

A Cinematic Case Study: “I Never Sang for My Father”

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Mini Review

In addition to their pure entertainment value, cinematic or feature films may powerfully influence views in popular culture about aging and the elderly held by younger and older audiences around the world. Educators and trainers in adult development and gerontology increasingly use such films to introduce discussions about aging and to assess how closely the fictionalized portrayals of elders and age-related issues match historical or contemporary reality. *I Never Sang for My Father* is a now-classic film that can serve these purposes.

Background and Storyline

Originally begun as a screenplay by Robert Anderson, *I Never Sang for My Father* had a brief run as a Broadway play in 1968. The film version, directed by Gilbert Cates, was released in 1971. The film deals with the defective relationships between an 81 year-old father, Tom Garrison (Melvyn Douglas) and his two adult children- Gene (Gene Hackman) and Alice (Estelle Parsons).

The film traces the source of these problems to Tom’s own early childhood experiences. When he was a young boy, his family was abandoned by his father, forcing him to sell newspapers and “dance a jig for pennies” in local saloons at night to support his mother and sister. He grew into an emotionally-disabled adult, unable to extend love to his own children and unable to recognize their need for his love. Instead, Tom expects and demands their loyalty.

Gene, a teacher, seeks affection and approval his father cannot provide. Tom is severely possessive of Gene, who now lives far away and is engaged to be married. Tom’s relationship with his daughter Alice is filled with unresolved pain and anger. He disowned her when she was a young woman because she married a Jew against his wishes.

Tom’s wife, Margaret (Dorothy Stickney), is quietly in the background in the early part of the film. Her importance to the family becomes immediately apparent when she suffers a sudden fatal stroke. Gene and Alice return home to attend her funeral. They become aware that Tom suffers from occasional dizzy spells and disorientation. For Gene and Alice, the immediate question that must be addressed is obvious: Can the old man continue to live

alone in his big house? Gene and Alice choose this occasion of their visit to ask Tom this question.

Significant declines in physical and mental capacities of elders raise concerns within many families about how best to provide the security required to allow them to continue to age-in-place in their own homes. For elders, these losses pose a threat to one’s sense of independence, autonomy, and control-vital parts of self-concept and sources of self-esteem. For adult children, the demands of filial responsibility -being a responsible son or daughter-may be equally challenging. The wheel of life turns. Tom, Gene, and Alice now face one another to deal with these issues.

The Teachable Moment

On the evening of the day of their mother’s funeral, Gene and Alice ask Tom about his future plans. The old man tells them he intends to continue his retired life as usual, hoping that Gene will drop by from time to time. Speaking on Gene’s behalf, Alice tells Tom that Gene wishes to get married and to live in California. She urges Tom to hire a live-in housekeeper. When Tom rejects the idea because it would be “inappropriate”, Alice persists, saying “we think you should hire one”. Tom explodes at the suggestion that he would be unable to take care of himself.

In a long, chastising rant, the old man reminds them that he was a wage earner as a child, accuses them of being ungrateful for the things he provided for them growing up, deprecates Gene’s accomplishments as a teacher and writer, and reminds Alice that they have gotten along fine without her presence for several years. Finally, he breaks down in tears. As he leaves the room, he says “I’ve hired and fired hundreds of people in my life. Are you now telling me that you think I’m incompetent?! Is that what you’re telling me?!” Gene and Alice stand silent as the wake of the confrontation fills the room.

The following day, Alice returns home. Gene makes a serious attempt to establish a loving relationship with Tom, inviting him to move to California with him. Tom refuses and attempts to manipulate Gene into staying with him. Pushed over the brink and filled with years of frustration and anger, Gene directly confronts

Tom's unnatural need to possess him totally. The old man, angry and hurt, throws him out of the house.

The dramatic portrayal of this elder care crisis provides several lessons for families, students, and gerontologists. Of course, today there are several sources of health care support for someone in Tom's situation. These include home care options, continuing care retirement communities, and assisted living facilities [1]. This continuum of care for physically or cognitively-impaired elders was much less available a half a century ago; this fact provides an opportunity to discuss advances in elder care to general audiences and students in training.

What has not changed, of course, is the fact that elder care issues occur within the context of long standing developmental and family relations between adult children and their parents. Dysfunctional relations marked by unresolved conflicts and emotions of love, hate, and guilt may motivate family members to satisfy first their personal agenda rather than finding solutions best for all [2]. Confronting Tom with questions regarding his competence on the day he has buried his wife illustrates a cruelty that one hopes is

limited to fiction. The story underscores the fact that even bad parent-child relationships, for all their potential harm, are still involving. They may hold yet-to-be-discovered 'positives' not likely to be found if relations no longer exist at all [3].

In the film's conclusion, the viewer sees a photo of Tom and Gene standing together in the bright sunlight. In a final voice-over narration, Gene describes the final years of their relationship, their occasional contact, his father's lonely death in a nursing home, and their ultimate-perhaps inevitable-failure to connect successfully. He closes the film with these words: "Still, when I hear the word 'father', it matters."

References

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