

NEIL SIMON'S *GOD'S FAVOURITE*: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

*Marvin Neil Simon is the preeminent purveyor of comedy in the late half of the twentieth century America. Before Simon has set a trend with his comedies, the Broadway theatre which is considered to represent the highest level of commercial theatre in English-speaking world has been popular for a very long time performing tragedies written by Eugene O'Neil, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. Comedy though was born at the same time as tragedy, it was never given the same position right from the times of Aristotle and never had a great history as tragedy has even in America. Surprisingly, Simon in the late twentieth century has become by quality and quantity the most successful commercial playwright in the history of American Theatre. At a time when the belief in God has become dim among the people, he touched the topic without the fear of critics attack, he tinged it with comedy to please his audience and invite them to enjoy in a light spirit the serious topic, that how he holded high the diminishing values and has become the most commercially successful play-wright in the history of America. The present play focuses on **God's Favourite***

Neil Simon possesses unique ability to be amusing even while dealing with serious ideas as in his play, *God's Favourite*. The protagonist is a chosen person by God to test his 'belief in God', so the title *God's Favourite*. God and Satan have a dispute over the faith of a mortal and so the deity has taken the trouble of testing him to win his argument with Satan. Characters, settings and situations here therefore are molded to suit the purpose.

The play begins in the night time when the bell rings and the house hold of Benjamin wake up in their Long Island home. When Benjamin and twins investigate, they find steel rimmed spectacles dropped outside in the snow as a clue to identify the intruder. The humor here is based on running gag. Sarah is unable to keep her bathrobe close and so she expresses fear that a rapist might have intruded. At this point Rose enters and Simon describes her as a 'Walking Harry Winston' covered with her jewellery even in her night clothes. She wears ear plugs which unable her to hear and holds the flower vase high to hit the intruder. Hence, she cannot see her husband and children. After a while her family members retire. Benjamin's son comes from the balcony dressed in an expensive tuxedo jacket and it is paired with patched jeans and sneakers. He has fully drunken and exchanges 'smart aleck' remarks with his father and the twins find him as an intruder. Morris and Mady, their black servants appear on the scene to report that they have seen a prowler outside the house. Mady remarks that living in the neighborhoods of rich is so dangerous when Joe dismisses them. Mady says, "It's getting' dangerous around here. I don't like livin' in rich neighborhoods" (GF.486). David sarcastically remarks, "She's right, Dad. Why don't you buy us a nice poor neighborhood so we'd all feel safer? (GF.486).

Unlike the mid-class atmosphere of the apartments in Simon's other plays, the setting here is set in a palatal home of a wealthy businessman. Joe Benjamin the protagonist of the play is tested by God. He is in his late fifties and he displays a great strength of character. As the play begins, Sidney Lipton tries to get into the living room of Joe but exits quickly through the French door as the burglar alarm starts to ring. Joe receives a phone call enquiring him if Mr. Lipton has come. It is actually a call by Mrs. Lipton and it is a wonder how she knows about his coming here. But, Joewho is not aware of this, thinks that a burglar might have intruded into his house. He confirms on phone that no one by that name has come there.

Joe's house has alarm system to indicate the burglar's entry and at the same time it may scare the thief, but Joe is also prepared for the worst, if it happens. But when looked in a light-vein, it is just a comedy, amidst of simple family bonds, the protagonist shows his faith

in God and ultimately after the tests, how it ends happily.

God sends his messenger, Sidney Lipton to test Joe and the comedy comes to life on the stage, when he appears. Unlike Job in *the Bible* who is a content man before he is tested, Joe is not a content man from the beginning. Though he has achieved great success in business and is a wealthy man, his members of the family are deviated from being normal in their behavior. His wife Rose is materialistic and childish. David, his son, a drunkard has no motivation and finds fault with his father's faith in God. The twins Sarah and Benjamin are absurd though have 'a combined IQ of 160' as is said by Simon. Rose comes back with her jewelry box as she hears noises and tries to know what is happening. She tells them that she will not get upset, if she is told what is happening. She worries a lot about her jewels, when Joe says that someone is trying to get into the house and gives assurance that if anything happens to them it is because of 'God's Will'. He asks all the members to go to their beds except David to ask him why he is bent on failing. To the question of David he answers, "I don't know who you are. Do you know who you are, David?" (GF.491). Joe answers David to explain what he is:

...Quick with a flippant answer. Fresh, disrespectful, unambitious, lazy, no interests, no principles, no beliefs, no scruples, a drunkard, a gambler, a playboy, a lover, a bum, a television watcher and a lousy guitar player, that's who you are.(GF.491)

What makes the father so painful is that he is the smartest boy in their family with three college degrees and distinguished himself standing first in his class, but now he is not even showing up for his senior year. Joe says promptly to David that he would not worry if the house is destroyed by fire the next day as it would be the 'God's will' David says that he tries to leave the house to take a long drive in six different situations, but cannot make it to the gate at least. To vindicate Joe's faith in God, he describes his poverty-stricken condition in his early years. He says:

I grew up in a tenement in New York. My mother, my father and eleven kids in one and a half rooms... one winter we all had the whooping cough at the same time, eleven kids throwing up simultaneously in one and half rooms- my mother nursed us on roller skates...through all that pain and heartache and suffering, she never complained or cried out against the world,

because she knew it was God's will. (GF. 492-493)

Joe is a devoted husband and father but his faith in God is more than this that he appears insensitive to the wishes of his members of the family. He gives every year to charity, and the next year he makes twice as much. David leaves the place leaving Joe alone to his prayer. He prays:

It's enough already, dear lord. Don't give me any more... Just David. Give me back my David... If it be Your Will, dear God, that's all I ask... Amen! (GF.494)

Joe is startled by the loud echoing sound of 'Amen'. Lipton enters the house searching his glasses without which he cannot see and asks Joe to switch on the lights. He denies that he is an antique dealer or that he has come to see Joe on business. At this point, he has some funny lines on movies which only a person of that area understands the humor connected to them. He later denies being a travel agent or a salesman. Thus Lipton engages Joe in a guessing game, which exasperates him so much and he is about to throw lunatic Lipton out from the window. Lipton is left to guess "his mission". Lipton at last comes out, "Yes, Joe---I am-who you think I am! (GF.502)" Joe finally comes to a conclusion that Sidney Lipton himself is a God, who has come to visit him and is contradicted by Lipton. Lipton observes that Joe gets disappointed and tells him that though he is not God, he performs services to God and he is a messenger of God. He doesn't live in the eternal paradise or a place as such. He lives in Jackson Heights, Queens. Lipton tries to convince him and concludes that he is a messenger from God by showing big 'G' on his shirt. Joe is so impatient to get the message from God which is supposed to be delivered by Lipton but, he doesn't want to deliver the message until Joe accepts him as a God's messenger. Joe finally gives assurance that he believes him and asks Lipton, "Why would God send a message to me, Joe Benjamin, a plain, simple, ordinary man?" (GF.505) Lipton answers him, "To test your faith, that's why!..." (GF.505)

Lipton assures him that God has faith but it is the other one who doesn't have faith in him, Satan. Lipton proceeds to inform him about the argument between God and Satan. Joe declares that whatever miserable or disaster may befall him, he will not renounce God. He is surprised to see Lipton pulling out a scrap of paper, 'the official message' which is read by them both aloud kneeling down. There is humor even in such situation. Sidney misreads his middle name and when he tries to correct him, he asks, "Melvin-right- would you believe God has such lousy hand writing?" (GF. 505)... Lipton tells him if he wants a theological

advice he should call Billy Graham. Joe says:

I am the servant of God, He is my Maker. I fear Him and love
Him but come hell or high water, I will never renounce Him!
(GF.508)

Lipton says in response to Joe:

Can I be honest? You can count on the hell and high water.
Good luck, Joe. I know you've got what it takes. And no matter
what terrible things happen to you, remember that God loves
you! (GF.508)

Joe solemnly exclaims, "And I love Him!" (GF.508) Lipton says:

But in case the romance falls apart, here's my number.
Renouncements are toll-free calls. (GF.508)

Joe learns that his factory is no more. This is the first disaster as predicted by Lipton. Joe says that he hasn't done insurance believing God to be his insurance. Lipton tells him that it is a mistake and leaves the place. The next scene opens two weeks later which shows the condition of Joe and his family. Lipton calls at night to Joe. However he does not renounce God. Rose asks him whether that messenger is from UNICEF, sarcastically:

Ohhhhhh! Ohhhhhh, I see... We all have to suffer because God
loves you so much. Oh, Joe, I'm so proud of you. You must be
thrilled to death. (GF.517)

Joe could not tolerate David speaking without faith in God, when he resists the type of language used in his house. Joe asks his family to go to the basement to pray God to forgive David for his sins. Lipton rushes with his raincoat which is burning. He says that he has been under a tree when David challenges God to show his wrath. Lipton takes out some papers from his attaché case, asking Joe to sign on all the three copies for a small 'ad' in the Sunday 'Times' to confirm that he has renounced God. Joe expects and refuses to sign on the papers. So he experiences physical tortures which are announced by Lipton. He says, "Don't ask for doctors. Think it over, Joe. If it gets worse... you've got my number. (GF.525)" The next scene opens with the dialogue between the black servants Mady and Morris. It is revealed that Joe's house alone is destroyed by the fire. Morris says: That the lord is testin' Mr. Benjamin? That it's God

who's burned us and froze us and starvin' us just to see if Mr.

Benjamin really loves Him the way he say he do ? (GF.527)

Within a short period, Joe suffers several financial and domestic setbacks. He is prepared to face even worse physical torments and spurns Lipton's repeated offers to sign a religious renunciation. Joe is suffering from a terrible pain as David has deserted the family. Rose asks Joe to renounce God in order to get rid from all the suffering. He refuses to do so that she says, "If you don't renounce Him, Joe...then I'm going to renounce you!"(GF.533). Rose leaves the place as he refuses to do. She leaves with her children Sarah and Ben. When Sarah says that her father may die if they leave him alone in such condition, Rose says:

He won't die. God doesn't want him to die. He wants him to stay here and suffer for a hundred and twenty years. Then they'll both be happy. We'll be dead and buried, and your father will be sitting on porcupine needles...Have a good time, Joe. (GF.534)

Joe asks his servants Morris and Mandy to follow Rose as they may be in need of them. The servants follow her unwillingly. Joe asks the servants, "What doesa suffering man living all alone in ashes need two in help for? Go with Mrs. Benjamin, Morris. She needs you" (GF.535).

After their departure Joe asks God about the next disaster he has to suffer. Joe is answered by a voice that the test is over for him, and the voice asks him to say, "I renounce God" (GF.536) as final tribute of his love for God. Disbelieving the voice he has heard, he recognizes that it is Lipton's voice, and finds Lipton behind him, who is standing at the fire place. Refusing to renounce God, Joe says that he is waiting for death and feels surprised when Lipton says that he has to wait for some more years for death. He also says that he has brought a list of physical tortures with him to undergo before death. Joe is prepared to endure all the tortures. Lipton tells Joe that he has been fired from the job and that trick he played is to save his job. Joe sympathizing Lipton, tries to console him saying that they must carry the burdens given by God to them. Lipton says, "Sure. The poor carry their burdens and the rich have them delivered. Where's the justice?" (GF.539)

As Lipton goes on renouncing God, Joe tries to make him feel comfort and promises him to write a letter of recommendation, and to put in a word to God. Though Joe requests Lipton to stay back with him, Lipton leaves the place. Joe, who is alone, discovers a ray of light with a clap of thunder that it is David, his son who is not dead drunk but totally blind. Unable to bear the sight of his blinded son, Joe says in anger:

Is this Your work? ... Is this Your test of faith and love? ...
You blind my first –born son and still expect me to love you?
Punish me, not him! Blind me, not my son ...
Where is your love? Your compassion? Your justice?
...I AM ANGRY AT YOU, GOD! REALLY, REALLY
ANGRY!... and STILL I don't renounce you!
How do you like that God? (GF.542-543)

As if in answer to Joe's outburst, the eyes of David are restored, Joe thanks as well as apologizes for his outburst. Rose enters with twobags of food, which she has won on a T.V game show. The Benjamin's family is reunited and goes into the kitchen leaving David alone, looks up to God and says:

Okay, God ... If you got room for one more, count me in... I
just wanted to thank you for sparing my father's life...That's
all I wanted to say ...Amen. (GF. 544-545)

The play ends with Lipton's words with an enigmatic note that God is crazy of Joe.
About the play Simon says:

The play is least objective about, because it was written under the most grueling circumstances: it was an attempt to release or exorcise some of the anguish I was going through following the death of my wife. I was not able to rationalize why somebody like Joan could die of cancer at the age of 39. I was very angry and writing that play was a kind of cathartic experience for me...it was depressing , yet it was something I wanted to do at that point in my life . I was in the middle of the ocean, looking for a log to hang on, and God's Favorite was the log that I grabbed. (James Lipton, p.187...

The play has much adverse criticism than any other plays of Simon as he deals the serious theme in a light vein. Unlike Bum, the elder son in *Come Blow Your Horn*, David never enjoys even in self-indulgence. The play is based on the plot from *the Book of Job*. Though the characters are exaggerated for the sake of comedy or farce, they are made interesting and audience empathizes with them. While the other characters including Joe stands as caricatures, the portrayal of Sidney is unique in that it is brilliant and individualized. He lives in poverty, has a nagging wife who never believes that he is a

messenger of God. He has poor eye sight that he cannot see properly without his pair of spectacles. At the end he becomes unemployed. But much of the comical dialogues are given to him and he is made modernized or rather, Simon. ‘Hollywoodized’ him if one can call him so. He is so imaginative that he says Satan is ‘gorgeous in Pink suit’ and resembles Robert Redford. To escape from the tense and boredom of life, he often watches movies and so uses such vocabulary connected to it. He dials thirty numbers to leave a message with God’s answering machine. Simon has made the play farce through his comedy making other characters caricatures.

Joe’s love for family is certainly undeniable and Joe is touched by David’s new found devoutness. To some extent physical torture is projected but not the mental suffering of it. Internal conflict is not focused may be as it is not a tragedy. Simon gives modern comical dialogues to make it comedy. This lightened the serious element and critics like Mc Govern attacks this element as well as characterization which are mostly stereo type.

It is ironic that this Biblical tale, which should almost automatically attain universality by virtue of its age and source, fails to achieve that quality so consistently found in most of the plays written by Neil Simon. (Edythe M Mc. Govern, p.15.)

Its, Joe’s belief in God saves him as well and the family which after the tests reunite.

References

1. Edythe M. Mc. Govern, *Neil Simon: A Critical Study*, New York: Frederick Ungar, 1978, p.15.
2. James Lipton, "Neil Simon: The Art of Theatre X", *The Paris Review*, Vol.34, No.125, Winter, 1992, p.187. .
3. Neil Simon, "God's Favourite", *The Collected Plays of Neil Simon*, Vol-II, New York: Random House, 1971, p.491. All the subsequent quotations are taken from this book.