Catharine, with Dr Sugar situated as the judge of and intermediary between the two women. The second is Violet, Catharine, and Sebastian, in which Sebastian is structured as the centre of the plot between his two traveller companions, Catharine and Violet (Gross, 1995, p. 229). From the perspective of the emotional system, and for the purpose of this chapter, emotional triangles are considered to be different interlocking tripartite relationships that are formed according to the degree of anxiety of the most central characters in the play: Catharine, Sebastian, and Violet. Still, the most important element in Sebastian’s emotional cutoff process is his relationship with his mother.

In comparison with Chance Wayne in Sweet Bird, the role of the father in Sebastian’s life is completely eliminated. However, most critical readings emphasise Violet’s role in the corruption of her son and interpret Sebastian’s homosexuality and his tendency towards self-destruction as a kind of mother-domination and overprotection (see, for example, Louise Blackwell, 1970, p. 13; Daniel A. Dervin,
This is emphasised through Catharine’s reference to the “string of pearls that old mothers hold their sons by” (Scene Four, p. 138), indicating Violet role in her son’s homosexuality. Writing in 1946 at a time when the negative concept of “momism” was being explored in American culture, Edward A. Strecker also refers to “mom and her silver cord”, implicating the role of overprotective mothers in their children’s emotional health and maturity. Strecker mentions that mothers keep their children “paddling about in a kind of psychological amniotic fluid rather than letting them swim away with the bold and decisive strokes of maturity from the emotional maternal womb” (Strecker, 1946, p. 31). From a Bowenian perspective, the relationship between Sebastian and his mother is an emotional unresolved attachment of the child to the parent(s) or emotional fusion that causes emotional cutoff.

Writing twenty years later, in the mid-1960s, when attention had switched from momism towards the identity politics and rights of marginalized groups, Nathan Goldman mentions that homosexuality was still “considered abhorrent in American society and [was] generally punished as a crime. It [was] generally seen as a threat to the institution of the family and the virility of our [American] society” (Goldman, 1967, p. 172). This was particularly true in the 1950s during the Cold War years when communists and homosexuals were considered subversive according to the norms of Senator Joseph McCarthy. David Savran confirms that “not only had Hollywood been invaded by Communists, but the very government and the armed forces of the United States had been infiltrated by homosexuals whose presence, they insisted, posed grave security risks” (Savran 1991, p.60).

With this historical context in mind, Paul J. Hurley explains that “both Sebastian and his vision, it becomes evident, are warped. His beliefs do not represent the clear-sighted view of a mind undimmed by sentimentality; they are rather the distorted reflections of a personality which has turned in upon itself” (Hurley, 1965, p. 396). Hurley’s perspective implicates that Sebastian’s basic and functional level of differentiation of self approximately intermingle with each other. His mother’s domination impaired his level of differentiation of self, and his thoughts and feelings are indistinct and come together in the form of moral dysfunction. Hurley demonstrates that Sebastian’s inversion is represented by homosexuality and egomania that isolates him from the society and makes him an introvert (p.396). Like Brick, his counterpart in
Cat, Sebastian rejects the responsibilities of mature people, preferring to live a luxurious life and work only as a self-obsessed poet. In this connection, Judith J. Thompson describes Sebastian as homosexual snob, self-absorbed, and socially and emotionally arrested development case (Thompson, 2002, p. 112). Violet claims that she is the motivated element that stimulates him to write a poem and without her it would be impossible for him to complete a poem. Gross emphasises that “all the familial power is concentrated in the person of Violet Venable”, who disguises such truths as her son’s homosexuality and the fact that he is cannibalised by the homosexual adolescents at the Cabeza de Lobo (Gross, 1995, p.236). The focal point here is that Violet’s corrupted thoughts, values and behaviours are transmitted to her son and cause his corruption.

Bowen asserts that as a result of social anxiety in the late 1970s (partly in the light of rising divorce rates), the poorly differentiated people escaped from their family and become involved in social gatherings and conjoint situations and relationships outside their original family (Bowen, 1978, p. 383). These relationships are usually fragile, and cutoff people move to other gatherings or a “substitute family”. This process between generations is a manifestation of emotional cutoff process and it is called the “generation gap”. The degree of cutoff in this case depends on the level of anxiety: the lower the level of anxiety, the lower the degree of emotional cutoff. A generation gap as a manifestation of a cutoff is observable in Suddenly even though the play is set in the 1930s and written in the late 1950s. As such, it coincides with Bowen’s serious observation and reasoning of the emotional regression and anxiety in 1950s American society. Mrs Venable mentions that:

[Sebastian] had a perfect little court of young and beautiful people around him always, wherever he was, here in New Orleans or New York or on the Riviera or in Paris and Venice. (Scene One, p. 109)

According to Bowen, friends have similar levels of differentiation of self. Thus, as a result of social anxiety and the generation gap, the process indicates that those “young and beautiful” people in Suddenly have poor levels of differentiation of self, and they are often stimulated to run away from their families to live in other often looser and diverse sets of relationships. When anxiety increases in these gatherings, members of these groups become cut off again and thus join other groups, and so on. Again this
insight can be applied to Suddenly despite its different historical setting. Roel van den Oever notices that Violet’s classification of the small group surrounding her son as coterie indicates queerness (van den, Oever, 2012, p. 84). This could explain Sebastian’s frequent travels with his mother; despite the fact that she accompanies him on his trips, he is emotionally cutoff from her. On her son’s last trip, Violet is unable to travel because she has suffered a stroke that causes one side of her face to contract. She discloses that Sebastian “broke away from [her] and took [Catharine] with him” (Scene Four, p. 138), which indicates that the mother and her son are emotionally fused, and since they are severely so, the emotional cutoff is profound.

Violet confesses that she made the most difficult decision of her life when she chose to stay with her son rather than her husband when the latter was critically ill and needed her to stay with him before his death. At that time, Sebastian entered a Buddhist monastery and he had “promised those sly Buddhist monks that he would give up the world and himself and all his worldly possessions to their mendicant order” (Scene One, p. 108). Interpreting Sebastian’s involvement in Buddhist rituals as a crisis, Violet helps him to get through this phase of his life by freezing his accounts. She mentions to Dr Sugar that after a month Sebastian “got up off the filthy grass mat and threw the rice bowl away” (p.108). Violet’s emotional attachment with her son is very intense, to the extent that she accompanies him on all of his trips. As such, although Sebastian’s trip to the Himalayas and his Buddhist experience is part of his search for God, it could also be considered a kind of emotional cutoff, taking the pattern of emotional distance or an “intrapsychic” cutoff.

Violet’s vanity, self-blindness, and denial of truth weaken her son’s level of differentiation of self. She overprotects her son and does not allow him to be independent or to leave her sight. Although Sebastian remains attached to his mother for forty years, he withdraws emotionally in a case of internal emotional cutoff. Being the only child, who remains a child even in adulthood, Sebastian’s situation could be interpreted as having a significant amount of unresolved emotional attachment to his mother. As Bowen mentions, the degree of undifferentiation and the degree of unresolved attachment are equivalent and can be managed in one’s own life (Bowen, 1978, p. 382). Sebastian uses his mother to procure homosexual males, and Violet uses her son by living through him and reclaiming a sense of her youth. She mentions that she cannot forgive Sebastian for substituting her for Catharine and “not even now that
he’s paid for it with his life” (Scene One, p. 111). Sebastian’s vulnerability and cutoff is allegorically depicted in Suddenly’s scene of offspring sea-turtles, which are cutoff emotionally and physically by their mother and left to be devoured by the carnivorous birds. Assimilating Sebastian with the turtles confirms Bowen’s idea that the emotional system is valid even in animals and lower forms of life.

In addition to the mother-son emotional fusion, Sebastian’s sibling position also bestows his features of vanity (self-importance), egotism (self-centredness), and narcissism (self-obsession), which all indicate an incapability to differentiate between thoughts and feelings and that lead to self-destruction. His fussiness is implicit in his dietary regime and is a metaphor of the criteria with which he judges the people around him. Violet mentions that her son has a discipline of “abstention” that is represented by having only one cocktail before dinner and lime juice on salad to keep his youth. She also remarks that Sebastian is “a snob about personal charm in people” rather than being a family or money snob (p. 109). Catharine notes that Sebastian talks about people as if they are items on a menu: “[t]hat one is delicious-looking, that one is appetizing” (Scene Three, p. 118). Moreover, Violet insists that Sebastian usually goes out “a mile in a boat to find water fit to swim in” (Scene Four, p. 139).

In response to Dr Sugar’s question as to whether Sebastian lives “a celibate life”, Violet states that she is “the only one in his life that satisfied the demands he made of people” (Scene One, pp. 110). As the only male child, Sebastian would like to be the centre of attention amongst his parents and peers. Walter Toman clarifies that the only male child’s greatest possessions are his aptitudes, his parents, or those people who are able to assume parental responsibilities (Toman, 1961, p. 115). In the only male child’s opinion, all that others present for him is taken for granted. As Violet explains to Dr Sugar, Sebastian refrains from marriage because she is the only one who understands his demands. Thus, Violet’s relationship with Sebastian does not look like that of a mother and a son but rather a well-matched couple. When Dr Sugar asks Catharine about her feelings for Sebastian, she says “He liked me and I loved him” and the only way in which Sebastian would accept her love was in “a sort of motherly way” (Scene Four, p. 131). The argument is that Sebastian’s degree of cutoff is basically initiated from his low level of differentiation of self, family projection process, and his sibling position.
Ford finds that “Sebastian attempts to escape his stifling relationship with his mother, first by fleeing to a Buddhist monastery, then by appropriating Catharine as his travelling companion” (Ford, cited in Kolin, 1998, p. 131). Ford’s perspective implicitly signposts the two ways of Sebastian’s emotional cutoff, first (as mentioned previously) by tearing away to Buddhism, then by selecting Catharine as his travelling companion instead of his mother. Similarly, Thompson enhances that Sebastian’s escape to the Buddhist cloister represents his attempt to break away from his “symbiotic” relationship with his mother (Thompson 2000, p.114). In Suddenly, Sebastian’s emotional cutoff embodies two forms of emotional cutoff: internal emotional withdrawal in which he develops emotional dysfunction and then, in his last summer, a physical distance as a reaction to the high degree of his emotional fusion with his mother. Sebastian’s emotional cutoff will be compared with two other patterns of emotional and physical cutoffs in Williams’s The Night of the Iguana.

**Emotional Cutoff in The Night of the Iguana**

_Iguana_ is considered Williams’s final theatrical success, attaining the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and published by New Directions in 1962. It has its roots in a short story of the same title published in 1948 in _One Arm_ collections. Set in Mexico in 1940, for Williams _Iguana_ “is rooted in the atmosphere and experiences of the summer of 1940, which I remember more vividly, on the emotional level, than any summer that I have gone through before or after” (Williams, cited in John S. Bak, 2009, p.128). The main triangle in _Iguana_ consists of the Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon (a defrocked priest), the widow Maxine Faulk (the proprietor of the Costa Verde Hotel, where the play is set), and the traveller artist Hannah Jelkes. Hannah’s grandfather, Jonathan Coffin (Nonno), shares the emotional triangle of the play, along with Hannah and Shannon, and his emotional role is significant for explaining Hannah’s emotional cutoff.

Regardless of the fact that both _Iguana_ and _The Glass Menagerie_ achieved the same award, they can also be compared with each other thematically and autobiographically. Hannah resembles Laura Wingfield and Williams’s sister Rose; Shannon is the current Tom Wingfield; and Nonno shares a name with Williams’s father (Cornelius Coffin Williams) and is imbued with his maternal grandfather’s spirit. Ferdinand Leon notices that both Williams’s _Menagerie_ and _Iguana_ are “memory” plays; while Williams recalls his own reminiscences in St. Louis in _Menagerie_, his
characters recollect their memories in *Iguana* (Leon, 1968, p. 87). In this way, *Iguana* can be read as a summation of ideas and themes that Williams had tried out in previous plays.

*Iguana* can also be seen as an emotional continuation of *Menagerie*: Hannah is the well differentiated Laura, who lives with her grandfather, and Shannon is the escaping Tom, who possibly ran away from one place to another carrying the guilt of the past and who cuts off from his Puritan mother. Nonetheless, Williams’s youngest brother Dakin clarifies that Williams sees himself in Hannah, who “stood for all the good things” in Williams’s personality (Bray, 1995, p. 776). It could reasonably be said that Hannah represents Williams himself, who tours the world with the principles of his maternal grandfather and who, in turn, “builds a [permanent] nest in the heart” (Act III, p. 313) of Williams. Hannah, for Williams, stands for a “believable” and “beautiful” spirituality (Williams, 1961, cited in Devlin, 1986, p. 83). This does not mean that Hannah is beyond reproach, but she is presented as being more refined and sophisticated than Maxine “a stout, swarthy woman in her middle fifties – affable and rapaciously lusty” (Act I, p. 229). This contrast also reveals a similarity between *Iguana* and *Summer and Smoke*, play out via the conflict between the spirituality of Hannah and physicality of Maxine.

The main emotional triangle in the play is Nonno-Hannah-Shannon. As Thomas P. Adler sees, the names of these three characters “underscore the dramatist’s point about human altruism and interconnectedness, for ‘Shannon’ contains all the letters needed to spell the other two” (Adler, 1994, p. 168). Spoto connects these three spiritual characters as the “closest to the playwright’s heart, and they had the greatest value for him as a poet, as an artist, [and] as a struggling believer” (Spoto, 1997, p. 249). Hannah and Nonno are the dearest to Williams as they can be seen to represent Rose and Williams’s maternal grandfather, Walter Dakin. Rod Phillips states that Shannon directly constructs a “bond of affection” with Hannah and Nonno, which depends on the three characters’ love of nature (Philips, 2000, pp.63-4). Shannon is immediately attracted to Hannah and is “suddenly pacified by her appearance” (Act I, p. 238). Rather than being only lovers of nature, the three of them could also be attracted to each other by emotional humanitarian bonds. Juanita Cabello finds that these three characters meet in search for meaning to mitigate the fragmentation they suffer in a rapidly changing world (Cabello 2011).
Shannon is about thirty-five old working as a tour conductor for Blake Tours Company after being dismissed from the church. He is described as “a young man who has cracked up before and is going to crack up again” (Act I, p. 230). Williams remarks that in characterising Shannon he “was drawing a male equivalent almost of Blanche DuBois”, as both of them appear at the end of their tether (Williams, 1961, cited in Devlin, 1986, p. 80). However, Drewey Wayne Gunn notices that Williams’s “Southern neurotic is now a man” as Hannah comes from New England (Gunn, 1974, p. 213).

From his first appearance in the play, Shannon looks emotionally and physically exhausted: “panting, sweating, and wild-eyed. […] His nervous state is terribly apparent” (p. 230). Glenn Embrey clarifies two reasons behind Shannon’s nervous conditions: his preoccupation with himself to the extent that “he is cut off from everyone else”, and his unstable and transient lifestyle of travelling from one place to another (Embrey, cited in Tharpe, 1980, pp. 66-7). Moreover, and in addition to his work as a tour conductor, Shannon’s temptation with the young ladies in his party leads him to be repeatedly fired from various companies, and thus Blake Tours Company is his last chance to keep his job. Although he travels and is supposed to know different people, Shannon lives a lonely and fragmentary life.

Shannon’s emotional cutoff is complicated because there are no specific details about his relationship with his parents as an adult. Hall clarifies that the intensity of a cutoff for a duration of time, a decade for example, is possibly the outcome of anxious relationships in the emotional system (Hall, 1981, pp. 92-3). It is not mentioned exactly when Shannon became an episcopal minister, but, Leon’s reading provides evidence that Shannon begins his tours in 1930 (Leon, 1968, p. 88). Leon deduces this when Shannon says that the party of schoolteachers at the Baptist Female College is “the worst party I’ve ever been out with in ten years of conducting tours” (Act I, p. 231). This indicates that Shannon was defrocked from his ecclesiastical congregation at the young age of twenty-five. Moreover, Shannon mentions to Hannah that he was put in an asylum to recover from a nervous breakdown after his heresy sermon before entering his “present line – tours of God’s world conducted by a minister of God” (Act II, p. 269). The argument is that there is a decade in Shannon’s life when he was cut off from his family of origin. Even so, his social and psychological discontent, his sexual repression, living as an outcast, struggling with his faith, and the ways in which he
collects evidence of his personal image of God, could all indicate his level of differentiation of self and emotional and physical cutoff from the previous generation.

Shannon’s ability to differentiate between his thoughts and feelings is limited, with Glenn Embrey arguing that his feelings entrap “between his sexual drives and religious fears” (Embrey, cited in Tharpe, 1980, p. 71). Embrey demonstrates that Shannon’s basic problem is “terrible guilt, fear of God, and an overpowering sex drive” (p. 74). He has a crisis of faith, although his belief in God and his intention to return to the Church are evidence of its presence. However, his concept of sexuality is connected with divine punishment. His feelings of fear and guilt after each sexual encounter are mingled with his beliefs about God. Shannon’s multigenerational family is religious and “his socialization is focused on the principles of sin, punishment, and confession” (Lindy Levin, 1999, p. 87). Maxine remarks to Shannon that she knows his “psychological history”, asserting that his problem started when he was a child and his mother punished him harshly upon discovering him practising “the little boy’s vice” and “God wouldn’t punish [him] for it harder than she would” (Act II, p. 290). On this reading, from a Bowenian perspective Shannon’s thoughts and behaviour are shaped according to his mother’s level of differentiation of self.

Hannah concludes that Shannon has “just been so much involved with a struggle in [himself]” (Act II, p. 285), and thus he prioritises his feelings rather than his thoughts. He lacks the ability to differentiate between such concepts as self-indulgence and self-need; self-annihilation and self-construction; and between self-discrepancy and self-consistency. He tells Hannah that a nest is a place for “the relative permanence of the location, and also for the purpose of mating and propagating its species” (Act III, p. 313). At the same time, Shannon contradicts himself, lives an unstable life, and therefore “can’t marry” and settle in a mature relationship. Although Hannah succeeds in calming his nerves, Embrey argues that she does not help prevent his fears and guilt from overpowering him (Embrey, cited in Tharpe, 1980, p. 74). On the contrary, Hannah points out to Shannon that his problem is not in liquor but rather a need to believe in someone or something to defeat the dark side of his self. Norma Jenckes finds that Hannah succeeds in building Shannon’s self-esteem and she “forces Shannon to see the desolation of his life, and she offers him an oasis of care” (Jenckes, 2005, p. 10).
Bowen points out that escaping physically from the scene of the family or remaining in it both require emotional closeness, and both can lead to symptoms (Bowen, 1978, pp. 382-3). For example, Laura Wingfield in Menagerie remains physically at home and as such she develops emotional symptoms under the stress of Amanda. In contrast, Tom runs away physically from his family, but remains emotionally attached to his family system. Likewise, Shannon’s life events indicate a geographic separation but also an emotional attachment, which he seeks to replicate in sexual encounters with young ladies, although ultimately these serve to increase the emotional distance in his relationships. Further, because he leaves his family of origin geographically, Shannon “is more inclined to impulsive behaviour” (Bowen 1978, p. 383). Bowen clarifies that an exaggerated pattern of geographical cutoff happens among individuals that either live in solitude or have a superficial relationship with others such as vagrants, hermits, and nomads (p. 383). In Suddenly, Sebastian tries to cut himself off from his mother by living as a hermit in a Buddhist temple, but his mother’s control over him makes this isolation unsuccessful. In contrast, Shannon, though he is an episcopal minister, cannot be classified as a hermit. Instead, he is more appropriately categorised as a traveller or wanderer, because his bag is “a beat-up Gladstone covered with travel stickers from all over the world” (Act one, p. 230). Travellers do not usually build up deep relationships with people. According to Bowen, people who run away to gain independence from their parents are, in some cases, vulnerable to many precipitous behaviours and relationships. This can be used to understand Shannon’s sexual encounters with the young ladies, which cause him to be fired from numerous agencies.

Reminding us of Blanche DuBois, who flirts with a student in her class and with the paper boy, Shannon and Maxine (in her middle forties) seem to be attracted to younger people. Pedro is “a Mexican of about twenty – slim and attractive. He is an employee in the hotel and also her [Maxine’s] casual lover” (Act I, p. 229). Shannon is charged with the “statutory rape” of Charlotte Goodall, a sixteen-year-old musical prodigy and the youngest lady in the Blake Tour party. Previously, Shannon was also involved with another young Sunday school teacher and, consequently, charged with fornication. Although Shannon pretends that he does not want any woman, he believes in the importance of emotional closeness because in his opinion, regardless of the age of the ladies, people always need human contact. When he fails to convince Hannah to travel with him, he submits to live with Maxine. Nonetheless, from Shannon’s level of
differentiation of self, high level of anxiety, and the degree of cutoff, he predictably “resort[s] to more temporary living together relationships” (Bowen, 1978, p. 383). Speaking to himself, Shannon voices his thoughts:

So I stay here, I reckon, and live off la patrona for the rest of my life. Well, she’s old enough to predecease me. She could check out of here first, and I imagine that after a couple of years of having to satisfy her I might be prepared for the shock of her passing on. (Act II, p. 23)

Although he seems happy in his decision to live with Maxine, he keeps in his mind that she may die before him and that this relationship is temporary. Furthermore, Shannon’s uncertainty of having a stable relationship with Maxine leads us to conclude that he could also withdraw from this relationship and escape to somewhere else.

Hannah’s emotional cutoff is less symptomatic than Shannon’s due to her higher level of differentiation of self. Hannah is a middle-aged spinster, who wanders with her 97-year-old grandfather, Nonno, who is described by Hannah as a “minor league poet with a major league spirit”. Hannah “could be thirty, she could be forty: she is totally feminine” (Act I, p. 38). When she appears onstage, “Hannah is facing the Veranda with a proud person’s hope of her acceptance when it is desperately needed” (p. 248). Hannah derives her courage and contentment from her ability to balance between her beliefs and reality. Hannah is classified as a wanderer and traveller but her character has greater depth than that of Shannon, who describes her as a “real lady”. Francis Donahue compares her with the dignified figure of Amanda Wingfield in Menagerie, demonstrating that Hannah has an exceptional stature in Williams’s canon due to her “refined nature, sensitive reaction to a fellow sufferer, her unemotional acceptance of her fate, and her luminous presence” (Donahue, 1964, p. 148, my emphasis). Her knowledge and experience in life are as deep as those of her aged grandfather.

Bearing in mind that Bowen claims that it is “possible to establish a fairly accurate functional level of differentiation by estimating the total family rather than the individual” (Bowen, cited in Sagar, 1997, p. 215), Nonno reveals some facts about Hannah’s family and character that predict both her level of differentiation of self and her emotional cutoff:
Nonno: I call her my daughter, but she is my daughter’s daughter. We’ve been in charge of each other since she lost both her parents in the very first automobile crash on the island of Nantucket (Act II, p.279).

This provides an obvious clue about the multigenerational process: since Hannah is his daughter’s daughter, and she is “brought up to be a wonderful wife and mother” (Act II, p.279), possibly by her mother, Hannah’s level of differentiation of self is shaped by her mother, and her mother’s is shaped by Nonno, and so on. Since her adolescence Hannah has accompanied her grandfather, who recites his poems while she sketches tourists from all over the world. Hannah remarks that she has been around the world “as many times as the world’s been around the sun” (Act I, p. 254) and that she sees their destiny is to be as wanderers.

From a Bowenian point of view, well-differentiated families are “long-lived” people, who have stable lives and do not develop serious emotional, physical or social dysfunction and who are not cutoff from their family of origins and other important family members (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 221). Nonno is described as “a very old man” with “a good kind of pride” (Act I, p. 247) and, Alice Griffin argues, he is still innovative despite his age (Griffin, 1995, p. 220). Nonno’s determination and creativity could also indicate a high level of differentiation of self that transmits to his granddaughter. Hannah remarks that her grandfather’s “recuperative powers are absolutely amazing for someone who is ninety-seven years young” (Act I, p. 249), and these “recuperative powers” could be not only physical strength but also emotional power that keeps his mind younger than his years.

Hannah’s determination, gentility, sensitivity, self-consciousness, and self-esteem, are indicators of her level of differentiation of self. Her wisdom and emotional maturity differentiate her from any other female character in Williams’s canon. Williams states that Hannah is a new figure in his drama and although she is a spinster, who is acquainted much with the spirit, “there seems less conflict within her than, say, in Alma” in Suddenly (Williams, 1961, cited in Devlin, 1986, p. 83). Hannah explains to Shannon her opinion about what a family means to her from an emotional point of view:

We make a home for each other, my grandfather and I. Do you know what I mean by home? I don’t mean a regular home. […] I don’t regard a home as a … well, as a place, a building […] I think of a home as
being a thing that two people have between them in which each can …

well nest – rest – live in, emotionally speaking. (Act III, p. 312)

Her grandfather represents her family and home. She speaks almost with the voice of a therapist, which reveals a remarkable intellectual ability. As Peggy W. Prenshaw finds, Hannah has the ability to make necessary adjustments in her life and her “self-denial produce[s] in her a boundless capacity for tenderness and compassion towards others” (Prenshaw, cited in Tharpe 1980, p. 16). Hannah is a self-disciplined person who has the ability to control her feelings and follow what she thinks is right. She believes in the “impermanence” of things, and so for her building a nest in the heart of other human beings is more permanent than a nest in a tree. On this point, C. Bigsby observes that Williams sets his plays in all kinds of temporary refuges: apartments, hotels, bars, and threatened houses of collapse (Bigsby, 1984, p. 109). Hannah also believes that being among a crowd of people is not an indication of communication, but rather of loneliness. Her determination to go on in this life after Nonno’s death is another piece of evidence for her capacity of differentiation of self. Hannah has a great capacity to differentiate between herself and others, allowing her intellectual system to guide her life.

Hall points out that death is considered the eventual cutoff (Hall, 1981, p. 90). This connects to the death of Hannah’s parents in a car accident when she was between fourteen and sixteen. At that age Nonno would give her a weekly payment of thirty cents for housekeeping and secretarial responsibilities and she subsequently travelled with her grandfather for twenty-five years. She also mentions to Maxine that she is “a New England spinster who is pushing forty” (Act II, p. 283). These facts about Hannah hint at her emotional cutoff that stems from her parents’ death. Hall clarifies that accidental death causes anxiety and symptomatic behaviour, and Hannah expresses her anxiety by classifying herself among “those people who can be young without really having their youth, and not to have your youth when you are young is naturally disturbing” (Act III, p. 310). Losing her parents and assuming responsibility for her grandfather has deprived her of youth. Hannah could have developed more self-destructive symptomatic behaviour, but her paintings and sketching as a form of “occupational therapy” help her to understand herself and the people around her. While her parents’ death isolates her from them physically, she remains emotionally fused to her grandfather: on this basis, the more intense the emotional cutoff, the more severe the
emotional fusion. Accordingly, in Hannah’s case her cutoff from her parents is very intense, and therefore her emotional fusion with her grandfather is as powerful as the degree of cutoff.

In spite of the fact that Hannah and Shannon are classified as wanderers, whose emotional cutoff could be exaggerated, Hannah’s maturity and level of differentiation of self enable her to have a less symptomatic version of cutoff. Peggy Prenshaw compares Hannah with Shannon, saying that the former is a “not quite emancipated Puritan, she understands and lives by the paradox that to win her freedom she must give up the self” (Peggy Prenshaw, cited in Tharpe 1980, p.17). Shannon, in contrast, “has spent years in a wearying rebellion against the restraints on him – against God, the bishops, the tour company he works for, the ladies on the bus, even the easygoing widow Maxine” (p. 17). Although it seems that both of them complete the other emotionally or physically, in this case it does not necessarily indicate that they have the same level of differentiation of self. For Shannon, physical encounters with women are always followed by emotional guilt. Hannah, in contrast, cannot stand to be touched physically, but she nevertheless has a remarkable ability to deal with others emotionally and intellectually. In contrast to Shannon, who does not possess the ability to manage himself and to control his emotional reactivity, Hanna’s high level of differentiation enables her to understand herself, to endure people around her, to control her anxieties and, accordingly, to have a low degree of emotional cutoff. When individuals cut off from their families they tend to begin a sequence of interlocking triangles, serving to extend anxiety and emotional reactivity to society more broadly. In order to test Bowen’s concept of the emotional process in society, the next part of this chapter clarifies some aspects of this process in a discussion of Bowen’s broadest concept.

Societal Emotional Process

As I mentioned in the opening discussion in this chapter, societal emotional process was added to Bowen theory in 1975 in order to extend the theory from the family to include a larger social group. This concept highlights the reciprocal emotional functioning between family and society. Although this concept is less refined than other of Bowen’s concepts, its significance exists in its “innovative context” for understanding interactions in society and family (Hall, 1981, p. 118). This concept assumes that society has an analogous emotional process as the family emotional process. Further, as
members of the family affect each other’s behaviour, reactions, feelings, and thoughts, social institutions, such as family and school, are also mutually dependent on each other.

The emotional process in the family, from the perspective of Bowen theory, can be repeated in social groups and across an entire society. When a family is chronically anxious, the emotional process in the family directs the situation to more emotionally-based decisions (or as Bowen names it: “band-aid legislation”) to mitigate a temporary anxiety rather than a chronic one (Bowen, 1978, p. 386). Thus, this process could impair the functional level of the family members, and stimulates emotional, social and physical symptoms. In the same way, social institutions such as governments, courts, universities and schools could also develop societal regression and symptoms if subjected to a chronic anxiety. As low differentiated families make decisions based on emotional reactivity rather than thoughtful and intellectual principles, the anxiety spreads over into other social institutions.

Similarly to the family that has periods of high and low emotional functioning through time, societies also have emotional periods of regression and progression that, from Bowen’s theoretical opinion, are generated by the disharmony between people and their social environment. On the societal level, Bowen supports the hypothesis that societal anxiety is caused by the depletion of natural resources (that supply technology and are essential to sustain life on earth), population increase, and a decrease in inhabitable land (Bowen, 1978, p. 272). Furthermore, Bowen believes in the theory that “post-war recovery” and changes that accompany the technology and progress cause social anxiety (p. 271). While Bowen’s social model echoes Talcott Parson’s structuralist view of postwar society, his attention to societal regression patterns, such as violence, crimes, chaos and drugs, increased after World War II, and these patterns were intensified during the 1960s when Parsons’ rather static model was challenged by the emergence of social movements. Bowen mentions that the “end of World War II was an important nodal point in a process in which the world became functionally smaller at a more rapid rate” (p. 441). Bowen clarifies that the advanced technology and the loss of frontiers after the war led to more feeling-oriented actions and consideration of rights rather than long-term planning and responsible thinking (p. 440). This sense of fragmentation, chaos, and anxiety is key to understanding Williams’s drama of the 1960s following Iguana.
Bowen mentions that in spite of the fact that the triangle is a vital aspect that unites family and society, and that triangles are available in family and non-family systems, it is still a small clue and not the main reasonable evidence to compare societal emotional process with family emotional process (p. 386). Consequently, Bowen discovered that the clue to the correlation between emotional process in society and family is delinquency or antisocial symptoms in the family. He noticed that the way that social representatives deal with the delinquent is the same as the “permissive” parents, who submit to the emotional demands of the moment in the hope of solving the problem. Bowen summarises this analogous permissiveness of society in the following way:

Society’s emotional reactivity in dealing with societal problems is similar to the years of slow build-up of an emotional breakdown in a family. When the first symptom appears, the family either ignores it or does enough to relieve the immediate symptom, considering the problem to be solved. Then they continue the usual course until another more serious symptom, which is followed by another superficial effort to relieve the symptom. The process keeps repeating until the final breakdown, which is seen as having developed unexpectedly (Bowen, 1978, p. 273)

This way of thinking or reacting is similar to the “band-aid” type or short-term legislations that are directed to relieve symptoms and temporarily relieve anxiety. Put simply, the process is similar to taking an analgesic to relieve specific pain rather than looking for the cause of the pain. To illustrate this: juvenile courts impose on the delinquent regulations in the hope of changing his/her behaviour, but if delinquent behaviour becomes criminal, then courts impose stricter regulations than before in the hope of solving the problem. Because the delinquent is the responsibility of both family and society, other social institutions that specialise in dealing with behavioural problems become involved in the process, such as juvenile courts, schools, police, and consultation centres, as well as psychiatric clinics. This demonstrates a process of different societal emotional interlocking triangles.

Variables that affect the emotional system in the society are analogous to variables in the family emotional process, specifically: differentiation of self, anxiety
and individuality-togetherness forces. The most essential variable is level of differentiation of self because well-differentiated families adapt to any kind of stress, while poorly-differentiated families transmit their anxiety to other social agencies. In this respect, Bowen clarifies that establishing a functional level of differentiation for each social institution can be estimated, especially when antisocial behaviour (delinquency for example) explodes and different social agencies become involved in the emotional process (Bowen, cited in Sagar, 1997, p. 215). According to Bowen, the functional level of differentiation of social institutions can be predicted from the mechanisms of dealing with a problem, social behaviours, and life patterns of the agency policy-founders (p. 215). Katharine Baker emphasises that political, educational, leadership, civil systems of society, and their relationship with neighbouring social systems could be taken into consideration to assign a society’s basic level of differentiation (self-management) through a period of time (Baker, cited in Titelman, 2003, pp. 384-5). This is the same as estimating the total family’s functional level of differentiation from both parents’ level of differentiation, the degree of their emotional cutoff from the family of origin, the interpersonal relationships of the siblings, and the relationship with the extended family.

The second variable in the emotional process in society is anxiety, which is defined by Bowen as “emotional reactivity of the organism to real or imagined stress” (Bowen, cited in Sagar 1997, p. 215). Bowen finds that the level of anxiety in the United States has been increasing since the early 1960s. Papero finds that stress is highly transmissible and infectious; when anxiety appears in a member of any societal group, it becomes like a stress “storm” moving through the group (Papero, cited in Sagar, 1997, p. 221). Subsequently, when a problem occurs at the social level, decisions are made to relieve the symptoms rather than addressing the basic problem. As such, they depend on emotional reactivity rather than logical objective thinking (Bowen, 1978, p. 273). In this connection, Vamik Volkan demonstrates that large group regression occurs when individuals in the group “share certain anxieties, expectations, behaviour, thought patterns and actions” (Volkan, 2002, p. 457); such large groups include religious, ethnic, and national clusters. However, Bowen’s theory of societal emotional regression deals with the society as a whole emotional unit regardless of culture, religion, or ethnicity.
The third variable is the counterbalancing forces of individuality and togetherness, as defined in Chapter 1. To recall, individuality “refers to the capacity to be individual while part of a group” or to be a player within a team (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 63). Togetherness, in contrast, propels people to be connected to the group and to respond to the group’s directives (p. 65). When anxiety increases among a group of people or any societal institution, togetherness automatically overbalances individuality and people strive for automatic togetherness. In this case, togetherness causes more anxiety, which in turn creates more emotional distance and “panicky striving for closeness, which results in more distance”, and the cycle repeats itself (Bowen, cited in Sagar, 1997, p. 216). A slight increase in the distribution of individuality and togetherness does not cause social regression, but nevertheless Bowen observes that human beings need togetherness but are “allergic to too much of it” (Bowen, 1978, p. 280). Likewise, it is important to clarify that individuality in itself is not threatening to the society, but togetherness keeps individuals from reaching a critical point (p. 279).

When levels of anxiety increase in any society, togetherness exceeds individuality, individuals concentrate on their rights and ignore their responsibilities that guarantee those rights, and consequently regression occurs (p. 279). An example of the intensity of societal togetherness is when people move to live in urban areas withdrawing from togetherness. As a matter of fact, they actually increase their anxiety, alienation, and withdrawal and this results in the need for emotional closeness with other relatives or outsiders and so on. Bowen does not ignore the importance of individuality and nor does he prioritise it over togetherness, or vice versa, but rather he highlights the importance of the balance between these two forces to maintain emotional equilibrium on a societal level. In this connection, he illustrates that America for most of its history was attractive to many immigrants because it was focused on individualism. High levels of individuality in the group indicate well-principled decisions, management of anxiety, therefore, a great potential for progress in all its citizens for the advantage of the group and society.

Violence, sexuality, and drug abuse are usually seen as manifestations of anxiety and societal regression (Bowen, 1978, p. 280). According to the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, increasing divorce rate, crimes, violence, drug abuse, and racial division are “symptoms” of societal regression (2014). Bowen explains that if emotional reactivity, anxiety, and a need for emotional closeness intensify, then people seek this
closeness to calm anxiety through an excessive use of drugs and promiscuity. This is especially true if people are not able to achieve emotional closeness in their families, since they are forced to seek it externally. Accordingly, the “incidence of sex outside of marriage has increased and the divorce rate has steadily increased” (Bowen, 1978, p. 280). Bowen also argues that the “sexual revolution, in all its many forms, is seen as a product of the regression” (p. 280). Further, he adds that “Forms of sexuality, previously disapproved and called perverse by society, have now become more accepted” by society in the late 1960s and 1970s as an outcome of emotional process in society (p. 280).

Bowen emphasises that the triangulation process in society is similar to that of the family. Hall also argues that although the emotional process in society is more than a background of family interactions, it “is an abstraction that epitomises how families interact with each other within particular social settings and within particular historical time periods” (Hall, 1981, p. 119). From Crossno’s understanding of triangles in society, anxiety occurs between two groups, then a third party or a group is included in the emotional process to alleviate the tension, and finally the system calms (Crossno, cited in Metcalf, 2011, p. 47). These two perspectives will enhance and broaden the discussion of societal emotional process in Williams’s Suddenly and Iguana by dealing with families and social institutions as essential components in the societal emotional process.

**Societal Emotional Process in Suddenly Last Summer**

In spite of the fact that cannibalism and homosexuality are central themes in Suddenly, the controversy of Catharine’s lobotomy is a vital example of the emotional process within a broader social setting. This is particularly clear in Bowen’s claim that “the one biggest group of societal scapegoats is the hundreds of thousands of mental patients in institutions” (Bowen, 1978, p. 443). In addition to the point that cannibalism is documented in history and literature, it is counted as a mental disorder in the twentieth century. Shirley Lindenbaum points out that cannibalism is a “psychopathology [and] aberrant behaviour considered to be an indicator of severe personality disorder or psychosis” (Lindenbaum, 2004, p. 477). In addition to homosexuality and paedophilia, Roel van den Oever links cannibalism closely to sexual transgression (Oever, 2012, p. 2). In spite of these facts about cannibalism, and although it could be a manifestation of
social regression, the decline of lobotomies in America in the 1950s is a more easily applicable model of societal emotional process.

The setting of Suddenly is a Victorian Gothic style mansion, indicating the chaos that Bowen suggests as social anxiety caused by advanced technology and civilisation. Williams describes this garden as “a tropical jungle, […] The colors of this jungle-garden are violent, especially since it is steaming with heat after rain” (Scene One, p. 101). The tropical jungle in Williams’s Suddenly and Iguana represents horror, regression, decay, war, and anarchy in society. Shannon in Iguana states the tropical countries, where he always takes the ladies, signify something in his mind: “fast decay is a thing of hot climates, steamy, hot, wet climates, and I run back to them […] Yes, horrors! – of the tropical country being conducted a tour through” (Act III, p. 323). In depicting the tropical jungle in Suddenly, Williams illustrates “an atmosphere of lush, sickly decay” (Andrew Sofer, 1995, p. 337). Abha Singh points out that the “psychic perspective of Sebastian is that of a parasite” that lives at the expense of others (Singh, 1998, p. 40). The most symbolic image of carnivores in the play is the Venus-flytrap, a carnivorous plant that feeds on insects, which grows in Sebastian’s garden. Sebastian used to provide the plant with great insects (fruit flies) from a laboratory in Florida. Williams depicts the chaos in such a civilized society as a jungle in which living creatures exploit other beings. It is not only Sebastian who is a parasite, but also the whole society, personified by Sebastian. Although technology enables people to use fruit flies for genetic research, it also increases social anxiety and regression in which “[d]octors can be bought, relatives bribed, [and] attorneys compromised” (Spoto, 1985, p. 222).

In 1955, Bowen observes that society seemed less responsible, less mature, more egocentric, more anxious, and more chaotic than before (Bowen, 1978, p. 270), which led him to think seriously about “social unrest and societal regression” (p. 270). One manifestation of that social regression observable in Suddenly is the power of money in a capitalistic society, as commented upon by Annette J. Saddik, especially since the theme of the play is expanded to indicate “the role of financial power in determining what will count as truth” (Saddik, 2007, p. 44). In this respect, Violet offers financial support for Dr Sugar’s research if he lobotomises Catharine and prevents her from revealing the truth of Sebastian’s death. Daniel S. Blumenthal argues that Suddenly was written at a time when ethical problems, such as the morality of research and the
financial issues related to research, were not as relevant as they are today (Blumenthal, 2011, p. 349). The argument here is that Williams characterises Dr Sugar as the epitome of strength and morality in the play. In addition, regardless of his personal interest in research, and regardless of the absence of legislations and regulations that prevent materialising psychiatric researches in the 1930s, Dr Sugar permits his moral compass to protect such emotionally impaired people like Catharine. Tischler describes the doctor in Suddenly as the “objective viewer”, and he has the real virtue of being impersonal (Tischler, 1965, p. 261).

As Bowen believes that development, technology, and post-war prosperity all cause societal anxiety, Esther Merle Jackson previously interprets Suddenly as a symbol of civilisation that controls people’s behaviour and the society itself (Jackson, 1965, p. 147). Jackson clarifies that a social action towards Catharine’s lobotomy is neither taken by the church (represented by Sister Felicity) nor family (represented by Mrs Holly and George Holly, Catharine’s mother and brother), but the decision is made by science (represented by Dr Sugar, a neurosurgeon) (p. 147). Through Dr Sugar’s comments on the “new” and “radical” nature of his work, which causes fear in others, Williams expresses his own experience of psychiatric therapy (Scene One, p. 113). He goes on to say that “[t]he public hasn’t grasped the true value of what this [psychiatry] can do to help a person. Instead, they think it has something to do with insanity” (Williams, cited in Donahue, 1964, p. 95). Mrs Holly also expresses this anxiety and reassures Catharine that “nobody, absolutely nobody in the city, knows a thing about what you’ve been through” (Scene Three, p. 121). Anastasia Kucharski points out that as a practice lobotomising patients remained radical and investigational until 1942 (Kucharski, 1984, p. 768), despite the fact that the first prefrontal lobotomy in America was performed by the American psychiatrist and physician Walter J. Freeman and the neurosurgeon James W. Watts in 1936. Kenneth Ogren’s investigation provides evidence that lobotomy became a firm medical technology and reached its zenith in America by the end of the 1940s (Ogren, 2013, p. 203). In 1947 the number of lobotomy operations in the country increased to 2000 and Kucharski similarly asserts that the decade after World War II witnessed widespread lobotomies in the United States (Kucharski, 1984, pp. 765, 769). Kucharski also classifies the progress of lobotomy into the early stage to relief the mentally disordered patients’ predicament; the prevalence of the procedure stage, and the third stage that is characterised by replacing the practice with other therapeutic
alternatives (p. 765). Lobotomies started to be perceived as unacceptable in the mid-1950s, primarily due to the unconvincing results of the surgery and then due to the availability of alternative therapeutic medications such as antidepressants and antipsychotics.

These stages can be read as periods of regression and progression: on the one hand, the use of a lobotomy as a cure for serious mental illnesses could be considered progression, but on the other hand, the increasing number of performed lobotomy surgeries in the 1940s could also be an implication of high levels of anxiety, emotional dysfunctions, and societal regression. Dr Sugar in *Suddenly* summarises the limitations of lobotomy, mentioning that it would take ten years for the medical world to prove the efficacy of lobotomy. Moreover, he adds that although the practice relieved patients of “acute disturbances”, “it maybe that the person will always be limited afterwards” (Scene One, p. 113). This is what Bowen implies in his theory of emotional process in society, in which emotional reactivity overrides intellectual capability. *Suddenly* was written and published in 1958, but the play reflects Williams’s deep emotional regret for Rose’s prefrontal lobotomy under the authorisation of their mother. Likewise, Ford demonstrates that the play represents “Williams’s profound distrust of medical science by starkly contrasting the enormous power that society grants medicine with severe limitations of medical technology” (Ford, cited in Kolin, 1998, p. 126).

Another manifestation of social regression that appears in *Suddenly* is the prioritisation of individual’s rights over responsibilities. In times of anxiety, rights dominate responsibility and the greater the demand in rights, the “more an individual concentrates on his or her rights, the less he or she is considerate and responsible about others’ rights (Bowen, 1978, p. 279). In *Suddenly*, Violet devotes her life after Sebastian’s death to “the defence of a dead poet’s reputation” (Scene One, p. 103). Violet admits Catharine to St. Mary’s Asylum and pays the costs in order to silence her and thus protect Sebastian’s reputation. In this way, Violet’s responsibility towards her son’s reputation makes her completely ignorant of Catharine’s rights in spite of the fact that Catharine has her own rights and needs. Catharine deserves to be taken care of because the death of Sebastian has emotionally disturbed her. Catharine’s rights are abused as she is not asked for her permission to enter the asylum. Further, Violet believes that because the Hollys are dependent on her financially, she has the right to decide Catharine’s lobotomy instead of Mrs Holly, Catharine’s legal guardian.
However, neither Catharine’s mother nor her brother defend her rights, because both of them are more interested in their own affairs. The togetherness in this case dominates Catharine’s individuality because both George and Mrs Holly are economically destitute and financially dependent on Violet. Violet, in turn, threatens to deprive them of Sebastian’s inheritance unless they convince Catharine to forget the truth about Sebastian’s death.

In Suddenly, and on the familial level, although Catharine is emotionally anxious, she stands for individuality and her own rights. Mrs Holly and George, claiming to love Catharine, try to make her think and behave according to their “directives” by focusing on her responsibility towards the family rather than her right to reveal the truth of her cousin’s homosexuality and death. In comparing the emotional process in the family with it in the societal level, Violet, Mrs Holly, and George stand for togetherness and emotional closeness while Catharine represents individuality. Violet, Mrs Holly, and George do not believe Catharine’s account of Sebastian’s death and they think it is “irrational”. Violet thinks that Catharine is responsible for Sebastian’s death, George thinks the telling of the story is unreasonable and unbelievable in such a civilized country as the United States, and Mrs Holly counts it as a fictitious and imaginary story. These moves toward togetherness increase Violet’s anxiety and keeps her at an emotional distance. She does not view Mrs Holly and her children as her family as they “are not blood-relatives of [her], they’re [her] dead husband’s relations” (Scene Four, p. 128). This situation illustrates how the balance of togetherness-individuality is disturbed, the level of anxiety increases, and social regression occurs.

It could be argued that Mrs Holly’s basic level of differentiation of self does not enable her to make significant decisions in her family. This corresponds with Bowen’s argument that societal or familial emotional regression “occurs when the family, or society, begins to make important decisions to allay the anxiety of the moment” (Bowen, 1978, p. 277). In this respect, and in addition to the fact that Mrs Holly is dependent on Violet financially (and thus not her equal), the former’s level of differentiation of self does not enable her to make an autonomous decision regarding her daughter’s lobotomy. In the societal emotional process, individuality (represented by the doctor) can be increased if the leader or responsible individual has “the courage of his conviction [and] who can assemble a team, and who has clearly defined principles.
on which he can base his decisions when the emotional opposition becomes intense” (p. 279). Dr Sugar is responsible for Catharine’s operation, and he stands for his values which are clearly defined. Violet offers to finance Dr Sugar’s medical research if he performs a lobotomy on Catharine, but as a responsible person, Dr Sugar answers her that although he has financial problems and he needs “a separate ward”, “trained assistants”, and wants to “marry a girl [he] can’t afford to marry”, he is aware and understands the side effects of the operation. He tries to alleviate the anxiety and emotional intensity between the two oppositions, Violet and Catharine. This is especially evident when the two women have an argument about Sebastian. In view of that, Dr Sugar’s final decision that Catharine’s story about Sebastian “could be true” is based on a careful listening to the opposing sides, which not only calms the anxiety of the moment, but also a long-term anxiety. Thus, Dr Sugar’s behaviour originates from an ability to take objective decisions in times of anxiety and can be interpreted as an example of responsible and socially progressive individuality.

In addition to the idea that Williams critiques the general social intolerance to homosexuality, it can also be interpreted as another manifestation of the societal emotional process in Suddenly. John M. Clum points out that Sebastian’s private life becomes a public and social matter when Catharine witnesses his death (Clum, cited in Butters et al., 1989, p. 157). As Steven Bruhm demonstrates, the sea-turtle scene, involving the consumption of the hatchlings by carnivorous birds, places Sebastian in “a system of power relations which he cannot fully control. This system uses cannibalism as a trope for the social anxiety surrounding homosexuality” (Bruhm, 1991, pp. 532-3). Bruhm clarifies that the relationship between homosexual males is a kind of “mutually consumptive bond” in which men use each other and “the strengths of the consumed man are passed to successive generations” (p. 533). From these perspectives, the emotional system is structured by uncontrollable relations among the components of the emotional field, regardless of whether they are members of the family or society. Williams links cannibalism to homosexuality to confirm that the latter is a source of social anxiety for many heterosexual Americans, even up until the early 1960s. In this regard, Saddik points out that psychological and social disintegration transfers to a form of bodily fragmentation through cannibalism and “tearing apart” (Saddik, 1998, p. 348). Accordingly, cannibalism is not only a metaphor for social intolerance towards homosexuality, but also towards other undesirable elements in society: that is to say, the
poorly-differentiated Venable family spills its anxiety into the wider society, thereby contributing to its breakdown. As Williams states, “without planning to do so, I have followed the developing tension and anger and violence of the world and time that I live in through my own steadily increasing tension as a writer and person” (Williams, *The Observer* 1957). This violence, tension, anarchy, and regression will be noticed clearly in the fragmented characters of *Iguana* and the social relationship system in which they live.

**Societal Emotional Process in *The Night of the Iguana***

As noticed in *Suddenly*, cannibalism, homosexuality, and the decline of the lobotomy as a medical procedure are features of the emotional process in society. *Iguana* also contains other aspects of the societal process such as violence and war, the detrimental effects of technology, the imbalance of individuality-togetherness, promiscuous sexuality, and the inconsistent relationship between rights and responsibilities, all of which will be discussed in this section. In spite of the fact that wars have emotional, social, and physical consequences on the individual, family, and society, Bowen believes that “the anxiety that starts regression is related more to a disharmony between man and nature than to disharmony between man and his fellow man, such as war” (Bowen, 1978, p. 279). Bowen also notices that societal regression was evident after World War II, increased in the 1950s, and intensified in the 1960s. Thus, through his position as a psychiatrist working with families and prominent in the national scene for many years, he believed this represented a downward trend towards regression. Although Williams would not have agreed with some aspects of Bowen’s account (particularly with respect to sexual identity), this trend is clearly evident in Williams’s drama, and Tom Scanlan observes that in Williams’s early plays he “dramatized the family world [as a social institution] in a state of collapse; in later ones family collapse is antecedent to the action” (Scanlan, 1978, p. 166).

In Williams’s *Iguana*, we can notice the effect of societal anxiety that originates from both wars and nature. From a Bowenian perspective, material plenty and rapid technological advancements afforded certain people a high standard of living that ultimately led to the depletion of natural resources, disturbing the balance of the environment, and consequently instilling deep anxieties and fears in people as a result of the exhaustion of these resources (Bowen, 1978, pp. 440-1). Phillips demonstrates
that technological progress threatened the peaceful and simple rural surroundings, and is thus considered to be one of *Iguana’s* significant themes (Phillips, 2000, p. 64). Indicating that technology participates in social deterioration, Hannah remarks that her grandfather, Nonno, “feels that the decline of the western world began with the invention of the wheel” (Act I, p. 250).

Although Bowen states that the effect of nature on the societal emotional process is deeper than the effect of wars, war and interpersonal conflict could be considered significant factors in social regression. In other words, in addition to political reasons and individual interests that lead to outbreaks of war, the depletion of natural resources (especially oil) and human’s fears about the future of the planet also play a significant part. The historical setting of the play is the early stages of World War II, evidenced by the German tourists, the Fahrenkopfs family, who brutally disregard everything and everyone around them and celebrate Hitler’s victorious bombing of England in the Battle of Britain. It is of relevance that Mexico did not participate in World War II until 1942. Maxine’s hotel in the town of Puerto Barrio embodies a geographic link between North and South America, and it also symbolises a refuge for many people from the ongoing war. The German family represents a manifestation of social unrest in which the individuality of the Nazi leader overrides the togetherness of the society, causing instability and decline in the overall functioning.

Along with general social unrest, violence, terror, and destruction, humanity’s propensity for conflict and the ability of people to destroy and even devour each other are observable in *Suddenly*. The images in *Suddenly* “are of violent nature – a jungle-like garden, [and] the attacks of birds on the sea-turtles” (Berkowitz, 1992, p. 96). Ford finds that Violet resembles a “fascist demagogue, [who] bribes, bullies, and beguiles all within her sphere of influence; she commands all of the blessings of civilization, but persists morally and spiritually as a savage” (Ford, cited in Kolin, 1998, p. 134). The attacks, the jungle, and the flesh-eating birds that “hovered and swooped to attack” the sea-turtles in *Suddenly* are correlating themes in *Iguana*, represented by the Nazi German air force attacks on England. As Thompson finds, the Nazi leaders’ “atrocities and crimes against humanity derive precisely from the same inflated sense of exclusiveness and superiority which [Violet and Sebastian] revere and embody” (Thompson, 2002, p. 113). From a Bowenian perspective, this exclusiveness originates from a low level of differentiation of self and from an increase in individuality that
disturbs the individuality-togetherness balance. Violet’s character is not that far removed from Boss Finley in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, since both represent the corrupted demagogue who interferes in the private lives of individuals, violates the rights of others, and encourages the norms of discrimination in society. In *Iguana*, this is represented by the Nazi false principles in violating the rights of minorities and disturbing the balance of rights and responsibilities. By relating such violent characters as Violet Venable and Boss Finley to Hitler, Williams highlights the universality of violence, fascism, and material power, regardless of time and place.

The disturbance in the individuality-togetherness balance that starts social regression and in which togetherness overcomes individuality is represented by Shannon’s exclusion from the church. Shannon is fired from the church after being charged with “heresy and fornication” for calling God a senile delinquent in response to those “smug, disapproving, accusing faces” (Act II, p. 268) over his sexual involvement with the parishioner. The accusations from the community and the way in which the church treats Shannon causes him to rethink his behaviour and Williams seems to be suggesting that it also leads to societal emotional regression. In reference to the outrage and shock Shannon caused when speaking from his pulpit, he tells Hannah that “a thunderstorm broke that Sunday” outside the church and “it was wilder than I was! And out they slithered, they slithered out of their pews to their shiny black cockroach sedans” (Act II, p. 269). As Shannon commits his “heresy”, anxiety continues, the emotional reactivity increases, and the role of individuality disappears. Further, the religious officials lose their ability to make decisions, with Hannah stating that this “is just what they did – poor things” (p. 269). This indicates that the overall functional level declines. In Shannon’s opinion he “was not defrocked”, but rather “was just locked out of the church in Pleasant Valley, Virginia, and put in a nice little private asylum to recuperate from a complete nervous breakdown, as they preferred to regard it” (Act II, p. 269). “They”, the church congregation or the religious officials, put him in an asylum to recuperate from a nervous breakdown and provide him with a chance to overcome a temporary anxiety rather than addressing a long-term psychological problem.

Both promiscuous and repressed sexuality can be seen as indicators of societal emotional regression, which clearly appears in *Iguana* as closeness. For example, the promiscuous sexuality of Shannon, Maxine, and Miss Fellowes, the results of a panicky pretence to achieve emotional closeness, could be considered outcomes of the emotional
process in society. Shannon is sexually involved with young ladies and Maxine hired a pair of Mexican night-swimmers six months before her husband, Fred, died. In their encounter Shannon and Miss Fellowes exchange accusations: she accuses Shannon of being “filthy” and he calls her a lesbian. The argument is that American social norms and concepts in the late 1940s and 1950s impose what is considered “decent” and “legal”, and likewise what is not. Thus, what might be considered acceptable for some people in a specific society is not acceptable for others. For example, Shannon views Fred’s indifference to Maxine’s promiscuity as a result of Fred being “just cool and decent” (Act I, p. 242). Moreover, when Charlotte asks Shannon to marry her, he replies that a “man in [his] condition can’t marry; it isn’t decent or legal” (Act II, pp. 263-4), indicative of his emotional state of mind and the fact that he is physically locked out of his church. Further, Williams mentions that the German family in the play “are all dressed in the minimal concession to decency” (Act One, p. 233), signposting that there are degrees of decency that unravel under what were approved as moral and immoral norms in society at the time.

Bowen argues that as “regression increases through successive stages, new ‘norms’ of behavior are established throughout society” and the togetherness of society demand a “professional approval” for these new norms (Bowen, 1978, p. 280). This kind of professional approval for new norms of sexuality is expressed as “rights” of “freedom from sexual repression” (p. 281). It could be postulated that Bowen’s theory of sexual revolution (as a manifestation of societal emotional process) could be either regression from a conservative Republican point of view or progression from a liberal Democratic standpoint. It could be interpreted that Bowen’s structuralist theory is aligned with conservative values, but he mentions that his evaluation of the functional level of society in twenty-five years has no direct relationship with the conservative and liberal forces (p. 276).

Another manifestation of societal regression in Iguana is the domination of individual rights over social responsibilities. In this respect, the unity of Miss Fellowes and Jake Latta (who is sent by Blake Tours to take over Shannon’s party) overrides Shannon’s individualism. On the one hand, both Miss Fellowes and Latta concentrate on the ladies’ right to have a good tour, whereas on the other hand Shannon, exhausted emotionally and financially, loses his last hope working with Blake Tours and pleads for his rights: his right to have a rest for three days at the Costa Verde hotel, his right to
severance pay, and his right to tell his side of the story with Charlotte, in that he “took
her out that night at her request, not at [his] … suggestion” (Act III, p. 296). Even
though Hannah does not like Miss Fellowes and the other ladies, she rationalises that
they have the right to a good tour because “they did save all year to make this Mexican
tour, to stay in stuffy hotels and eat the food they’re used to. They want to be home
away from home” (p. 303). Consequently, each one of them (Shannon and the ladies)
encroaches upon the other’s rights, the overall level of responsibility declines, and
emotional societal regression occurs. He pleads for autonomy, emotional closeness,
harmony, and rights, but the united ladies accuse him of irresponsibility.

This theme also operates on the level of symbolism in *Iguana*. Social anxiety is
epitomised by the symbol of the iguana, which represents both Shannon’s situation and
that of all human beings. Embrey deduces that the captured iguana “not by coincidence
is it supposed to become Maxine’s dinner – its intended fate reinforces Shannon’s fears
that [Maxine] will devour him” (Embrey, cited in Tharpe, 1980, p. 77). This devouring
metaphor parallels the scene of cannibalism in *Suddenly*. Williams describes Shannon
as follows:

[He is a] man who is very much concerned with what is going on in
society. […] you realize this is a person whose great redeeming virtue is
that he has a true and deep social conscience. […] But still, through the
personal disturbance you see the presence of a deep awareness of social
inequities, the starvation and the misery. (Williams, 1961, cited in
Devlin, 1986, pp. 80-1).

When Hannah wonders how Maxine can eat an iguana, Shannon tells her that hungry
people will eat anything. According to his experience gained from the tours of God’s
world, Shannon finds that “[t]here’s a lot of hungry people still in the world. Many have
died of starvation, but a lot are still living and hungry” (Act III, p. 322). Shannon tells
Hannah about two indigenous people in a nameless country who ate offal. What can be
related to Bowen theory here is that one of the causes of starvation and desolation is
associated with population explosion, which plays a major role in causing anxiety and
social regression.

Aspects of societal emotional process not only appear in Williams’s *Suddenly*
and *Iguana* but also in the early plays, and even intensify in his late plays. As discussed
in the introduction of the thesis, “drug addiction, alcoholism, prostitution, gambling, divorce, venereal diseases, illegitimacy, poverty, homosexuality, crime, riots, and racial discrimination” are usually considered manifestations of social breakdown (Goldman, 1967, p. 157). In this connection, Gerald M. Berkowitz remarks that in *Sweet Bird of Youth* the “sensationalistic plot turns on violence, political corruption, alcohol and drug abuse, sex for hire, racism, venereal disease, castration, and hints of incest” (Berkowitz, 1992, p. 96). Writing in 1978, Bowen states that there is “evidence that the functional level of differentiation in society has been lower the past few decades. It would be the number and intensity of the forms of emotional disruptions, such as major crimes, riots, etc.” (Bowen, 1978, p. 440). Accordingly, any undesirable behaviour, situation or event at any period of history in any society could be considered an aspect of social anxiety and destitution. For example, beggars are mentioned in *Suddenly* when Sebastian asks Catharine not to look at the dark naked children labelling them as monsters and considers beggars as a social disease. Big Daddy also remarks that in his trip to Spain he noticed those “bare skins beggin’ like starvin’ dogs” (Act II, p. 60). Maxine also reprimands Hannah for dragging Nonno “like Mexican beggars carry around a sick baby to put the touch on the tourists” (Act II, p. 282). Moreover, Big Daddy refers to his experience in Morocco where he observed that Arab woman used her 5-year-old child for prostitution. These situations confirm the universality of the manifestations of social regression in Williams’s drama.

To conclude this chapter, emotional cutoff is a mechanism used to deal with unresolved attachment to the parents. It has the ability to ease and mitigate stress temporarily, but at the same time can increase emotional reactivity and the need for emotional closeness outside the family. It also has a positive effect on the family emotional system. Still, this is contingent on the individual’s emotional maturity and autonomy. Thus, it could be argued that Bowen meant the following: differentiate yourself, but do not *totally* cutoff yourself from the family emotional system to keep the integrity of generations. In *Suddenly*, Sebastian Venable’s cutoff is emotional because he fails to escape geographically from his mother’s domination. His self-obsession and level of differentiation of self, family projection process, and his sibling position as the only child, all prevent him from being a differentiated self. In *Iguana*, although both Hannah and Shannon are wanderers, Hannah’s emotional cutoff is less severe than that
of Shannon, who segregates himself geographically and emotionally from his family of origin and develops social and emotional dysfunctions.

The degree of cutoff from the family affects the degree of societal emotional process: low levels of differentiation of self and high anxiety indicate a severe emotional cutoff from the family, and, consequently the intensity of the emotional process in society. This is because when anxiety increases in the family, cutoff spills over out of the family to triangulate other relatives, relationships, and social (political, religious, medical) institutions. As noticed in this chapter, Sebastian’s anxiety, cutoff and its consequences spread into other areas to include his relatives (the Hollys), police, courts and the asylum. Shannon’s cutoff in Iguana is also sharp to the extent that it extends to triangulate his private relationships, the party he accompanies and the church. Hannah’s cutoff, in contrast, embodies social progression in which high levels of differentiation of self leads to address the anxiety intellectually and more objectively.

It is simple enough to imagine the chaos in any society if we take into consideration the natural realities (depletion of natural resources, population explosion, and the disappearance of frontiers) and cultural facts (religion, education, politics, media) mingled with each other and causing regression in society. In Suddenly and Iguana different manifestations of societal emotional process appears clearly such as the breakdown of the family institution, sexual deviation, social crimes, bribes, mental disorders, emotional disturbances, drug addiction, social corruption, religious deterioration, promiscuous sexuality, alcoholism, starvation, decay and decline that correlates with technology and war.

In Suddenly Last Summer, Violet’s malice and hatred destroy herself, son, and relatives. She represents the roots of fragmentation, chaos, and corruption in which man destroys his fellow man by using technology, power, and money to satisfy her selfishness and greed. Although the end of The Night of the Iguana seems optimistic, this optimism is not emotionally convincing and it lacks the connotation of integrated family: Hannah remains alone, whereas Shannon has no other choice than to remain with Maxine and endure life with her grudgingly, accepting her financial and emotional partnership.
Conclusion

Differentiation of Self and the (Dis)integration of the Emotional System

*I believe that man is moving into crises of unparalleled proportion, that the crises will be different than those he has faced before, that they will come with increasing frequency for several decades, that they will go as far as he can in dealing symptomatically with each crisis, and that a final crisis will occur as soon as the middle of the next century.*

*(Murray Bowen, 1978, p. 281)*

In this thesis I have argued that Murray Bowen’s theory provides a new and valuable paradigm for reading family members’ interactions in Tennessee Williams’s early and middle plays through an analysis of eight interlocking concepts. Each concept provides a theoretical approach for analysing the complex dramatic relationships between characters and the central theme of family disintegration in Williams’s plays from the mid-1940s until the early 1960s. The thesis states that, according to Bowen theory, any change in the family emotional system stimulates the functioning towards either the stabilisation or destabilisation of the system. In Bowen theory, the unit of analysis is the family rather than the individual, and the overall functioning of the family either enhances or impairs any member’s functional level in the emotional system. My argument is that the overall functioning of the family members predicts the outcome of either the emotional and functional integration or the disintegration of components in the system. The thesis does not seek to examine the social, political, economic, or cultural reasons behind the disintegration of the American family from a sociological or a strictly historical perspective. Instead, by applying Bowen’s general theories to the specifics of Williams’s plays, I have shown that the study of the family members’ interaction in the emotional system can explain their degree of stability or instability.

I have asserted that the nuclear family was the basic social structure in the United States during the 1950s. Thus, and because the family is a system, the emotional structure of the family in Williams’s plays is highlighted rather than the family as an
economic or patriarchal unit. This is to express the emotional function of the family and its role in family emotional disintegration. The emotional structure of the family in Williams’s plays is based on a more basic triangular structure which involves at least three people and thus subtly questions the ideology of the nuclear family that was so prevalent in that decade. For instance, *The Glass Menagerie* is classified as a single-parent family that focuses on the threesome of Amanda, Tom, and Laura. This is also true of his plays of the 1950s: in *Sweet Bird of Youth* Boss Finley’s family is composed of father, daughter, and son. Because a two-person relationship is rarely stable in times of stress, and because the triangle is the basic “building block of any relationship system” (according to Bowen), my claim is that the emotional structure of Williams’s plays is triangular. In other words, Williams and Bowen would agree that the triangle is the ignition key of the emotional process. As I have shown, both of them were interested in the central family triangle, which can involve any number of people, and the system becomes a sequence of interlocking triangles that expand to include other members of the extended family, friends, and their social context.

The triangular-structured family is evident also in Williams’s 1960s plays. For instance, George and Isabel Haverstick, the newly-married couple in *Period of Adjustment*, triangulate with Ralph Bates, who helps the couple to reconcile their marriage. Ralph and Dorothy Bates, in turn, not only triangulate with their son in the emotional process, but also Dorothy’s parents. In *The Night of the Iguana*, the three-person relationship is not familial but involves Maxine, Shannon, and Hannah. Despite the fact that the emotional structure of the triangle can be applied to family and non-family systems, levels of differentiation of self can best be examined within the context of the family. Nevertheless, levels of differentiation of the self in *Iguana*'s triangle are examined in social relationship systems rather than family settings, even though the characters’ family history enhances our understanding of their emotional functioning: Shannon’s dysfunction in his religious family settings, Maxine’s over-functioning with a husband ten years her senior, and Hannah’s emotional fusion with her grandfather, Nonno. Likewise, societal emotional processes in *Suddenly Last Summer* are also viewed through the characters’ interactions with each other and through a social relationship system rather than studying each character separately.

As I have shown, the basic argument of the thesis is built on the fact that levels of differentiation of self and anxiety in the system predict whether members of the
family have a tendency toward stability or instability, integration or disintegration. Understanding family dynamics within relationship systems in Williams’s plays necessitates a detailed understanding of Bowen theory, particularly the central concept of differentiation of self. When anxiety arises in any emotional system, members of the family pressure each other to behave, think, and feel in a specific way and triangles appear in the system. If the level of anxiety increases, then emotional reactivity increases and, accordingly, other interlocking triangles in the nuclear family start to form. The emotional process does not stop in the nuclear family but it develops to include emotional cutoffs from the family of origin, emotional transition process through the generations, and the societal emotional process.

Keeping this in mind, we see the theme of family disintegration operating in all eight of the plays I have studied in this thesis. Returning to chapter 1, in *The Glass Menagerie*’s triangle, family members function in reaction to one another and their emotional system is fused. This emotional fusion makes the Wingfield network fragile under stress and it explodes in the last scene when Tom escapes from his family. The symbol of the menagerie is not only the icon of Laura’s brittle world, but it is also a symbol of the Wingfields’ and Williams’s intense emotional fusion and togetherness that, under stress, can shatter like glass.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the functional level of the emotional triangle maintains the integration of the nuclear family of Stella and Stanley. Blanche’s triangulation with the Kowalskis destabilises the family system, whereas the Kowalskis’ balanced level of differentiation of self helps to prevent the system from erupting. Blanche’s differentiation of self, anxiety, multigenerational transmission process, and her severe emotional fusion with her family of origin impair her functional level within this family system and make her the most dysfunctional and susceptible member to anxiety. The conflict between her desires and her Southern aristocratic thoughts and gentility at Belle Reve steers her life towards psychological disintegration.

In *Period of Adjustment*, the mechanisms of the nuclear family mitigate each of the two couples’ anxieties and permit a period of modification towards a family system and a sense of togetherness. Although in both couples there is a variance in levels of differentiation of the self, the emotional complementarity between each couple enables them to preserve a sense of emotional harmony and integrity. The Winemillers’ nuclear
system in *Summer and Smoke*, and the dysfunction present in Mrs Winemiller and her mental disorder, lead Alma to be projected in her family. The Winemillers’ dysfunctional emotional system plays a substantial role in Alma’s desolation.

As chapter three demonstrates, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* not only represents the deterioration of the ideal myth of the South, but it also underlines the decline of emotional and social structures of the extended family. The members of Big Daddy’s family, consisting of two male siblings, their wives, and five grandchildren, who all live under one roof, charge and intensify the multigenerational emotional process. Such a system is fraught with anxiety, tension, and sensitivity. The stability and integration of the emotional system relies on the balance of individuality and togetherness. Further, multigenerational emotional process influences the level of differentiation of self, spouse’s selection, and predictable characteristics of the future generations. Physical distance or closeness among family members does not necessarily guarantee the integrity of the nuclear or extended family. On the contrary, Williams shows that physical closeness among extended family members could increase anxiety and upset the balance.

Chance Wayne, the only remaining bird in his clan in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, tries to uphold an American model of individualism, self-development, and independence. However, social norms (influence, power, and money) impose upon Chance a lifestyle with which he cannot cope. Consequently, Chance’s opportunity to achieve a responsible and mature individuality deteriorates under a societal emotional system. Boss Finley represents the despotism of patriarchal authority that shapes the next generation’s functioning according to the society’s expectations rather than the generation’s own beliefs. Boss Finley’s racism and his belief that the “white race should not be polluted” is projected onto the black bird, Chance, and complicates his sibling position profile.

In *Suddenly Last Summer* and *The Night of the Iguana*, Williams uses Sebastian and Shannon to reveal that when a family produces members with low levels of differentiation of the self, these members become cutoff from their family of origin and start forming fragile and unstable relationships in society. The iguana is not only the symbol of Shannon who frees himself from the emotional trap that he will at some point return to, but it is also a symbol associated with Sebastian who is not able to
differentiate himself from the emotional system and ultimately is consumed, literally and figuratively, by the savagery and chaos of society. The argument is that emotional fusion equals emotional cutoff and the results are mostly the same. Simply put, if individuals are not able to differentiate themselves within their own family, then they have little chance to differentiate themselves in larger social settings.

I have hypothesised that Williams developed family relationship systems in his plays against the context of dominant social trends in the 1950s that privileged the nuclear family as the basic emotional and stable social unit. But, as Peter Titelman notices, “from the end of the 1950s, Bowen understood that the emotional process in the nuclear family was a fragment of a larger process involving young adults leaving their families of origin through variations of cutoff” (Titelman, 2003, p. 19). This links to my argument that Williams’s early and middle plays are more appropriate to the Bowen model. It also correlates with the central argument that Williams’s 1960s plays transform from a family model to a more fragmentary individualistic course that appears clearly in Iguana, and later intensifies in the 1970s plays such as In the Bar of Tokyo Hotel (1969), Small Craft Warnings (1972), Vieux Carré (1977), and Clothes for a Summer Hotel (1981).

The core of this thesis indicates that those families with high levels of differentiation of self are emotionally autonomous, less emotionally reactive, flexible to changes, more capable of facing any internal or external anxiety, coaching with their nuclear and even extended family instead of cutting off, and, therefore, more able to keep a sense of familial emotional integration. This system allows both for its members to be autonomous and, regardless of the physical distance between family members, to remain emotionally integrated. Poorly differentiated family systems, in contrast, are emotionally fused and can erupt under stress. The environment of this system impairs the emotional functioning of its members, and consequently leads the overall functioning of the family to disintegration.

To conclude the thesis, I want to examine the implications of the universal or cross-cultural aspects of Bowen theory. Kerr and Bowen mention that “content varies from family to family and from culture to culture; emotional process is the same (varying only in degree of intensity) in all families and in all cultures” (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 202); by content they mean the “different belief systems, values,
customs, fears, and ways of coping with anxiety” that transmit from one generation to the next (p. 201). C. Margaret Hall confirms the utility of Bowen theory for “cross-cultural research” due to its “emphasis on universals in human behaviour” (Hall, 1981, p. 21). The universality of Bowen theory, and its ability to predict “the possibilities and probabilities” of human behaviour, make it applicable, theoretically at least, to different people from different cultures and ethnicities. This is regardless of the fact that Williams’s plays depict white American families, and Bowen builds up his theory with reference to postwar American society.

Since the early development of his theory, Bowen faced the problem of communicating his ideas to people within and beyond the psychiatric profession and to differentiate it from general family systems theory. He mentions that only a small percentage of people could understand the theory and he expected the reason for this is due to the fact people are not used to hearing about “systems” concepts (Bowen, 1978, p. 387). Michael Kerr states that although many people appreciate Bowen’s contribution in family therapy, some of them still misunderstand the concept of differentiation of self (Kerr, 2007, Interview). Kerr adds that he is frequently asked about the inapplicability of Bowen theory to some cultures such as East Asian and Middle Eastern families that emphasise togetherness over individuality. In response to this, Kerr explains that: first, basic emotional patterns such as triangles, emotional conflicts, emotional distance, and projection occur in every family in any social setting. Second, the concept of differentiation of self when equated with emotional maturity indicates the emotional functioning that exists in all cultures (Kerr, 2007, Interview).

American society has historically placed (and continues to place) more emphasis on individualism and autonomy than other cultural models, particularly those from outside Europe and North America. Because cultural values shape behaviour to some extent, Bowen bases his theory on human behaviour foundations rather than more complex cultural dimensions. For example, multigenerational transmission process demands prolonged information about a line of multiple generations of the same family. Although empirical studies in the field of social sciences have investigated the validity and utility of the multigenerational concept (Klever, 2004; Baker and Wiseman, 1998), this concept could remain impractical and an abstraction, for literary studies particularly.
In contrast, Monica McGoldrick and Betty Carter criticise Bowen theory because “it does not account for the fact that women and minorities have experienced a socialization that actually proscribes the assertive, self-directed thinking and behavior that are necessary for differentiation” (McGoldrick and Carter, 2001, p. 285). In their opinion, women, homosexual people, and some ethnic groups cannot differentiate themselves from a society that penalises such categories of difference. This was particularly true of the 1950s and early 1960s, specifically in respect to homosexuality and race, as Williams’s dramatic works portray. For example, Blanche’s sexual promiscuity and Brick’s homosexuality are rejected by family and society. In Williams’s early and middle plays, African-American characters are often given very minor roles, and in most of the cases they are servants, such as in Cat, or are considered a threat to white society, as in Sweet Bird. Even in Suddenly Last Summer, the cannibals are “dark naked children […] with little black mouths”. Nonetheless, as Williams acknowledged, the 1960s witnessed the African-American Civil Rights Movement that could be seen as a social progression to end what was left of racial segregation. Even though Williams’s statements and the subjects of his plays do not deal in depth with the politics of race, his later plays depict this to some extent by focusing on outcast and marginal characters in society. For example, Williams’s play The Kingdom of Earth published in 1976 (previously published with the title The Seven Descents of Myrtle in 1968) deals with the politics of race by marginalizing Chicken, a major character in the play, as a “mulatto” who descends from African-American mother and a wealthy landowner.

In response to the feminist criticism that Bowen theory contains a gender-bias, K. Blake Horne and Mary W. Hicks clarify that “Bowen theory was never meant to be sensitive to the content of any sociological variable, whether it is gender, race, culture, sexual preference, or religion. It was put forth as part of a broader effort to move the study of human behavior toward the life sciences” (Horne and Hicks, 2002, p. 111). In this connection, Richard B. Miller, Shayne Anderson, and Davelyne Keala provide empirical studies supporting the validity and universality of Bowen theory. They demonstrate that there are no gender differences in the levels of differentiation of self, even though they admit that women usually have higher levels of emotional reactivity than men (Miller, Anderson, and Keala, 2004, p. 462). Furthermore, Ona Bregman’s social work with women supports the idea that although individuals’ ability to think and
feel “may be clothed differently not only for different genders but also for different people of the same gender, but basically emotional process is the same” (Bregman, cited in Lieberman and Lester, 2004, p. 211).

According to my understanding of Bowen theory, it is close to being a social science that explains human behaviour on a broad structural level, rather than explaining cultural and sociological matters in detail. It is therefore not as attentive to factors of culture, race, gender, and sexuality that – particularly at times of social oppression – can lead to emotional anxiety. It is these elements of social identity that led to a number of new movements, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, that questioned the ideology and purpose of the nuclear family. In this way it can be argued that Bowen’s theory is neither attentive enough to differences in identity and historical change nor it is totally ignorant to them. This is because, as previously discussed, the functional level of differentiation of self can be affected by cultural variables. Furthermore, the main variable that affects basic level of differentiation of self, in turn, is anxiety that is available in every culture and every emotional system. To illustrate this, anxiety can be physical, social, emotional, cultural, sexual, economic, religious, or political. However, these issues are often only implied in Bowen’s theory, and Williams’s drama helps to clarify these cultural specifics. For example, the source of the Wingfield family’s anxiety is economic, Blanche’s anxiety is social and economic, George’s anxiety is psychological, Big Daddy’s anxiety is social and physical, and Shannon’s anxiety is religious, to name just a few of Williams’s examples. Further, the scale of differentiation of self does not account for gender characteristics on an individualized level, but rather the members’ levels of differentiation of self (whether males or females) in the emotional systems.

In Bowen theory, any group at any social setting is an emotional system. Williams and Bowen enable us to think emotionally and intellectually about our role in the family, society, and the world around us. Simplifying the understanding of such an intellectual theory through literary works enables the individual to function more prudently in the family and social system and to be a goal-directed person, having the ability to take the “I-position” in times of anxiety and conflicts, thus enhancing individuals and families’ ability to acclimatise effectively in life. Further, a deep understanding of Bowen theory encourages me to develop a ninth concept that I will name the “global emotional process”. This is especially relevant since the twenty-first
century is shaping up to arguably be an age of social regression on a number of fronts: the Palestinian Israeli multigenerational process since the early beginnings of the twentieth century; the tragedy of 9/11 at the beginning of the century; the global economic crisis of 2009; the Arab Spring and chaos that has started in 2010 with nonviolent revolution in Tunisia and developed to a violent civil war in Syria and Libya; the series of interlocking triangles and the refugees’ cutoffs following the Syrian crisis since March 2011; global warming and the depletion of natural resources; rapid technology and social media that increases emotional distance between people and brings anxiety into the living room; social projection process for minorities and ethnicities; political and interlocking triangles; and international conflicts and dysfunctions, are all indicators and manifestations of a wide-ranging emotional process.

Notwithstanding that empirical studies have provided evidence of the legitimacy of Bowen theory, it is important to point out that future literary research needs to take into consideration other additional features and probabilities of the theory. For instance, can literary texts approve the validity of the multigenerational process? Is the theory effective with step-families, childless families, families with adopted children, or same-sex relationships? Both Williams and Bowen focused on the heterosexual family, and this is not surprising because the acceptable norm of the family in 1950s American society was heterosexual rather than homosexual. Future research could also highlight to what extent the economy, policy, religion, gender, race, ethnicity, traditions, and culture affect the family emotional system and levels of differentiation of self. Moreover, future studies could be geared to understand not only Williams but also other writers and other texts.

A final question should be kept in mind: does the intellectual system usually guide the emotional process towards a sense of stability or will it always inevitably erupt? In spite of the fact that most societies privilege rational decisions over emotional ones, it could be argued that a balance between the two would prevent purely unconscious or instinctual motives guiding individual or group actions. One lesson that can be learnt from exploring the relationship between Bowen Family Systems Theory and Williams’s drama is that to improve the chances of family integration at a differentiated level, we should keep a balance between individuality and togetherness no matter the length of the physical distance between family members. I have argued that the structures in Williams’s plays mirror those of Bowen’s system to some extent,
but also make us look at more specific factors which a broad systems theory cannot
easily account for. Laura’s emotional fragility, Amanda’s fastidiousness and
thoroughness, Blanche’s sensitivity, Alma’s distraction, Ralph’s emotional capacity,
Maggie’s strength of mind, Big Daddy’s perception, Big Mama’s wisdom, Hannah’s
contentment and determination – the drives that stimulate and shape the behaviour of all
these characters call attention to the range and applicability of Williams’s universal
theatre. The world is full of examples of Williams’s profound characters but the power
of his drama lies in its emotional ability to portray reality on the stage and off the stage.
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Primary Resources


**Secondary Resources**


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