

NOTHING WILL COME OF NOTHING: THE UN/NATURALLY UN/CONDITIONAL FAMILIAL LOVE IN KING LEAR AND MOM AND DAD (2017)

The way we view family and how it is regarded in our modern culture would be well served to compare to family values and behaviours of the past, and more specifically, to early modern culture, represented in this paper by the bard himself. As displayed in the modern example of the film, parents place such a high standard, and pressures on themselves to consider themselves (if at all), “good parents.” Not to mention, those who start a family/wed because of societal norms: find a partner, get married, get a 9-5 job/stay at home, and have children. There is no reason this should be the cage that keeps in not only the person and individual, but their hopes, dreams, and desires. As can be seen in the Shakespearean text, unconditional love is not a standard that is important to base commitment or truth upon, nor is being a parent conducive to any form of being a beneficial and important part of society. In fact, giving up one’s own agency to view their children/family as an extension of themselves can do much more harm than good.

This paper will attempt to tackle horrors of familial love, which have been used copiously in films such as *Orphan* (2009), *Goodnight Mommy* (2022), *Parents* (1989), *Hereditary* (2018), *The Prodigy* (2019), *The Babadook* (2014), *The Brood* (1979), and *Dogtooth* (2009), to name a few. These films include all types of horror tropes/sub-genres: body horror, torture, cannibalism, the supernatural; all shredding the conceit that a loving family is a natural thing.

UN/NATURAL LOVE

While the term unconditional love may sound biblical in nature, it was coined less than a century ago in 1934 by German psychoanalyst Erich Fromm. He connected this type of sacrificial love to a parent’s love. And yet, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, written centuries ago in 1606, challenges that notion with as much brutality as modern film.

*Lear* starts off with a ridiculous conceit of giving his daughters power based on their “love” and continues this behavior all the way to his demise, and the demise of those that did love him. Though his ailment is not named, everyone can see his deteriorating condition. After Cordelia is banished in the first scene, an act done in haste and without rational, Goneril and Regan discuss their father’s poor judgment:

“The best and soundest of his time hath been but  
rash; then must we look to receive from his age,  
not alone the imperfections of long-engrafted  
condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness...” (1.1.341-345)

The only one who cannot see this awful condition is Lear himself. As Addyman (2021) highlights, the failure of Lear’s human relationships in the play exposes him and others to the ‘unnatural’ in humans and the indifference of non-human nature. The fact that he asks who loves him most and equates his daughters’ words to giving them reign over his country, shows that he does not comprehend that he and his daughters are separate individuals. Their love, even if it did exist, has nothing to do with how much of

him, and his country, they should receive. When it comes to the one daughter who speaks her truth, he is completely indifferent, and yet still sees her as an extension of himself and his own desires, fears, and beliefs. After being captured and fated to die, Lear merrily (and obliviously) says:

“...so we'll live,  
 And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
 At gilded butterflies...  
 And take upon's the mystery of things,  
 As if we were God's spies:” (5.3.12-18)

In *Lear*, it could be argued that the main reason for the happenings that turn from bad, to worse, to tragedy, originate from the “**un**-condition” part of the word “unconditional.” Lear is in a state of un-condition, because he is untethered from everything that gave him a sense of self: his kingship, and his family, which he believed loved him, and through that love did he acquire his own self-worth (Tallent Lenker, 2001). This has caused him to be divorced from time, space, coherence, and recognition of his environment. In simpler terms, he’s “lost it,” as can be seen, for example, when he is treated by the physician Cordelia brings to him:

“Where have I been? Where am I? Fair daylight?  
 I am mightily abused...  
 ...let's see;  
 I feel this pin prick. Would I were assured  
 Of my condition!” (4.7. 59-64)

Termizi, Jianbo & Mani (2023) employ the Bowen Family Systems Theory, arguing that the main reasons for the dysfunctional relationships in *King Lear* are the projection of Lear’s anxieties or unresolved conflicts onto his daughters and the chronic anxiety brought about by the societal regression. These anxieties and conflicts bring about what these critics refer to as low self-differentiation. Differentiation of self refers to the capacity to maintain one’s individuality while remaining connected to others or the ability to be separate while maintaining commitment (Titelman, 2014).

This commitment is seen as the bane of all parents’ existence, as well as their reason for living, in *Mom and Dad*. The awfulness of family, the horror of it, comes from the first moment we are introduced to the Ryans family, during a simple “getting ready/eating breakfast” scene at the top of the film. Brent (DAD), Kendall (MOM), daughter Carly and son Josh swear, they’re angry, disappointed, and guilty – and the child-killing virus hasn’t even reached them yet. The horror is as casual as the family.

## THE MONSTERS

As the film progresses, all parents watch – or are around - static on a screen, and become homicidal maniacs, killing their children with anything they have in hand, from a chainsaw to a meat tenderizer. Though this appears as a simple horror trope in the apocalyptic film genre, it goes much deeper when it reaches the Ryans. It is the element of danger and vulnerability of being attacked by someone who is supposed to protect

you, the person who gave you your life. On a more emotional level (which gives the audience watching pathos/catharsis) – the people who should love you the most.

When considering modern times, one could ask an important question – why is a parent’s love the most powerful love, if we put biology aside? There are external reasons that may change someone’s regular behavior, social pressures such as financial institutions, laws, and societal norms that must be adhered to. These can create, much like in *Lear*, aggression and even violence. A societal system like the family unit, or the “correct” way to love and be a parent, creates a set of morals that may not connect to the truth of the individual. After all, many choose not to have children, or marry, or even live with a roof over their heads. Others become monsters because they did not consider their parenthood a choice:

“Systems are evil, not people. It is society or ideology that churns out monsters; the blame is diffused to the larger social system. This view fits nicely with liberal postmodern ideas about *structural* rather than individual responsibility, but it also sits well with neoconservative arguments that we must alter the cultures of theocracies and monarchies everywhere to create freer, happier, decidedly non-monstrous individuals at home and abroad. We live in a time when it is reasonable to think of monsters as socially conditioned or constructed (Asma 243-244).”

When one becomes a part of an institution, there is a certain comfort of being told how to behave, a gilded cage, so to speak. If a parent gets a 9-5 job they despise, society is quick to remind that it’s the correct thing to do. If a couple is together, they must wed. Then, have children. Statistically, two being the most accepted upon number and considered ideal (one child of each sex, even better). However, with independence and choice removed, so could other barriers, like the fine line between cruelty and monstrosity, or harshness and violence.

At its core, human agency is the same whether you rule a kingdom or work as a car salesman/carpenter/teacher/politician/stay at home parent. These days, institutions are much less tangible, considering the media, and especially social media to be one (if not the most) prominent among them. It’s not a coincidence that in *Mom and Dad* the virus is spread via a static TV screen – those days of watching wildly terrifying events unfold only on TV, usually with a delay and only from the point of view of the newscaster, are long gone. Now, terrorists record their heinous, horrific acts online, streaming them in real time. While they attack, you can hear them praising their leaders, their religious affiliations, their hate speech in the background, along with laughing and cheering (The October 7<sup>th</sup> attack in Israel was a true first in that sense, we saw the terrorists as they invaded, while they attacked, how they used and dragged the bodies, captured the prisoners, looked into the lens of their phones, showed their faces; those videos keep circulating even now). In the film, both Kendall and Carly are on their phones constantly, looking away from any TV screen.

If the rules do not apply anymore, then chaos becomes the monster. The cage becomes invisible, but we can still feel it. We feel the celebrities telling us who to root for, we can see the products sold to us if we want to or not, we can see the evil humans

doing evil deeds, and the “perfect” people doing perfect things, like families, usually comprising of a father, mother, daughter, and son (and maid), just like the Ryans.

Even though the rules are not laid out by a governing source telling them to love their children and sacrifice it all, that is no longer needed in today’s world. And even if we go back to *Lear*, where there were many governing institutions – especially for royals – the tangible rules created monsters, including Lear (rules for a King were legion), Regan and Goneril (monsters from lack of agency and a mad/old/dying King), and Edmund (barely considered human, as the laws claim he is the lowest form of being – a bastard).

If one relinquishes their agency to rules they can or cannot touch, it also gives them someone to blame, because the person is without choice. Thus, “of course it is important to the political and social sciences that the essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them” (Arendt, 135).

In the play, humanity is lost from the first scene as a result of Lear’s demands, though we are told throughout the play that his condition, and the plotting behind his back are nothing new. The moment Lear equates love to power he loses it all.

In *Mom and Dad*, the virus acts as an agent that removes said machinery, the cogs keeping society revolving. That is when all parents become monsters.

The institution of parenthood creates power, which changes according to the family. Lear not only has power because he is King, it is because he is the sole parent (and a man). But it is “fake” power, as the story unfolds and we realize who controls him, and how they debase and ruin him. In the film, Brent and Kendall are the same. They have “power” in the sense that they can tell their daughter to come to dinner and not have her boyfriend over, but in actuality they are the sole reason for both their misery, even before the virus breaks. Their children leave them in the end, powerless, tied up, and practically dead. What will they do once all the children of the world escape? If parents have no one to blame/kill, how will they come to terms with their own choices, their succumbing to the invisible cage of societal norms?

#### IT'S FOR YOUR OWN GOOD

Lear rules an entire country, and he starts off the play cutting up that land according to his daughter’s claims of love and devotion. It is, simply put, narcissistic and the opposite of what is considered a good King and parent – sacrificing, giving his all, unconditionally. Due to the ailment he suffers from, we get a ruler who uses his position for his own benefit, under the guise that giving his kingdom to his daughters based on their love makes sense, since that means they will take good care of it. His daughters and sons serve a purpose. They are his heirs. Thus, they are worthy. This may explain a question that often comes up when researching this play – why does the play start at “the end?” When Lear is already well into his sickness/madness and asking a question that would be ludicrous even without the kingly context?

It is because he needed to get to a point in which all scheming people involved can lead him to his end, with barely a whimper. A system of oppression or control must

be indisputable, the subjects must be under complete submission, such as the example given in Arendt's 1963 book, of Nazis bringing their victims, without protest, to the noose. There is no rebellion, no coup. The person subjected is not a person anymore, but a tool to make the system disguised as a government serving the people to continue the rouse and become that much more powerful.

The parents want their children to have everything they need in the film. They have nice clothes, electronics, access to all the comforts and luxuries an upper middle-class household can provide. And yet, they resent their parents from the first scene. They believe they should get what they want because that is a parent's "job." Thus, the metaphor of killing your child becomes wish fulfilment. Through modern psychology, many speak of their resentment to their parents, and are encouraged to do so. Why are parents not allowed, or it is frowned upon, for them to resent and even hate their kids?

#### GROWING PAINS

As terrible as it is to kill a child, what if the script is flipped, and parricide is brought into the discussion surrounding familial love? The killing of a parent seems less morally abhorrent, somehow. Less "unnatural." Films such as *Natural Born Killers* (1994), *The Good Son* (1993), *Sinister* (2012), *The Omen* (1976/2006), *The Children* (2008) – these all show how a child can kill the parent, because they want to. When going through a count of films about killing children, these far outnumber horror films about children killing parents, by a landslide.

The reason for this difference may go back to the previously mentioned invisible cage. When the age a child "turns" on their parent/s, this usually occurs in ages right before they become adolescents. At this age, psychology tells us, children begin to differentiate themselves from their parents, partially because they start seeing them in a more realistic light. The parents' weaknesses, emotional nature, their 'failures,' controlled by outside forces, slaves to societal norms that the children are not. The child then decides to take advantage of the classic trope "they're just kids," and really makes a meal of it (Beyers & Goossens 2007).

When it comes to film, movies that showcased this power struggle began to become more popular in the 60's and 70's, a type of childhood rebellion in the form of the sexual/feminist revolution was countered with exorcism films aplenty. Nearly every time, a young woman's behaviour could only be explained away by being possessed. No other reason for her to have sex, or steal from her mom's wallet (Carly), or sneak around with her partner. It must be the devil (Thomas et al., 2022).

What is arguably the most influential and monumental horror films of the supernatural/religious sub-genres is *The Exorcist* (1973), and the daughter's name who is exorcised is Regan. Her symptoms? Bodily fluids, emotions run wild, aggression/violence, all being a drastic change from the submissive, delicate little girl she used to be before her possession. The parents, bring in a middle-aged white priest to solve this.

If the man of the cloth represents repression, or even the past, what does Regan represent, in both this film and in *Lear*, and found in Carly? The future that the older generation, *Lear*, even hyped-up parents crazy to kill their children cannot stop. In *The*

*Exorcist*, faith wins out, the family unit is restored, so all's well that ends well. But was it familial love that made it happen, or simply a normative (at the time) societal temporary fix to a problem that cannot, and will never go away – children growing into young adults who take over their respective times.

In *King Lear* and in *Mom and Dad*, there is no such happy ending – if one is so inclined to call it that. Lear is overrun and dies from the grief of losing Cordelia, who was inadvertently killed by her sisters/their army, Regan and Goneril, who then die together in a murder-suicide. In the film, Brent and Kendall are tied up in their prison/basement, seemingly left to starve to death.

Could these not be seen as happy endings? Lear could not rule, he was unfit and dangerous as King; perhaps Edgar (the good/real son) would rule well, maybe even become a great King. The final words of the play come from Lear's faithful servant Kent, speaking of his King: "The wonder is, he hath endured so long." (5.3.315)

This could be read in several ways, but in the context of the play starting from an older man, Lear, who is already suffering from the illness, should be taken off the cast into retirement. Instead, he continues the battle not because he loves Cordelia, or any of his children. Not because he loves his country. His ego is the culprit, the one convincing him of his superiority. And so, it also keeps him going much, much longer than he should have. A man with his faculties intact would have decided on an heir (rationally) long ago, and retired. Kent bemoans on older man, though his King, not accepting his limitations, not bowing his head to nature that creates generations and children, as well as illnesses, and death.

In the film, Carly, her boyfriend, and little brother Josh escape. Is that not better than being killed by their parents, or, succumbing to a society of maniacal killers, and instead creating a new society? Carly and her boyfriend do not bow their heads to their parents, either. They do not go silently into the virus-filled night. They claw their way to freedom. Though they do not kill their parents, just like Lear does not directly kill Cordelia - but does when he sends her to fight her sisters - they leave them to starve.

Our society says that it is most unnatural for a parent to lose a child. A parent should not outlive their offspring. Lear tries to, and dies, loses it all. In the film, the same thing happens. The authorities catch on quickly to what is happening, and try to fight against the infected parents just as much as the children. The police/authorities is another symbol – society, and the 'system' that the Western world has built relies on these young people to continue making it stronger, or sometimes, to change it, for better or worse.

Is the horror in the death of Cordelia which Lear caused, or in Lear's death? If Cordelia fought to her death in the name of her father, died for him, is that unconditional love, or romantic nonsensical sacrifice? In the film, is the horror in the virus causing parents to go mad and kill their children, because that is 'unnatural'? Or maybe it is in the generational differences that causes the massive divide between the parent and the modern child – the parent in the cage of capitalism=love, and the child in their cage of the media and outer influences they don't quite comprehend due to their young age? Parents being obsolete? Children being a burden? Wherefor lies the horror?

## TRUTH AND BLOOD

Cordner (2016) also challenges the concept of unconditional love:

“On the face of it, any claim by a parent (for example) that s/he loves his/her children unconditionally may seem to express hubris. Why so? Well, unconditional love, surely, cannot fail, just because one who loves unconditionally loves, and would love, come what may. So, loving unconditionally—as implying loving “come what may” —involves continuing to love despite whatever does or might happen to ones’ beloved. But it also involves continuing to love whatever happens to the one who loves (2).”

Connecting this sacrificial love to hubris sounds human, and true. Even when we write about superheroes that are seemingly far better than us (Superman is a great example of this), they all have at least one flaw. It is impossible not to be flawed, and thus, it is impossible to love in a way that makes it a superhuman, intangible ability. Parents cannot know what their children will become, nor do they know what kind of children they will be. Can love withstand all levels of betrayal, immorality (as defined by the society in which the parents live), actions against parents, or against humanity?

In the film *Mom and Dad* (2017), we see both parents battle with the concept of unconditional love/parental love, as it is prescribed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century within a Western, American context, as Kendall drives Carly to school:

MOM: I mean, everything just revolves around you, doesn't it?

CARLY: Doesn't everyone's world revolve around themselves? Who else should it revolve around?

MOM: Well, you're part of a family, Carly, and that means that you love each other even when you can't stand each other, and that you give a shit even when you don't really give a shit.

Carly, in a sense, takes on the “Cordelia” role, as she is brutally honest throughout the film, like a Greek chorus of the viewer’s subconscious (or conscious thoughts they are scared to say aloud). Carly, like Cordelia, sees through the nonsense, the trite societal norms.

MOM: Honey, your grandparents are coming for dinner tonight, remember?

CARLY: Mom, really?

MOM: Really. What? You haven't seen them in months, and they're not getting any younger.

CARLY: Awesome! You and Grandma passive-aggressive bitching at each other and Grandpa telling us his disgusting Vietnam stories.

Not only is Carly telling her truth, she tells her parents’ and her grandparents’ truth. Brent’s mom hates Kendall. Brent’s dad hates Brent, because he considers himself a Vietnam hero. When the virus hits and the grandparents arrive, Brent’s father runs after him and menacingly spits: “I fought in wars! What did you do??”

Here is seen one of the main commonalities between the play and film, that relates directly to familial horror – the truth. Most horror films start with everything being ‘normal.’ Even in *Mom and Dad*, though their normal is not usually shown unless it is in R rated movies, the family reacts to each other in a normal fashion. They are

snippy with each other, they say nothing when their comeback would have been too brutal, and they reply in passive aggressive ways that though truthful – still hide the whole truth, which the virus in the movie is here to expose.

Carly is a great conduit to expose truth prior to the virus, but even she keeps things bottled up until she finally shouts at her mother who is trying to understand the reason they have drifted apart:

MOM: You could have a new cousin today, that is a big deal, and all you can think about is... you know, I don't even know what you think about, because you don't tell me anything. We used to be best friends, remember?

CARLY: Okay well, that's not the case anymore, Mom, I have other friends.

MOM: Right, see it's just for me, you and Josh are everything. So, you don't get to just shut me out, okay? It's not fair.

CARLY: God, it's not my fault you have no life!!!

Carly, throughout the film, is different to Cordelia in the sense that her parent is not indifferent to her, but wants to connect. However, the length to which Kendall goes to in order to connect is trying to use her youthful language (she uses the term hashtag), but she does not actually try to get to know who Carly is, which is similar to Lear, who considers Cordelia an extension of him, but is completely blind to who she is as a human being that is not his heir.

The reason Carly explodes and says her mom has no life is that it's true. Kendall is seen working out in room full of women half her age, and talking to a friend about her miserable meaningless life. Then, to combat that feeling, she goes to what she thinks is a job interview. Instead, she's laughed at by her potential employer due to her age and inexperience; he believes she's only there to hook up with him.

And so, another truth that is revealed in both pieces: without children, the parents in the film and play have nothing. Lear bases his life on the love of his daughters, Kendall does the same, and Brent/Dad bases his life on a 9-5 job that he is only doing, as he makes clear in the film, to pay for the “extravagance” that is having children. He constantly reminisces about his youth, because his dreams were what he was living for, then. After children, the dreams go away and all of life, work, and your daily routine revolves around what Carly represents, as does Cordelia's sisters – children who are not necessarily grateful, or seeking their parent's approval/love.

#### SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

The film begins with Carly on her bed, speaking with her boyfriend, which her parents do not allow in the house, telling him she will try to get away from the “parental units.” She also steals money from her mom without shame or guilt. Much like in *Lear*, the parent is looked at as a type of machine that provides life and cares for them in a material sense, but they are not owed anything in return. Regan and Goneril are an extreme case of this, taking away Lear's power and even the roof over his head. Lear, via Cordelia, tries to avenge himself and get his country back, but they are no match for the Royal Guard. The film takes it one step further – parents may give life by creating it, but they can also take it away by directly, and violently, murdering their children.

This is another truth that connects to the natural/unnatural elements in both pieces that are the essence of the horror: what is natural. If animals cannot “love” in the way we perceive humans are capable of, how could we be capable of unconditional love, or even love in general?

In the film, the murders committed are mostly off-screen, but the faces and bodies of the parents *are* seen, moving in an animalistic fashion, close to the ground, on all fours. This is another element of truth and what is natural – we are only one smartphone away from being primates, well known in the animal kingdom for killing their newborns.

If a parent is displeased with their child, why not dispose of it, like Lear does? This is also seen in many Sci-Fi films of the future, when genetically altered humans are tailored to the parents’ specifications physically and in personality traits. We can also see it in our real, human past, with the prevalence of infanticide.

#### THE END OF US

The film, in many ways, portrays a secret fantasy all parents have of hurting their child. Though showcased in the only genre that would allow it to be humorous, horror, the film tackles this very real concept. What happens when the cage is broken, when fantasy turns to obsession and the realization, that while societal cages/norms forbid it, we can, indeed, hurt those we love, we can murder our offspring, and we have a lengthy history of doing so for many reasons that do not involve a virus.

The unconditional love we so often speak of is part of the gilded cage parents live in, it gives meaning beyond biology to take care of our young, and give them all of ourselves. The phrase ‘flesh and blood’ may sound like a great name for a horror movie; but is in fact a not-so romantic way to describe our children. Society/laws/Western morality dictates that blood is thicker than water, another phrase less than appetizing to describe something that we *should* aspire to have – family. These phrases may be all that remains to show what family really is. Blood. Flesh. Breeding. We are not born into romance, but if the child is lucky, they may be born into a family, just like Lear, Brent & Kendall and most of the Western world that believes in taking the cold, harsh phrasing and turning it into a fairytale of support, care, and unconditional devotion.

While there is much familial horror in *King Lear*, it is the love – or relentless desire for it, that creates the anxiety, terror, cruelty, psychological and physical torture, and the heartache of missed opportunities in the play. The true horror here is what Lear and Cordelia represent, which could be read as wrongfully as mixing up family with unity, truth with justice, and blood with unconditional love. Lear splits his country into three parts, because he has three daughters. The magnitude of their love goes in accordance with the size/importance of the land. Goneril and Regan, who seem so unified in their blood as sisters, kill each other. Cordelia believes she is just in avenging her father’s treatment by her sisters, yet is easily squashed by the royal guard, and ends up dead. The blood this family shares does nothing to keep them together, just, true, or united. It only tears them apart.

The film continues that same notion, with a 21<sup>st</sup> century twist – what, if at all, is natural when considering family? If no one is there to speak the truth, to unbind what makes us separate from our animal counterparts in the wild – is a familial ‘unit’ based on love considered healthy, or natural at all?

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