

The Cycles and Circles at the Bottom of The Bottle

by Nathaniel GrayBeal

In the summer of 2018, Tommy Orange's *There There* was published. Through 2018 and into 2019, it won multiple prizes such as the Pulitzer Prize, the Hemingway Foundation and PEN Award, and others for its outstanding writing, story, and more. Tommy Orange himself is a member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes but was raised in the Oakland area. The book revolves around multiple characters in single or multiple part stories, divided into chapters further in. They tell the past of the characters, their traumas, their present events, and more. It holds nothing off the line, dealing with assault, abuse, mental and physical illnesses, substance and alcohol abuse, and more. Throughout the book, many of the characters must deal with addictions, the effects on their genetics through these addictions, mental and physical illnesses, all leading to the cycle of substance abuse on themselves and the people around them— Much of which Tommy Orange went through himself. In a short interview with NY Times, he explains that “I wanted to have my characters struggle in the way that I struggled, and the way that I see other native people struggle, with identity and with authenticity.”

We are introduced to a character who has fetal alcohol syndrome, another who lost a family member to drunk driving, and characters who deal with substance abuse from both themselves and the people around them. The people before them, the people following them, and everyone in-between as well, is affected by their addictions. The trickle down effect of substance abuse and alcoholism is very clear

through many characters. There is a reoccurring cycle of violence and trauma regarding substance and alcohol abuse through the book and the lives of the characters.

In the DSM-5, it is titled “Neurobehavioral Disorder Associated with Prenatal Alcohol Exposure” or ND-PAE for short. It mentions that ND-PAE exposure in America from 2% to 5% of the population. It continues that the proposed criteria of ND-PAE can be low IQ, memory impairment, impaired self-regulation, and family issues revolving around domestic and community violence, ongoing parental abuse of alcohol and substance abuse, multiple out-of-home placements, and lack of aid in mental or physical health care given. In the first story, the first character we meet deals with the effects of ND-PAE like these; Tony Loneman, and must carry a disfigured face due to the choices of someone else, namely his mother. The DSM-5 also mentions suicidal thoughts and tendencies into early adulthood, something Tony had not shown. Yet, at the end of the book, when death does come, he does not fight it. This will be touched on further in the paper.

As his last name implies, Tony Loneman is a lone figure due to his strange appearance. Tony’s own thoughts give a further idea of his ostracization due to his ND-PAE. Tommy Orange, as Tony, writes that “He’s used to being stared at... Everyone has been staring at him his whole life. Never for any other reason than the Drome.” The Drome being what he calls his fetal alcohol syndrome. Drome, while being a shortened version of ‘syndrome’, the broken-down version gives ‘drome’ the meaning of something running in a certain way. For Tony to give his

medical condition a nickname of sorts gives him control once more in a situation he never could control in the first place, giving him a chance to run his life in the way he wanted despite his disfigurement. Furthering this control of his life and running it his way, counsellors at the Indian Center give him the advice of telling him he's smarter in other ways. Leading loosely from this, Tony begins selling drugs. One of the first instances of substance abuse leading to further substance abuse, a cycle given to him before he was even born. Unlike other characters, did not even have a chance at something resembling a choice for alcohol related trauma as it was given to him from the womb. It is hard to say how much his mother had drunk with him, enough for Tony in his adult age to be disgusted by it and refuse to be near it. All due to his mother when he was in her womb. He dies a young man, in his early 20s, before his adulthood could ever start. It is hard to tell, when he is dying, if he is comforted by this or frightened.

Another character traumatized by someone else's drinking is Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield and her older half-sister, Jacquie Red Feather. Their mother was an alcoholic and through the beginning of their story, her drinking takes over caring for her children. Throughout the story, as well, it is told that Opal carries her beloved bear 'Two Shoes' around and talks to him for comfort. Often having long conversations with him to help herself ease away from the pain of real life. She meets a possible new friend and leaves the bear momentarily. When their mother turns deeper into alcohol and comes out with her cancer announcement, Opal begins to realize that her darling Two Shoes, much like her mother, has withered and torn

up in the time she left him behind. She realizes her mother chose alcohol over her and her sister, and much like the rotten bear, she can't love her mother anymore and leaves both behind to die. The constant poisoning of alcohol in the sister's life continues as Jacquie becomes an alcoholic following lately after her possible rape, an assault, giving birth to her assaulter's child and being talked out of an abortion, but does give the child up for adoption. This child she later meets at the powwow, alongside her assaulter and the father of the child, Harvey. Unsurprisingly, Harvey is a heavy drinker, much like herself at the time.

From her mother's alcoholism, leading to her own alcoholism, and her daughter's substance abuse – Jacquie's daughter commits suicide. Jacquie gives her grandsons to Opal to raise as she cannot take care of them. Slowly, she begins to resemble her mother. She remembers her mother's words that "the spider's web is a home and a trap", coining alcohol to be like a spider. With this and her spider web tattoos on her feet in mind, she decides that she will no longer live in the house that alcohol built, and refrains from drinking. Through the story, the theme of spiders and webs pop up often. Characters involved in Jacquie and Opal's family often show having spider-like wounds on them, picking spider leg's from the wounds themselves. The spider legs can be seen by other characters, despite their symbolism, they are really there and not hallucinations or dreams.

Orvil, who pulls the spider legs from his own leg, calls his grandmother to see for her advice. Upon hearing the message of the spider legs, Opal is surprised but not too affected, as spiders and spider legs have been prominent in her family. Their

mother never allowed them to kill spiders, claiming their webs carry miles of messages. To the family, spiders represent homes and traps, both a light side and dark side with an equally unnerving middle ground. The ideas of spiders and alcohol can be taken into the idea of generational trauma and alcoholism, from homes and webs, much like alcohol and substance abuse. Alcoholism and substance abuse provide comfort like home to victims, often burying themselves deeper into the substances and trapping themselves like a web. Through Orvil, only when he starts to have an interest in his heritage and family, begins the itching of the spider-wounds. His family, filled with alcoholics and substance abuse, are making the webs into further entrapment. It is most likely that due to events later in the story, the memory and feelings of his heritage will be traumatic to him and his siblings. Opal, raising the boys, never wanted to talk about their heritage in fear that it would be dangerous and the risks were greater than the reward. She had only seen the pain and trauma and substance abuse brought by their heritage and tribes, saving the boys from harm that could arise from them learning more. She knew of the spider wounds, as she had her own, but never told her sister as to not worry her. Opal and the boys are connected by underlying trauma before their heritage, something she reveals later. When the spider legs begin to open from his leg, the possibility for pain also opens. He does go to the powwow, he is shot there and ends up going to the hospital with Opal praying for his life. Despite not knowing the fate of Orvil, Opal believes that a sign of good luck that happens is the sign that he will live through the event.

Characters turn to alcohol and substance abuse to ease and relieve the pain, trauma, and scars that previous alcoholics have had on their lives. From trauma and substance abuse, the shootout at the powwow commences. Some characters go to find some type of light in their dark lives, others to grant more darkness. Everyone has a different reason to attend, yet every reason is quieted when the shots begin to ring out. Suddenly, their reasons are divided between wanting to live and wondering why they must continue to be killed and harmed. It is a cycle of violence, of trauma, of so much pain. Surely, with this incident and the deaths following it, alcoholism and substance abuse will rise again to null the pain of other's actions. From this abuse, more will most likely follow. This will not be the last Tony or Jacquie, suicide will push more pain, death will push more pain, alcohol and substance abuse will prevail and will continue the cycle. Unless there is a hard change to the characters, many will most likely go back to their addictions. Jacquie was eleven days sober, in her 60s, before this event. It is possible the spider webs of her home and addiction will drag her back in, as she merely struggled without booze just on being near them and nearly 13 years after her daughter's suicide. She seemed tired of the shootings, she seemed to know the cycle would continue.

As Tony dies at the end, he realizes that he can finally drop his mask, drop "The Drome", and be free. He can be himself and he finds peace in that. He has ran his life and hated it throughout his life, and is now able to leave it and run another way towards warm freedom. He hears birds singing, a symbol of flight and freedom

and calm. His cycle has ended, yet what he has caused has opened many more. He is alone on his section of the ground, dying, the world going black and eerily calm. It is impossible to tell the entire extent of the damage he has caused and what damage he has caused to the future of the tribe, the people in them, and the events that will be triggered from this. Orvil is badly wounded in the gunshots, it is hard to decide what will happen with Jacquie from these events. It is possible she will return to alcoholism, as previously mentioned.

Everything revolves in a cycle, from trauma, substance addictions and their influence. From the events of the powwow, the cycle will only grow and bring in others. The damage caused is unknown.

Works Cited

Alter, Alexandra. "Tommy Orange's 'There There' Is a New Kind of American Epic."
The New York Times, 31 May 2018. Web. 6 May 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/31/books/tommy-orange-there-there-native-american.html>

American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013.

NIAAA. "Fetal Alcohol Exposure." National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 29 Sept. 2020. Web. 6 May 2021. <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/brochures-and-fact-sheets/fetal-alcohol-exposure>

Orange, Tommy. 2019. *There There*. London, England: Vintage.