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The Circularity and the Father-Son Relationship in Price’s Trilogy *A Great Circle*

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26 April, 2012
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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Master of Arts in Literature in the Department of English Language and Literature, Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan

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26 April, 2012
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Acknowledgments

Many people made this thesis possible, and my gratitude for their support, encouragement, and advice is difficult to express. A simple “thank you” seems inadequate and appropriate at the same time. To my wonderful supervisor, Dr. Lamia Hammad, your guidance and ideas were invaluable. To my committee members, Dr. Al Shraah, Dr. Shakury, your comments and help have set me on my way.

To my awesome family, who has always supported me in any endeavor, academic or otherwise, particularly to my parents, I do thank you. To my wonderful fiancé, Hashem, your presence underlines all of this; to say that you have supported me while I wrote this thesis is, of course, an understatement. You are always there. Thanks to you all.

To a hundred friends, you all gave me something, no matter how large or small; my gratitude goes to you who encouraged me and tolerated me unavailability. My biggest debt is, of course, to Allah who is always there by our sides guiding and showing us the right path.
Abstract

This study attempts to show the different angles of father-son relation in Reynolds Price’s fiction. It also shows that no matter how tough and strangling this relation gets, its members will always be circled around its sphere. Price’s trilogy indicates one focal fact; a family which suffered so much in the name of heredity. Every generation of the Mayfield family has experienced exactly what his predecessors went through making this family’s course of life doomed to fail since all the lives of its members were nothing but a complete failure. Besides that, their lives were mere copies or versions of their grandparents.

By analyzing the novels of this trilogy, The Surface of Earth, The Source of Light and the Promise of Rest, this study concludes that this family’s biological troubles were shaped mainly because all the characters suppressed their real needs and sought needs which fitted their society and what seemed acceptable through the eyes of their superego. This suppression can be defined through sociological terms which limited the characters’ free will. The misery of this family came to an end as one of its members, Wade Mayfield, pursued his real needs and openly admitted his difference ending a history which sounded so problematic, adding to that a future which might sound safely intact of the flaws of their past.
**Introduction**

He is unique, really. He ranks very high. With Eudora Welty and, I suppose, Faulkner. Reynolds’s writing is a kind of writing that is actually poetry. The dialogue is like real dialogue, but it’s been elevated into a special language which he carries through with great consistency.

(Michael Ruhlman, *A Writer at His Best* 134)

Reynolds Price, born in 1933 in North Carolina and died in 2011, is one of the well-known Southern novelists as well as a contemporary prominent man of letters of the latter half of the twentieth century. Besides being a novelist, Price is also a short-story writer, poet, essayist, translator, playwright and memoirist. He is best known for his attachment to the South in which most of his fiction is set, particularly North Carolina. And here lies the constant comparing and contrasting competition between him and Faulkner, the representative voice of the Southern Literature of the United States. Price admits of no indebtedness to Faulkner, for such a favor is almost always being paid to Milton and Hemingway. Price’s focal themes include issues predominantly related to family, race, sexuality, gender, marriage, death and Eros which Price substitutes for love. Such themes are constantly portrayed and mingled in the famous Southern trademark with an overall realistic Southern atmosphere.
Price’s on-going family topic concerns relations, either with family members, kins or surrounding milieu. This fact paved the way to the title of the thesis which concerns the circularity of everything related to the Mayfield family. The term indicates that all the actions, behaviors and utterances begin and end in the same manner. This circularity is best seen in the portrayal of the father-son relation in which a son begins exactly from where his father started. Besides that, they both end with the same deeds and the same way of living indicating the circle that both go through. In a conversation with William Ray, Price admits “well, I would agree that all my books are certainly family obsessed. I can’t think of a novel that I would call a great novel, a novel that I love or have great admiration for, which doesn’t seem to me very profoundly concerned with the family” (qtd.in Ray 89).

Such relations are also portrayed between different generations of the same family. Here lies the bulk of Price’s fiction; when dealing with familial relations, Price intentionally presents different layers of age, gender and mentality in order to pinpoint the reactions or attitudes through which generations act and react. Such a style which Price follows will be of a great interest in my work since this study tries to prove the several points in common between Price’s sixth generations of this family leading to the focal debatable issue of whatever action is fulfilled by a father, a son or a grandson, it is merely a mark of genetic pattern.
Each character in the three novels - to - come is a mere reflected mirror of his predecessor either in the actions, speeches or even inner thoughts and dreams. The work indicates the famous saying of history repeating itself in this family’s saga. Unlike many other writers who are mainly interested in the mother–child relationship, Price here is almost always possessed with the father–son relationship and its subsequent consequences. In surveying Price’s intended books here, you can barely trace any mother figure or simply any healthy, recognizable maternal relationship between a mother and her child. And, this lack of a feminine guide in the whole trilogy strengthens Price’s premise in having a male community which only needs women for propagation.

Price’s paternal bond is so intimate, vague and at the same time risky to handle since he prefers to keep things unresolved, giving the reader the chance to bring whatever interpretation he/she can come up with. Calling the bond risky stems from the idea of a very close incest in the air which again will be the thesis’s to prove its exact opposite; deep intimate bond between a father and his son is put into question, since Price himself is intentionally being ambiguous about the nature of such bonds. Moreover, being anxious and totally obsessed with the idea of incestuous feelings gives the reader a good stand in claiming taboos over profound intimacy.

In tracing Price’s work, one may find that a certain pattern is being applied in depicting the father – son bond with paying much attention to bestowing this
relation with some kind of attractive ambiguity that has caught the attention of several critics up till today. This pattern goes through three crucial phases which take place during the whole life of the Mayfield man. Phase one starts with the child’s birth being connected to the father’s past and heredity which again is defined as biological determinism. Phase two takes the reader deeper into the kid’s psyche questioning the reasons for hating the father while phase three presents the procedures taken to search the father’s love and then to claim him back through the quest motif that starts with initiation and ends in total resurrection for the hungry son.

Furthermore, the three novels work together to present Price’s portrayal of a family curse through genes which is best described through the term of biological determinism. This term indicates the idea that our genes and genetic structure determine every feature of our being and of our personality which advocates the point that our actions are predetermined and unchangeable (Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia 1). Throughout the trilogy, one gets to notice the power of biology in determining the lives of the Mayfield members. The sequence of the novels presents The Surface of Earth which sets the background for the Mayfields and their constant fears and struggles into a life that might be called a decent life. The Source of Light presents the continuation of the curse through the deeds of its couple, Rob and Hutch, while the final novel, The Promise of Rest leads the characters in what might seem as a promise of relief to those who had suffered so
much to get to where they are now. The first novel presents all the characters living on the surface of earth not knowing what they exactly want or need, which is obviously found in the deep layers of earth. Therefore, the second novel takes the reader deeper and deeper into the characters’ lives in their search for some kind of light to get them out of their fated tunnel. As a result, the third novel leads the characters to a reward through the promise of a new mixed generation which presents hope for a permanent rest to the members of this family.

As a start, a survey of the criticism available on Reynolds Price shows that the strange flavor in such paternal bonds is in need of further investigation. This thesis fills the gap by revealing the dots and bottoms of father – son relationship along with tracing the established pattern depicted in Price’s most debatable work, his famous trilogy *A Great Circle*. The novels are *The surface of Earth* (1975), *The Source of Light* (1981) and *The Promise of Rest* (1995). Before discussing the thesis topic, some of the critical views in this context are to be presented now.

James A. Schiff in his book *Understanding Reynolds Price* reveals the everlasting factor concerning Price’s fictional families. He says:

For nearly every Price character, family is the crucial factor in individual identity; as Price affirms, “[my novels] are very drenched in family. “In *Kate Vaiden* Kate’s life is shaped by the murder – suicide of her parents, and in *The Surface of Earth* nearly every major character is affected monumentally by parents and grandparents . . . . The most gripping and
meaningful bonds for Price’s characters are familial rather than matrimonial: father-son, father-daughter, son-mother, aunt-nephew. (16-17)

These lines reveal Price’s paramount interest in the theme of family, since it is the factor that marks all of his characters’ lives as well as shapes the way they think, behave or even approach life. Price here admits that no fruitful relation can take place outside the domain of the family; all the characters mentioned in the novels are only fathers, sons and grandparents.

Moreover, Jefferson Humphries, the editor of Conversations with Reynolds Price, confirms such a debatable theme through casting the light on Price’s several interviews. In the interview with William Ray in 1976 in which they both discuss parts of the trilogy. William Ray confirms:

Ray: let’s make at least one list then. What are the particular human relationships illuminated and explored by The Surface of Earth? I would think they might number at least a dozen. Can we begin a partial list, in a way a partial amends to that last question?

Price: All right. Just start on page one- sister-and –sister; sister-and-brother; daughter-and-father; so-and-father; daughters-and-sons-mothers; grandchildren and their grandparents; children and their aunts and uncles; adults and their servants; children and the servants of their parents; the relationships that broadly speaking are called friendship: male-male; female-female; male-female. What else?
Ray: Fathers and sons.

Price: Fathers and sons, very crucially in the last book of the novel and certainly other books as well. (131-132)

This part of the interview indicates the point concerning the type of relationship Price is mostly interested in. Everything here is being presented through the lens of the Southern family Price portrays.

William Mark Poteet in his dissertation, *Ritual, Initiation, and The Construction of Masculinity by Gay Men in Modern Southern Literature* reveals the sixth generation of a family that had suffered so much to get to this point. Poteet says:

Unlike the characters, the reader is privileged with the knowledge that Raven is, indeed, Wade’s off-spring. In an effort to help complete the “great circle,” Hutch gives the boy the Mayfield wedding band that has appeared in all the three novels, a circular symbol of love, failed love, and, primarily, a continuation of the generations. (256)

Mark Poteet here highlights Price’s representation of the Mayfield family. As will be shown later, these familial relations will follow the fated model Price marked which will be elaborated later on.

Tara Powell, in her article, “Fiction of Mercy: Suffering Delight in Reynolds Price’s The Promise of Rest” claims: