

**Self-Discovery and the Break Away from Naturalism in  
Beth Henley's *The Miss Firecracker Contest***

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## **Abstract**

Self-discovery should be an important purpose for everyone. It results in a consequence sense of self-esteem. The lack of self-esteem leads to shame and self-denial. When we lack the ability to define ourselves, we suffer from an intense sense of self-doubt. We cannot decide our values, beliefs, or aims. Instead, we are ready to accept the definition of the others even though they are false or forged. Beth Henley is one of the most important playwrights who highlight the theme of self-discovery in their drama. Henley's protagonists, especially the female ones, deny the false definitions that fence them as a result of the oppressive rules and expectations of their community. Thus, women's self-esteem and self-determination are two qualities that go hand in hand in Beth Henley's drama. Henley proves that without the ability to develop a sense of self-worth, a woman will have a few chances of forming self-determination. Beth Henley is classified as a naturalistic playwright. She applies the naturalistic style of writing trying to present a slice of life put on stage with art. Moreover, Henley depicts the theme of self-discovery through a gentle break away from the traditional concept of naturalism. *The Miss Firecracker Contest* stands as a good example of such break away.

## **Key Words**

*The Miss Firecracker Contest*, American materialism, the “Southern Belle”, the patriarchal authority

## **Introduction**

*The Miss Firecracker Contest* is Beth Henley's first play after *Crimes of the Heart*. It is a two-act play that belongs to the group of Southern Gothic comedies. The play depicts a stage of family rally around a beauty contest. The main character in the play is Carnelle Scott who is practicing for the upcoming Fourth of July beauty pageant in Brookhaven, Mississippi. Carnelle is an irresponsible young woman who is desperate to win the contest. Nevertheless, with the pass of time, we find Carnelle doing her best believing that winning the contest will restore her reputation and make her somebody like her cousin, Elain who is actually a former Miss Firecracker.

## **Self discovery and the break away from naturalism in the play**

*The Miss Firecracker Contest* treats serious themes of femininity, beauty, and self-esteem. The main theme of the play is seeking identity. Beth Henley's protagonists, especially the female ones, seek their lost identities and need to redefine and accept their own selves. In the same vein as the characters in *Crimes of the Heart*, they need to discover their identities away from their families and their relationships with men.

The play introduces three eccentric characters who are self-seeking just as the three sisters in *Crimes of the Heart*. They are Carnelle and her two cousins; Elain and Delmount. The characters in *The Miss Firecracker Contest* are also victims of a deep sense of abstinence and a runaway lack of self-assurance. They inherited such self-esteem problem from Aunt Ronelle. She is Carnelle's aunt and the two cousins' mother. Ronelle is absent from the stage, yet she plays an important role in the three characters' life and decisions throughout the play. Such

role reminds us of that of the three sisters' mother in *Crimes of the Heart*.

The central action of the play turns around Carnelle's struggle to win the Miss Firecracker Contest. Definitely, Carnelle fights to find her identity away from the fact of being an orphan cousin and also away from the title that used to follow her reputation as "Miss Hot Tamale". Indeed, it is a struggle to define herself through maintaining cultural expectations of beauty and youth. Delmont describes Carnelle saying: "she never did attain any self-esteem. Had to sleep with every worthless soul in Brookhaven trying to prove she was attractive."(93; act 1, sce.2).

Indeed, Carnell never had a stable family life. Her mother dies when she is only a year old. Carnelle moves to live in her uncle's house. The uncle falls to death trying to pull the bird's nest out of the chimney. The father also dies in the summer heat and Carnelle has to live with her aunt Ronelle who raises her until she dies of cancer. Carnelle is thus left with no close family. She seeks love and finds it in some casual relationships with so many men. As a result, Carnelle ruins her reputation and loses an important part of the cultural expectations of her community.

The play reflects the impact that family has on the development of self-evaluation. Undoubtedly, family affects one's self-esteem. The child's mind is very impressionable. It is something very open having no control over most of what the child hears, sees or experiences. The family is the first group that we experience. The family house is the place where our most important identities take shape.

Self-worth finds its roots in the family; there is a profound relationship between the self-esteem of the parents and the influence it generates on the children. Living within a united family, where parents care for their children and guide them toward their strengths, help the children develop healthy self-esteem. On the contrary, certain experiences within a fragmented family, like that of Carnelle, can lead to low self-evaluation and dysfunctional behavior. As Weber indicates: "it was hypothesized that those who report more emotional abuse would also exhibit lower self esteem; lower agreeableness" (2).

Actually, Carnelle is planning to leave her town. However, she regards the Miss Firecracker pageant as her last chance to improve her reputation before leaving. Carnelle dreams of this moment asserting: "Well, if I won the Miss Firecracker Contest-See, I'm a contestant in it and if I could just win first prize then I would be able to leave this town in a crimson blaze of glory!(91; act 1, sce.1). Carnelle regards winning the contest as the only prospect that will afford the self-respect and approval she destroyed by her poor choices. "It also would help divest her of a title already achieved, "Miss Hot Tamale," thanks to her easy ways with the hometown yahoos." (Maurer 2).

From the beginning of the play, Carnelle tries to get ready for the pageant. Elain and Delmount, are present with Carnelle to help her prepare herself and to offer advice. In addition, they have their separate agendas. They are seeking their identities while trying to escape the ghosts of their past. Elain wants to run away from her husband and children while Delmount wants to sell his inherited house where Carnelle lives.

*The Miss Firecracker Contest* presents an important part of the American materialism and its influence on the Americans'

self-esteem. The play depicts how the American people appreciate beauty rather than character and spirit. Through the story of Carnelle, Beth Henley employs beauty as one of the main aspects of the male ideological principles that encode the American society. As Naomi Wolf confirms: "beauty is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact" (12).

Definitely, *the Miss Firecracker Contest* reflects the Southern interest in the mythology of the "Southern Belle". Moreover, it introduces women's beauty as one of the standards set up by the patriarchy to reinforce the patriarchal authority, largely based on money. Jay comments on Beth Henley's utilization of the beauty contest as the setting of the play stating: "Henley locates her play about a beauty contest and its effects on women—and men—in the South, where she can utilize the Southern Belle as a prototype of female beauty and passivity." (148-149)

The patriarchal authority in *The Miss Firecracker Contest* is represented by Franklin, Mac Sam, and Delmount. Their attitudes towards the women in the play give a picture of the beauty myth and its effects on both men and women in the American society. The three men usually put women in comparisons like contradictory categories. Finally they place them either in the category of perfection or corruption.

Franklin, the first representative of the patriarchal ideology in the play, symbolizes the notion of the American ideal of beauty based on the platonic ideal woman. He deals with his wife, Elain, as an art object and compares her with a symbolic

Greek podium of ideal beauty. Elain is so tired of Franklin's pounding love. She mentions: "Yes; he did love me. But it just caused him to follow me around asking, 'Do you love me? How much do you love me? Tell me how you love me, till I could shake him till he rattled'" (86; act 1, sce.1).

Franklin adores Elain and provides her with a castle filled with treasures and lovely clocks. Such castle with all its treasures is not but a symbol of Elain's entrapment. Both Franklin and Elain represent the symbolic relation between beauty and the patriarchal ideology. He adores her and she cannot leave him. Even when Elain leaves him she returns again assuring: "I need someone who adores me" (126; act.2, sce.2).

Mac Sam, the carnival balloon man, also introduces the patriarchal interest in beauty. Like the other men in the play, he appreciates Elain as a perfect symbol of beauty and Carnelle as an imperfect whore. He is so fascinated by women's body beauty. When Elain mentions pink as her favorite color, Mac Sam responds: "Ah, pink. I once knew a woman whose skin was awfully pink and pretty looking (124; act.2, sce.2). Knowing about Delmount's past affair with the ugly Tessy and his rape of her, Mac Sam tells Delmount: "You don't have to make excuses to me. I've done nearly as bad myself."(121; act.2, sce.2). Sometimes, Mac Sam has some of Delmount's confusion about women. He worships Elain, nevertheless he feels an affinity with Carnelle.

Delmount, Elain's brother and Carnelle's cousin, puts women in reductive polarities. For Delmount women embody either perfection and beauty or natural corruption represented in illness and death. Delmount's dreams about pieces of women's bodies depict such reductive polarities. He sees some beautiful

pieces and other bloody ones. He even admits to Mac Sam that he is confused about women. He has an obsessive eye for beauty and simultaneously he can be attracted by a woman that does not have any beautiful characteristics. Elain speaks about Delmount's obsessive eye saying: "he's been known to follow a normal looking woman through the streets all day and all night because he finds the mere shapes of her nose exotic or beautiful" (99; act 1, sce.2)

Delmount tells Carnelle that he has a romantic nature so he idolizes beauty. At the same time Delmount reflects a fragmented conception of women's beauty lying to Mac Sam: "Well, fortunately, I have yet to make advance to any woman who did not possess at least one classically, beautiful characteristic. It's sort of a romantic notion I've had. I don't know. Perhaps, it's caused me to be fragmented in love"(116-117; act 2, sce.2). This fragmentation is confirmed by Delmount's rape of two unattractive young women. His sexism becomes obvious when he describes the accident: "And they were dying for it. Hell, I was doing them a favor. There's the irony. You just can't go around obliging people in this world. That's one thing I've learned."(90; act 1, sce.1).

Delmount's mother; Aunt Ronelle, also represents a negative image that reinforces the patriarchal ideology in the play. She is absent from the stage like the mother in *Crimes of the Heart*. She is dead but throughout the play, we can realize how she affects Delmount, Elain, and Carnelle. She pretended to be a saint in public while she was like a monster at home. She is one of Beth Henley's bullies like Old Granddaddy, Zachery, and Chick in *Crimes of the Heart*. When Popeye describes the house as a scary one, Carnelle announces: "Well, it's just like



my Aunt Ronelle fixed it up. It's got her special touch: this old spinning wheel; these lace doilies; these old pictures in frames here. I'd prefer something more modern and luxurious, but-that's just me,"(77; act 1, sce.1).

Aunt Ronelle is a selfish woman who represents the oppressive culture regarding beauty as perfection. She is the one who affects the other characters' choices and sense of self-worth in the play. She fixes the furniture of the house as she wants and no one has the right to object even after her death. She also damages the relation between Elain and Delmount when she leaves the house and all its furniture to Delmount only. When Delmount blames Elain for refusing his custody, Elain does not sympathize with him asserting: "You are a selfish human being! Mama always loved you ten times than me." (95; act 1, sce.2).

Aunt Ronelle is a dysfunctional mother who plans in Elain and Carnelle the idea that idealism means beauty and that welfare and wealth mean security in life. Carnelle inherits much of Ronelle's standards of perfection. This becomes very obvious when Carnelle describes Elain's beauty using the words "perfectly perfect" that "Carnelle becomes obsessed with "mean" Aunt Ronelle's warped view of beauty as an avenue to fortune, which will eventually establish one's self-worth in the community." (Plunka 91).

It is Ronelle who pushes Elain to share in the Miss Firecracker pageant at the age of seventeen. When Elain wins, Ronelle helps her see herself like a queen or a pedestal. She even plans for Elain's marriage to a wealthy man. Elain recalls the day she graduated Jr. College when Ronelle said: "You've had your spoonful of gravy now go out and get a rich husband;"(95; act 1, sce.2).

The patriarchal presence of Franklin, Ma Sam, and Delmount along with the dysfunctionality of Aunt Ronelle are factors that overlap each other to assure the idea of the oppressive environment in the play. Another factor that affirms this idea is the pattern of the fragmented family; Carnelle's family. Beth Henley, as a naturalistic playwright employs these factors to depict the influence that oppressive environment and heredity have on the development of the main characters' sense of self-esteem. Joel Colodner asserts:

Though we all grapple with problems of self-esteem and personal identity, most of us don't face the obstacles of Beth Henley's characters in *The Miss Fire-cracker Contest*. . . *The Miss Firecracker Contest* is concerned with people finding inner resources to cope with cruel circumstances. (260)

Adopting the naturalistic view of existence, Beth Henley portrays her protagonists as victims of some external forces of the environment and internal stresses of heredity. The circumstances of those protagonists are good representative of Henley's view. Most of the main characters in the play are poor and barely educated. They usually come from poor and uneducated families. They try to improve their standard of living, yet their attempts are unrewarding because of forces out of their control. Carnelle's participation in the contest is an example of such attempts. Delmount's plan to sell the family house in order to join a college for studying philosophy is another attempt. Besides, the presence of Carnelle's seamstress; Popeye is a good example of the oppressive circumstances of the characters. Popeye got her nickname from a childhood prank that caused her eyes to bulge. Moreover, she learned to sew as a

child by making outfits for bullfrogs when her family could not afford any dolls.

Studying the circumstances of the main characters, we should take into consideration class as a lens that gives a picture of the characters' dream of better lives. Class is referred to through Elain's marriage to Franklin. By marrying a rich man, Elain becomes a queen in a castle that she has everything. The power and prestige she gets from this marriage puts her over others. She uses money to keep her privileged position and to save her reputation. For example she pays for her brother's stay at a mental asylum and refuses to accept his custody in order to protect her reputation.

Elain is too attracted by the class lens to leave her Natchez castle. Informed about Floral's intention to leave her husband, Delmount offers to give her all the money he gets from the sale of the family house to find herself away from Franklin. In opposition, Elain refuses claiming that she cannot lose anything. Obviously, she became accustomed to welfare and wealthy life.

*The Miss Firecracker Contest* is one of Beth Henley's plays that reflect the influence that class has on women's identities and how they are defined in society. Elain is the character that reflects the class lens. Indeed, almost all the other characters belong to the working class. Delmount clears off dead dogs from the roads, Mac Sam sells ballons, and Carnelle works at a jewelry shop. Especially Carnelle represents the other side of the class lens. She reminds us of the sisters in *Crimes of the Heart*. She belongs to a low class and wants to improve herself socially and economically. She loses her parents at a very young age and unfortunately does not find any care except that of Aunt Ronelle. Affected by aunt Ronelle and noticing Elain's life,

Carnelle realizes how the American society respects beauty and how fame and money serve to make you gain power over others. Jaehne comments on Elain's life asserting that:"her "life as a beauty" is an invisible shield to protect her from the reality of working women whose hands don't deserve to be lily-white" (12)

The behavior of the characters also assures Henley's adoption of the naturalistic view. Henley employs beauty as a lens that reflects such notion. In *The Miss Firecracker Contest*, Beth Henley introduces beauty and class as lenses that affect women's identities in the American society. The beauty lens is also related to a radical perspective. It is the white dominance and superiority. Carnelle is sure that she will win the other non-white contestant: "Let's see, I know I'll beat Sapphire Mendoze just cause she's the token Negro and Mexican. I'm not trying to be mean about it, it's the truth."(109; act 2, sce.1).

From the very beginning of the play, we find that Beth Henley's characters do not appreciate the value of the internal beauty. They care only for the physical beauty. For instance, Carnelle worships her beautiful cousin Elain and dreams of her perfect life. Carnelle speaks with Popeye about Elain wondering:"Isn't she wonderful, Popeye! Isn't she just perfectly perfect!"(82; act 1, sce.1).

The notion of the importance of internal beauty is confirmed by Beth Henley at the end of the play when Delmount rewards Popeye's love. Popeye is the seamstress who makes Carnelle's custom. Henley introduces Popeye as a funny character with a hard life. She is very simple and naive that she falls in love with Delmount just from seeing his picture. Popeye got her nickname from a childhood accident. She does not attain

the physical beauty standards that Delmount seeks. However, he is ready to appreciate her internal beauty and expresses his mutual love.

Beth Henley introduces in *The Miss Firecracker Contest* the culture of beauty pageants that is mainly a Southern phenomenon. The point that Henley wants to highlight is the point that both Carnelle and Elain cannot realize in the play. It is the fact that the pageant is not designed to choose the most beautiful woman in the town but to choose the most representative one for the society of the town. Indeed, Carnelle is more beautiful than the other participants, yet she does not have the chance because of her past reputation. It is Carnelle's reputation that makes her the least representative of the values of her community. Carnelle confirms this idea to Elain saying: "I know why you're worried. You think I've ruined my chances, cause-'cause of my reputation." (84; act 1, sce.1)

The characters of the play themselves are examples of Henley's adoption of the naturalistic theory. The first character to be discussed is Elain. Elain is a victim of society that worships beauty and deals with her as a pedestal. She has everything and feels that she has nothing. She is so tired of her husband's adoration. She leaves him and leaves her children seeking identity in independence. Eventually, she realizes that she needs love and Franklin can afford it. She is thus a victim of her misunderstanding. Andreach clarifies that "unable to forgo the creature comforts her husband provides, she [Elain] lets him know she is ready to come home". (16-17)

Seeking her mother's approval, Elain follows the same self-division pattern of life. In public Elain and her mother seem to be saints or angles. However, in family relationships they are

monstrous. They share the same meanness. Such meanness stems from a deep sense of lack of self-esteem. They cannot find themselves in a society that demeans and denies them.

Elain's meanness is proved several times in the play. First, she refuses to accept custody of Delmount to be released from a mental institution that "the beautiful, the sweet, the perfect, Elain Rutledge refused to help her own brother get out of a dirty lunatic asylum" (89; act 1, sce.1). She refuses to give Carnelle her red dress. Even when Elain gives Popeye her earrings, she confesses that it is just because they hurt her ears: "I hated the damn things. They pinched my ears, I was glad to get rid of them"(130; act 3, sce.3). Elain does not admire Carnelle, but she is ready to lie when Carnelle reaches the final saying: "Of course, I always knew you'd make the pageant! I never doubted it for one minute!" (102; act 1, sce.2).

Elain seems to inherit much of her mother's selfishness. She does not care for her children. When Elain declares her plans to leave Franklin, Carnelle asks about the destiny of the children after the mother's departure and Elain responds: "Oh, children manage in this world. Don't ask me about them" (86; act 1, sce.1). Even though when Elain decides to return to her husband and her house, it is because of the luxury life to which she has become accustomed.

At the same time, Elain symbolizes the American Southern Belle. She always pretends to be gentle and passive. She even claims that she cannot bear the heat and that she is about to faint. Such gentility and passivity are just part of her desire to escape the past. When Carnelle speaks about her sordid past, Elain says: "Let's not discuss it in all this heat"(84; act 1, sce.1). When Delmount wants to discuss the subject, she cries: "Don't

talk about it! I can't bear that side of life! It's repulsive to me. So shut up your mouth for once."(94; act 1, sce.2).

Elain always pretends to be a genteel Southern lady. She faints when she sees Delmount's purple leg and faints again when she finds a frog in a box. She seems to be a saint when she explains to Carnelle the virtues of suffering. When Elain speaks about her mother's illness, she tells Carnelle: "Why, all this is gonna help build up your character! Remember the more Mama suffered the more divine she become"(96; act 1, sce.2).

Elain plays the same role of her mother when she affects Carnelle's self-esteem. Definitely, Elain is Carnelle's dream for the future. She is everything that Carnelle is not. She is the perfectly perfect who has everything while Carnelle is just a poor orphan. Elain won the Miss Firecracker contest title when she was just 17 while Carnelle has a very weak chance to win it when she is 25. Elain has all what Carnelle dreams of. She has a big house in a big city, a wealthy husband, children, and class. She did what her mother asked her to do by investing her beauty into marriage with such a rich man.

When Elain wins the Miss Firecracker Contest at the age of seventeen, she places herself on a podium by the culture. Every one deals with her as a perfect object of art. She is asked to give speech on beauty at the town's Fourth of July Festival per year. Delmount calls her "the beautiful, the sweet, the perfect, Elain Rutledge"(89; act 1, sce.1). Even when he wants to insult her, he says: "You're so damn perfect and I'm such a no account failure"(95; act 1, sce.2) Delmount continues: "All you want is for everyone to think you're perfect. Well, perfect is dull!"(95; act 1, sce.2). Carnelle also describes the moment when Elain won the Miss Firecracker title saying: "Anyway, it was way

back that first year when I came to live with them. She was a vision of beauty riding on that float with a crown on her head waving to everyone. I thought I'd drop dead when she passed by me". (82; act 1, sce.1).

Even though Elain is always referred to as an ideal, she realizes the fact that she is nothing but an object of art. That is why she searches for herself. Even after she marries the very rich man; Franklin, she does not feel happy. In the same vein as Babe in *Crimes of the Heart*, Elain's parents steer her into a lucrative marriage. Especially, Elain's mother symbolizes the dysfunctional authority employed previously by Babe's grandfather.

Elain's crisis with Franklin reminds us of that of Babe with her husband, Zachery, in *Crimes of the Heart*. Elain tries to describe her life with Franklin to Popeye saying: "It's such a burden trying to live up to a beautiful face. I'm afraid I'm missing everthing in the world"(98; act 1, sce.2). She suffers from a severe sense of nothingness. Carnelle cannot appreciate Elain's suffering that she wonders: "Gosh, Aunt Ronelle said you had it all up there in Natchez; everything-just like a queen in a castle. . . What was it like-when you had it all?"(86; act 1, sce.1).

Elain is a naturalistic character who accepts things as they are. She is a victim that stands as a symbol of the naturalistic theory of heredity. She does inherit much of her mother's culture and behavior. However, the turning point in Elain's way towards self discovery begins when she refuses to be like her mother. Indeed, Elain's mother planted in her "destructive values and expectations and deprived [her] of the nature, validation, and



example with which to move beyond the limited possibilities for women's lives sanctioned by patriarchy" ( Guerra 122).

Impulsively, Elaine leaves her husband's house seeking an identity away from her mother's choice and away from her husband's tedious worship. However, she realizes the fact that her identity is tied up with being loved and treated like a pedestal. Thus, she decides to go back to her life. Finally, Elaine realizes that her need for love is a necessity for the discovery of herself. It is one of Beth Henley's major themes that: " The great majority of her work has been feminist—in that it explores the status and feelings of women in their frantic, touching quest for love and belonging" (Jay 287).

Carnelle is another victim of oppressive forces in the play. Losing her parents at a very young age and having no close family except aunt Ronelle and two cousins, Carnelle suffers from a deep need of love and self-worth. She even loses her reputation in the process of the search for her lost identity. She has to struggle in order to gain her society's approval and regards the contest as her last opportunity in the battle. She tries very hard to emulate Elaine and her mother who pretended to be saints or angels. However, she is very astonished by the fact that people never forget that she was once "Miss Hot Tamale". Carnelle comments on her mislay to Elaine stating: "It's awful! It's so awful! They never forget! They never do! . . . Did you hear them? They were laughing and calling me, "Miss Hot Tamale." Did you hear it?"(117-118; act 2, sce.2). Carnelle also declares her fault to Elaine stating: "I can't believe I ever wanted to be like you or that mean old monkey either"(128; act 2, sce.2).

Carnelle's identity is the opposite of Elain's though she is another victim of forces out of her control. She is merely an imperfect product. She is not beautiful like Elain nor does she follow the traditional norms for the Southern Belle. Carnelle joins the Miss Firecracker Contest as an attempt to relabel her identity. She wants to win the contest to salvage her reputation and to garner the power and prestige that Elain has garnered. Just like Elain, Carnelle is a victim of her dead aunt's concepts. Jay asserts: "Carnelle believes that winning the contest would give her this same power, would validate her worthiness in the world, and would give her life meaning." (157).

Carnelle regards Elain as her idol. She is very determined to follow in Elain's footsteps. She delays entering the Miss Firecracker Contest for five years so that she can perfect her talent. She wants to wear the same red dress that Elain wore when she won the contest. She even dyes her hair bright red to match the dress.

The play ends while Carnelle can't find her lost identity in the beauty title. Yet, she is still searching for it and she is sure she will find it one day. Beth Henley chooses an open end for her play this time. Besides, Carnelle's decision to leave the town after her defeat should be regarded as a suitable attempt to search for her self. She wants to redefine her identity away from such reductive attitudes that regard the woman as merely a body.

By the end of the play, Carnelle discovers that there are more important things in life than what she is seeking and that happiness is not only fame and beauty. Finally, Carnelle realizes what she really wants. She does not need others' approval and praise. Yet, she needs love and support. Dillard signifies that

"Carnelle survives the trials of the pageant and learns that winning the approval of strangers is not as important as the love of one's family". (3)

Delmount's crisis represents the third problem of self discovery in the play. As the play begins, we are informed that Delmount had not been heard from in a while. He has just been released from a mental institution and worked at a job of scraping dead animals off the road. He is planning to move to New Orleans where he can go to college to study philosophy. Therefore, he returns to sell the house. Being guilty of violent behavior and rape of two young girls, Delmount is unstable and confused about women. He inherits some of his mother's philosophy. He has a passion with exotic beauty. Delmount tells Mac Sam: "Well, fortunately, I have yet to make advances to any woman who did not possess at least one classically, beautiful characteristic. It's sort of a romantic notion I've had" (116-117; act 2, sce.2).

Delmount also needs to be loved, but he is so upset and sometimes mystified by his sexual fantasies. Much of Delmount's confusion is the result of his self-doubt and lack of real love. He even does not realize his need for love until Popeye declares her love for him. Eventually he rewards her innocent love with his returned affection.

Delmount is an example for the naturalistic view of the characters in the play. He is confirmed to spend time in a mental institution because of a violent loss of control. He could have been released after two months. However Elain refuses to sign his custody papers. Elain's behavior here represents one of the external forces controlling Delmount's destiny that: "her refusal to accept her brother exemplifies society's method for

controlling conformity."(Andreach 14). The turning point in Delmount's case begins when he appreciates Popeye's naive feelings. Besides, he decides to get back to the university.

To conclude, *The Miss Firecracker Contest* is one of Beth Henley's naturalistic plays. The play adapts the basis of the naturalistic perception. The fundamental view of man that Beth Henley adopts throughout the play is that of an animal responding to some external forces and inner stresses out of his control. Besides, he cannot understand them. Henley's characters have to face an oppressive environment and they are apparently helpless victims of its oppression. It is the naturalistic view of existence. However, Henley makes it untraditional one breaking away from the concept of determinism.

*The Miss Firecracker Contest* applies the most significant elements of naturalism. The first element to be discussed is pessimism. The play implies a philosophical pessimism applying the scientific theory of heredity to the characters. Sometimes, Beth Henley provokes us to admit that Carnelle and her cousins have inherited much of Aunt Ronelle's philosophy of life. Susanne Auflitsch clarifies that "Feeling neglected by her own mother who had allegedly always preferred her brother Delmount, Elain has become a dysfunctional mother herself" (273).

The protagonists of *The Miss Firecracker Contest* are always reflecting a pessimistic view of the world. Sometimes, they express this view emphasizing the inevitability of death. For instance, Carnelle tells Popeye about the death of her parents, uncle, and aunt asserting: "Well; you know, they say everone's gonna be dying someday. I believe it to."(79; act 1,

sce.2). Other times, they express this view repeating phrases of despair to each other. For instance, When Carnelle cries after losing the beauty contest and Poeye cries because Delmount does not care for her, Elain comments:"Your lives aren't over, not like mine is. No neither of you have to face the sort of tragedy I'm facing" (102; act 1, sce.2)

Another element of naturalism that is applied in the play is detachment. Henley employs some nameless characters and some meaningless actions in the play. For instance, till the end of the play we are not informed of the names of Elain's children. While we are busy with the result of the contest, Beth Henley moves us to a meaningless action of a horrible present for Carnelle. We do not even know the name of that man who brought that "horrible little frog in a pink outfit"(112; act 2, sce.1) as a gift to Carnelle. Another example of detachment in the play is Popeye's story about her nickname.

The third element of naturalism in the play is the conflict. The play introduces two types of conflicts. The first conflict is an internal one. It appears within the protagonists who are never pleased with their conditions. The second conflict stands between those protagonists and their environment. It is an external conflict during which the environment is always careless about the ambitions of the individuals that attempt to resist it. Carnelle's dream of the Miss Firecracker title is a good example for such conflict. Another example is Delmount's ambitions regarding the study of philosophy at university. Even Elain's crisis with her husband exemplifies such conflict. Beth Henley employs the motif of the fragmented family to support the implication of the element of the conflict. As Jay comments:

"Henley seems to see and judge the world through the microcosm of the family" (288).

The motif of the fragmented family assures the internal conflict within the characters who are seeking love and familial support. Carnelle expresses her need for love through some illegal relation with men. Elain expresses her need for love when she returns to her husband. Delmount also seeks love. He has a strong need to be loved. This need is expressed through some sexual dreams and fantasies. It's only when he rewards Popeye's naive love that his need for love is eventually complete.

Beth Henley breaks away from the fourth and the most important element of naturalism. It is determinism. Henley separates from the naturalistic plot employing human action instead of nature and heredity. The play ends with Elain asking Delmount to stop planning her life. Delmount has a goal for life. Even Carnelle accepts the result of the contest bravely.

Undeniably, Beth Henley applies the naturalistic style of writing in *The Miss Firecracker Contest*. It is very obvious that Henley tries to put on stage an exact copy of life that: "By attempting to put on stage in act 1 the living room of a house and in act 2 the dressing room for a carnival contest, *The Miss Firecracker Contest* exhibits this naturalism as well."(Andreach 14)

Beth Henley depicts the details of Carnelle's preparation for the pageant on the stage. She never neglects her awareness of the importance of the theatre's intimacy and convenience. Henley asserts: ". . . A character slashes her face with a razor blade. It is very effective on stage, because you see her pick up

the razor, you see her slash, then the blood." (Craig "Family Ties and Family Lies" 285). Therefore, Beth Henley was so pleased to turn her play into a screen film. In an interview with Beth Henley she illustrates: "It was fun filming *Miss Firecracker* because you could see the beauty contest."(Greene 217).

The play is also full of off-stage actions that are described in detail. For instance, Carnelle describes Aunt Ronelle's disease and its consequences in detail. Popeye retells the accident that resulted in calling her with that strange neck name in detail. Moreover, Carnelle's description of the loss of her close family is very detailed.

### **Conclusion**

Eventually, *The Miss Firecracker Contest* is a Southern Gothic comedy that exemplifies Beth Henley's untraditional concept of naturalism. The play reflects much of the cultural character of the South. It reflects the negative impact that beauty pageants and the politics of appearance have on young women who feel like enemies or rivals. The most prominent theme introduced in the play is self-discovery. It expresses the dilemma of some people seeking their identities. Their journey of self-discovery is actually a journey of finding inner resources to cope with their cruel circumstances.

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