

Ara Kim

Professor Eonjoo Park

Contemporary British and American Drama

11 June 2023

A Different Kind of Honey: Redefining Family Values in *A Taste of Honey*

Shelagh Delaney's play, *A Taste of Honey*, introduces unconventional family structures that challenge traditional family values. Set against the backdrop of post-war England, the narrative reveals the struggles of individuals, particularly those confined within traditional family structures, exemplified by characters like Jo and Helen. In contrast, the play presents an alternative familial model through the relationship between Jo and Geoffrey. This relationship, built not on traditional ties but on shared experiences and emotional affinity, offers an exploration of love and support beyond societal norms. In this paper, I will shed light on these redefined family values by contrasting the relationships between Helen-Jo and Jo-Geoffrey, arguing that the latter provides a better environment for emotional growth and support.

Helen, portrayed as an ill-equipped parent, often demonstrates a narrow understanding of relationships, perceiving them as a zero-sum game where love and attention given to one person result in a decrease for another. Particularly when involved in relationships with more than one person, she fails to find balance, instead choosing to immerse herself in one relationship while neglecting the other. This skewed perspective is evident in two distinct triadic relationships within the play: Jo-Helen-Peter and Jo-Geoffrey-Helen. Helen disregards Jo when with Peter and later dismisses Geoffrey when she requires Jo's support.

In the dynamic involving Jo, Helen, and Peter, Helen dismisses Jo's discomfort around Peter, responding to Jo's behavior by casually stating, "She's jealous," without considering that Jo might be feeling anxious due to Peter's unwelcome presence (Act 1, Scene 1, 19). Helen's narrow viewpoint is further seen in the relationship between Jo, Geoffrey, and herself. After

breaking up with Peter, she turns to Jo, depending on her daughter, and then interferes with Jo's relationship with Geoffrey, depriving her daughter of a chance at happiness without her mother's interference. Helen's erratic and inconsistent parenting causes Jo to question her own identity, heritage, and even sanity.

In contrast to Jo's one-sided good luck wish to Helen when she leaves her daughter, the relationship between Jo and Geoffrey is represented as wishing 'good luck' to each other. They not only help each other but also wish for each other's happiness. Geoffrey gladly listens to Jo's fanciful story of Prince Ossini, who represents Jo's boyfriend, and Jo, without burdens, appears excited even when not being truthful. They also practically prepare for the baby's birth. This relationship provides Jo with a sense of peace and freedom she never experienced with Helen, through their open-mindedness, despite any anxiety she might feel about becoming a mother or existing outside a traditional family structure.

Nevertheless, their unconventional relationship confronts societal scrutiny and internal conflicts. Geoffrey's marriage proposal to Jo, for instance, symbolizes his commitment to Jo and the unborn baby, reflecting societal expectations of conventional family structures. However, Jo's rejection presents that their relationship cannot be stabilized in that way.:

JO: Look Geof, I like you, I like you very much, but I don't enjoy all this panting and grunting . . .

GEOF: Marry me, Jo.

...

JO: You'll have to go some time. We can't stay together like this forever.

GEOF: I'd sooner be dead than away from you. (Act 2, Scene 1, 58-59)

Despite the unsuccessful proposal, the sincerity of their feelings for each other is evident, as seen in Geoffrey's expression of not wanting to be apart from Jo and Jo's statement of liking Geoffrey. This could indicate Jo's understanding that their relationship is far from the common

ones she has observed and that she cannot restrict him within conventional family confines. As long as they persist in conveying their indefinable affection, the cycle of discord may continue. Moreover, their connection, unbounded by conventional family norms, could be threaten with separation at any time, particularly due to the absence of a legal marriage or biological ties.

However, their bond suggests that they can experience love and support beyond traditional familial ties. As friends and family, within an equal relationship, they can resolve conflicts through conversation. Despite the challenges they face as a single mother and a gay man, their partnership offers a unique sanctuary, helping them endure and overcome difficult times. Even if they part ways and become independent, the time they spent together would fuel their growth.

Overall, *A Taste of Honey* presents a contrast between the traditional concept of family, represented by Helen and Jo, and a progressive idea of family based on emotional bonds, as represented by Jo and Geoffrey. Their relationship demonstrates mutual love and respect, transcends traditional familial roles, and offers hope to Jo, who has long craved affection and stability. The story conveys that family connections could be found beyond traditional boundaries, offering readers a broader and more inclusive definition of family.

Works Cited

Delaney, Shelagh. *A Taste of Honey*, Grove Press, 1959.