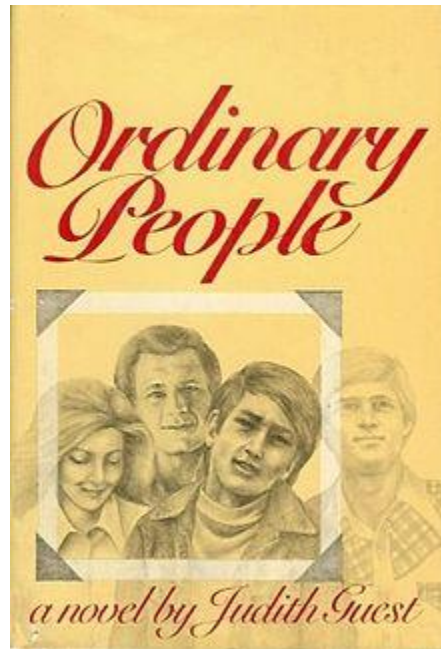


Consequences of Family Disintegration in Judith Guest's
Ordinary People

Radhakrishnan, C., Ph.D. Research Scholar



Abstract

This paper focuses on one failed family and its anxiety over the sudden death of a person and a suicide attempt of another one simultaneously. The primary focus is on growing children are increasingly more and more isolated from the family and other friends. The author portrays the one unsuccessful family unit and their inability to overcome their present problems among the members of the family. The events of the novel are strongly influenced by the past, notably the protagonist's brother's sudden demise in a boating accident. Each one of the family is worried about the past at the same time, and they have forgotten their present life because they are dwelling in the past. On the other hand, the lack of communication gap between the protagonist's father and mother's relationship make wider from the beginning to end of the novel. They fight more often internally but not openly at least through some words of argument. Their personal

relationship is saying that they love each other but never sharing and showing in a better relationship. In the end, both the protagonist and his father have come closer, but his mother leaves them for an indefinite period. Both father and son do not know any reason for her leaving and the rest of the family shed tears at the end.

Keywords: pain, mental illness, struggle, alienation, death, suicide attempt

Introduction

Judith Guest is a screenwriter and novelist, her successful novel *Ordinary People* (1976) propelled her fame as a best-selling author. The movie based on the novel was an award-winning film directed by Robert Redford. *Second Heaven* (1982) is also much-admired more audience not like the first novel. These are merely set in contemporary middle-class suburbia. Judith Guest's introduces her characters especially troubled adolescence males as a central figure. The characters struggle with problems such as: suicide, depression, isolation, divorce, and child abuse. These similar themes reflect in her first two novels. Guest's *Ordinary People* begins with the bumper stickers as means of expressing what that principle can be for different people. When the novel begins, the protagonist is introduced as a high school student without guiding principle. He is simply lying on his bed in the morning, thoughts about the different things he has to complete. He is unable to move from the bed and is struggling to resume his life with family and other friends.

Sudden Death of the Protagonist's Brother

The novel *Ordinary People* begins with the protagonist, Conrad Jarrett who is released from his hospital stay due to his unsuccessful suicide attempt. His elder brother has died in a boating accident in which the incident happened in front of his eyes forces him to kill herself by slashing his wrist during shower. Later, his father has admitted to a hospital and rescued him. After his return from the hospital stay for around eight months treatment, Conrad recovers physically but not mentally. Still, Conrad is grieving alone without sharing anyone in the family. In the morning hours itself, " he rolls onto his stomach, pulling the pillow tight around his head, blocking out the sharp arrows of the sun that pierce through the window" (Guest 02). He lies on the bed and thinking that morning is not the right time for him. His thinks that he does not have

his guiding principle to follow. Due to his hospital visit, Conrad becomes junior at school and old friends are away from him. He has become a poor student at studies which is strongly influenced by the events of past. He does not do much school work properly. During his class hours, often Conrad begins daydreaming. When he is brought back to reality, his class teacher calls on him to comment on the lead character in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Then the teacher tells Conrad that she does not want to push himself. At the same time, Conrad realizes that what he needs is to be pushed by himself instead of others. However, Conrad is not a good conversationalist with the family to talk about this issue to them. But his eternal silence causes that he will never correct all his defects.

Back to school from the hospital, Conrad has struck between pressure and concern over his father's protectiveness and mother's lack of interest in her husband's behavior. Both are quite the opposite in their activities. Therefore, Conrad is willing to work at being a good swimmer again. But he quits school swim team because water and its waves remind him of the drowning of his brother's death often. This incident is seen throughout the academic circle is faced with crisis after crisis and gets emotional embarrassment in every day. So he does not enjoy his school choir too. Conrad's only hope is Jeannie, who is a new student at Lake Forest, becomes the close girlfriend of him. Another likable friend is Dr. Berger, a psychiatrist. At the request of his father Conrad has met the doctor who is affectionate and has a soft corner towards him. On the other hand, including his close friends, especially Stallman also is apparently cruel from the beginning of the novel, vulgar, and quite the opposite to Conrad. Once, Conrad is reading a newspaper that the shocking news about his hospital friend Karen Aldrich's suicide attempt. He happens to know she made her successful suicide attempt which ends up her fulfilling her intention. At home, his father worried too much about his son's different behavior and his mother's concern on husband's over protectiveness separate the entire family. Conrad's suicide attempt, enough from school swim team, a junior at the school, separation from old friends, poor performance at studies, the breakdown between the father and mother have happened because of the elder brother's death. This horrible incident brings a complete failure in Conrad's life with the family and other friends.

Calvin Jarrett's Over Protectiveness

Calvin Jarrett, the protagonist's father, and his professional success has enabled the family to provide a very comfortable life to his wife and the beloved sons. Calvin himself has grown up in a Detroit orphanage home without knowing his role model as a father figure. But, now he is a real good father and well-wisher of the family, which for a long time is a source of great pride to him. His mother had died, and he became an orphan at the age of eleven; "Calvin has caught himself thinking about that lately, and wondering if all these years it is still in existence" (Guest 07). Calvin's struggle after the marriage life with a complete settlement is also not separated from him. During his early days, "there was no room for him in the apartment, no money: it was no neighborhood in which to bring up kids" (Guest 07). He hardly remembers his mother sending him gifts on his birthday, and on the occasions like Christmas. His mother rather visits Evangelical Home where Calvin spends his childhood days. Calvin becomes a tax attorney, husband, and a father of two sons. Being responsible as a father, he never ignored his family at any circumstances.

Calvin realizes that the father role is not a simple one. That is to mean minding manners, respecting those who are bigger or smaller than fathers. The reason for the absence of his father, if anyone should ask him, he always points out that he has no example to follow. But his two sons at present in the family are fortunate because he has a good father figure to follow. The sad incident happens to Jarrett's family is his elder son's sudden death. Later, it is followed by his younger one's suicide attempt. The two horrible incidents have haunted the entire family. Calvin spends much of his time alone instead of his family when he is grieving for his only son and wife's digression. The author has given that the clear picture of the father's role is a harsh and challenging one. Calvin's life in this novel before and after the marriage life is full of endless inner struggle. He will never stop worrying about his son and his abnormal behavior that is why her wife isolated from him, because she is not that type of character and nerve-racking about the past. Then, there is a gap between husband and wife relationship from the beginning to end.

Beth Jarrett

Beth Jarrett is the protagonist's mother, who spends most of her time playing golf with friends and working around the house. She is deeply troubled by the horrible incidents she has experienced with her two sons. At the same time, she wants to move on without dwelling on the

past. But her husband's grieving attitude brings her into conflict with him. She utterly hates Calvin's over protectiveness of his son. Even both spouses are not in contact with each other even though they are living in the same house. The only reason is that Calvin often thinks about the past. She is not ready to remember or recall about the dead past. The one such example is clear from her son, saying that "she's not a worrier" (Guest 42). And also "my mother is a very private person, he says. We don't ride the same bus" (Guest 98). Conrad's reply to Dr. Berger expresses the apparent misunderstanding between son and mother's relationship. Beth says her husband that she does not understand at all, and does not want to live with the past hanging over her head.

However, Beth is interested in keeping up the appearance that all is well in the household, and her relatives. This is obvious that Beth's relationship with the family is a difficult one. Even when they disagree with going away for Christmas trip to London, Calvin insisted them not to travel during Christmas because of his son's poor mental and emotional state. This decision has caused tension in the family because Beth wanted to visit during vacation. Here, the protagonist's father and mother's mutual understanding and grief over son's death. At last, Beth has revealed the sources of his anxiety about the possible Christmas trip to London. Therefore, the final chapter of the novel focuses on Calvin, who has just been left by her wife. Beth does not say goodbye to the family; both of them have different expectations. They have been fighting for many days until Beth's departure; as a responsible father, husband, Calvin, who is always trying to mend everything. And slowly both father and son begin to put two and two together; it shows the meaningful father-son relationship. Finally, Beth tells them that she is leaving; the novel ends with another widening rift between the parents' relationship.

Conclusion

To conclude this paper, the author expresses this sort of soundless emotional anguish of the one failed family through this novel *Ordinary People*. The story ends in an inconclusive manner because of the endless struggle among the members of the family. The events of the story and its sad moments have disturbing implications in the characters lives, which show the absence of any one person in the household. The rest of the family is consistently scattered permanently.

References

Guest, Judith (1976) *Ordinary People*, New York: Penguin Books.

Guest, Judith (1983) *Second Heaven*, New York: Viking Press

Hardy, Thomas (1981) *Jude the Obscure*, New York: Signet Books.

Jump up to a b Guest, Judith; 2005; Biography at judithguest.com; retrieved on September 16, 2006.

VanAntwerp, Jill (2000) "An Interview with Judith Guest," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 16: Issn. 2, Article 3.

Just, J (2010) Essay: The Parent Problem in Young Adult Lit, *Sunday Book Review*, *The New York Times* http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/04/books/review/Justt.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

Ouellette, Jeannine: November 2004; Judith Guest: Ordinary person; *The Rake*; retrieved September 17, 2006.

Radhakrishnan, C.
Ph.D. Research Scholar
Bharathiar University
Coimbatore – 641 046
Tamilnadu
India
rkradhakrishnan6@gmail.com