

How does *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Glengarry Glen Ross* and the social discourses of their time, affect public and private values of society?

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Theatre has always been an outlet to address social issues that occur in our societies. In this critical essay I will be discussing relative social concerns for both *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*, establishing that they are indeed social dramas that reflect the discourse of their time.

The concept of sexual liberation during post war America in the 1950s has always been a debate for historians. In her essay, Meyerowitz argues this using Elaine Tyler May's book *Homeward Bound* where she "borrowed the word 'containment' from foreign policy of the Cold War and repositioned it as a broader post-war cultural ethos that applied as well to gender and sexuality" (2014, p. 295). She agrees that "other historians have followed May's lead" when it comes to the jurisdiction of sexual freedom during this time suggesting "impact on policy, politics, citizenship, masculinity, femininity, and sexual behaviour" (p. 295), though she also suggests that due to "mounting historical evidence", the post-war years were not as conventional as some might propose. Meyerowitz concludes this by giving what she describes as "the obvious answer" (p. 296); that both sexual conservatism and sexual liberation were social issues; the latter indicating the private needs of the people and the former representing their public values. This controversy "set the stage" for the ongoing historical debate and had lasting impacts in all aspects of social life during the post-war era. After the absurdity of WW2, the "wartime rhetoric had reinvented smalltown America" (Bigsby, 2000, p. 31) and many people were recognising the impermanence of life. With this came the desire to live life authentically. This is where those who advocated for liberation emerged and "endorsed sexual expression" over "sexual restraint"; their main objective being to "constitute a liberal reformist version of modern sexuality" (p. 297). Though despite this, the overwhelming dominance of McCarthyism seeped into the nation. Anything or anyone that didn't meet the criteria of "the Cold War ideal of heterosexual nuclear familial lifestyle" (Chiang, 2010, p. 112), was considered a perversion of society and was treated as such. Ironically, this oppression on sexual subcultures, demanding that they remain "publicly invisible but privately tighter", ended up cultivating "the early roots of the second-wave feminist and modern sexual liberation movements" (p. 112). This can very much appeal to the discourse of how public values and private needs struggled to find balance with each other on social issues during twentieth century America.

Bigsby's book *Modern American Drama* dives into an informed analysis of Tennessee Williams' life and the ways in which he projected his personal struggles into his playwrights. William's "felt threatened and marginalised" (Bigsby, 2000, p. 41) being a closeted homosexual during post-war McCarthyism. For him, "writing was, indeed, a way of freezing time, of abstracting himself from process" (p. 42) and instead, he externalised these pent-up emotions onto his characters. Bigsby describes how "his characters find themselves pressed to the very edge of the social world" (p. 41) and are "damaged, emotionally, sexually" whilst treading the "boundary of insanity" (p. 42). Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is the perfect example of this. The play depicts her descent into madness as she struggles to deal with the guilt of her homosexual husband's suicide and in the loneliness that came with

it, how she was driven to “intimacies with strangers” (Williams, 1957, p. 87) to fill the void that her late husband left her with. Instead, Blanche is left with overwhelming insecurities over her physical appearance and is reduced to exile from her hometown for her fornication (here, Williams specifically critiques the Souths corruptness over sexual freedom). Blanche describes this as a “storm” in which she was “caught in the centre...People don’t see you – men don’t – don’t even admit your existence unless they are making love to you” (p. 53). This moment confirms how deluded and fearful she is when it comes to her appearance and for what that translates to her sexually. She rewords her sentence, correcting herself to say men instead of people, indicating how hypersensitive she is to criticisms from the male gaze. Here, Blanche compels herself to become a sexual object and she becomes aware of the fact that her appearance affects the way she’s treated by men. It is the turmoil of her past that represents the storm; one she is terrified will threaten her future. With her alone in the centre, she becomes desperate to be seen as admirable by her male companions. After uncovering this past, Stanley describes her as “downright loco – nuts” (p. 71) for her behaviour, and she is ultimately admitted to an asylum. This links to how “American post-war psychoanalysts, in particular, defined nonnormative sexuality and portrayed it as psychotic, neurotic, arrested and immature” (Meyerowitz, 2014, p. 298) – her preference of younger men, “represents her desire to resist the implications of maturity” (Bigsby, 2000, p. 43). These experts cast homosexuals and “women who had sex outside of marriage” as “physically damaged individuals” (p. 298). And so in terms of Williams’ homosexuality, it is clear that he utilises Blanche’s character as an outward cry for his own liberation and “to communicate his own confused sexual identity” (Mazumder, 2013, p. 15).

Williams focuses this struggle through Stanley and Blanche’s continuous opposition towards each other. When first introduced to each other, Blanche is extremely flirtatious with her sister’s husband. The stage directions depict this clearly: “She sprays herself with her atomizer; then playfully sprays him with it” (Williams, 1957, p. 22) as well as when she openly admires his physique when he undresses in front of her; the confusion she feels by being attracted to him leads to her feigning sickness at the end of scene one. Though despite her openness, Stanley remains indifferent to her notions, often getting annoyed by them, “He seizes the atomizer and slams it down on the dresser” (p. 22). The verb “slams” highlights his dominance and masculinity and is a reference to his animalistic qualities. He even goes as far to say that if he “didn’t know that you was my wife’s sister I’d get ideas about you!” (p. 22), which essentially confirms Blanche’s intentions towards him and his rejection only furthers her desire. However, these feelings are somewhat juxtaposed in scene five where Blanche articulates her thoughts on Stanley in a dramatic monologue that not only insults him, but also furthers the depth of her – and Williams – sexual desire. The language used is extremely equivocal in tone: “Maybe he’ll strike you or maybe grunt and kiss you” (p. 47) and depicts her disgust in Stanley’s animalistic behaviour. However, this only masks her jealousy and her true attraction and desire for such masculine qualities, which we see when she “throws back her head and laughs” (p. 22) after Stanley slams down the atomizer. Stanley and Blanche’s constant back and forth is a representation of the struggles between public values and private needs, Blanche’s constant need for sexual validation compared to Stanley’s traditional and somewhat misogynistic outlook on life reiterates this ideology and the tensions that come with it. Furthermore, “sexual liberalism of the postwar years harboured an aggressive masculinism” which could link to the rape scene in which Stanley “construed nonmartial sexual expression of male autonomy” which

includes the “subordination of women” (Meyerowitz, 2014, p. 302) – Blanche. It is becoming that he ruins her with sex as ‘sex ‘has been her Achilles heel. It has always been his sword and shield’” (Corrigan, 1976, p. 392). Stanley contradicts himself by raping Blanche due to the relentless judgement that he places upon her throughout the entirety of the play. Here Williams highlights yet another key social issue of misogyny as when it comes to Stanley’s sexual liberation, as a man and a heterosexual, he is in a position of power to take it for himself, without judgement.

Tennessee Williams cleverly attempts to “combine elements of theatricalist staging with verisimilitudinous plots and characters” (Corrigan, p. 395) in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. He juxtaposes these, mainly to communicate to the audience Blanche’s failing mental state using “aural and visual effects” in his stage directions that “distort the surface verisimilitude of the play” (p. 386). The flat they reside in is very small, with only two rooms and a bathroom it is clear that Williams has done this intentionally as “his sets have a metaphoric force” (Bigsby, p. 34). This is done not only to indicate Stanley’s lower class, but to allow his characters to experience tensions with one another. Blanche and Stanley are no exception to this and they confront each other “across a space charged with sexual energy” (p. 34). This is seen most often through Blanche’s constant need to bathe, disrupting the space for others. We see through the stage directions that Stanley mocks her: “[mimicking]: ‘soaking in a hot tub’” (Williams, p. 69) and becomes easily annoyed by her occupying the only bathroom in the flat. Moreover, we also see his frustration with her when she continuously turns on the radio during the poker scene, so much so that “he tosses the instrument out of the window” (p. 35). Because of this dynamic between them, the intimacy of the flat represents them as “trapped in a diminishing social and psychological space” and reminds us that “there is a link between space and power” (Bigsby, p. 36). In addition to this he also uses “costuming, props and lighting” to emphasize “the dichotomy between Blanche and Stanley” (Corrigan, p. 386). Blanche’s clothes are symbolic to her sexual liberation. She has a trunk full of “feathers and furs” (Williams, p. 18) and she wears white to convince men she is virtuous and pure, though, in truth it “hides her Phallus” (Bak, 2005, p. 99), and she uses it as a costume to entice men into her trap. This fails with Stanley though who instead likens her trunk to “the treasure chest of a pirate”, and her, a “deep-sea diver who brings up sunken treasures” (Williams, p. 19) – he sees her costumes for what they truly are: a façade.

When one hears the term capitalism, it often conjures the negative stereotypes of “Wall Street excess and political selfishness” (Troy, 2005, p. 16) and when relating it to the 1980s in America, an era where “junk bonds and trashy values created deficits ‘as far as the eye could see’” (p. 16), it was known to be a period of struggle for the American people, where public values did not coincide with private needs. President Jimmy Carter warned the nation during the summer of 1979, that the country “faced tough times ahead, most immediately from the energy crisis that had sent oil prices soaring” which ultimately led to a rise in both inflation and interest rates “to unprecedented levels” (Baker, 2007, p. 44). By the spring of 1980, America’s economy was sent into a recession which only furthered the sense of “economic anxiety” (p. 46) in the public’s minds, making them eager for political change leading up to the presidential election at the end of 1980. Ronald Reagan, America’s new president that would go on to define the 80s, encouraged a “gospel of progress and prosperity” and re-established a hope of “revolutions in economics, marketing, advertising” (Troy, p. 3) in the public’s minds. Though this was far from the truth. Instead, what came to

be known as the Reagan recession, “generated the most unemployment since the Great Depression”, and there was serious concern over “the growing gap between rich and poor” (p. 13). Stuck in this system with a president more focused on compromises rather than revolutionary change, sent “indices of social pathology and individual misery soaring” (p. 16) amongst the American people as they struggled to find identity in “a private world invaded by public values” (Bigsby, p. 204). To make matters worse, “the United States had still not come to grips with the meaning of its defeat in the Vietnam War” (Baker, p. 48) in 1975 – a war that was constituted in preventing the spread of communism: capitalism’s natural enemy in the political world. Their defeat left America “incredibly divisive” (p. 49), leading to Reagan accusing Carter of allowing their country’s strength to deplete on his watch and that there “had been a loss of respect for the United States in the world” (p. 62). Because of this, Reagan was adamant to “rebuild U.S military strength” (p. 62), though by focusing his attentions on this, he left the economy in a state of disaster that continued to affect American lives throughout the 1980s.

Similarly to President Reagan’s direct focus on re-establishing power in America, David Mamet’s social drama *Glengarry Glen Ross* is a “play about power” in a world where “success breeds success” (Bigsby, p. 219). The play was “inspired by Mamet’s own experiences in a Chicago real estate agency” (p. 217) and so we can regard it as an authentic and realist documentation of capitalist society during the early 80s, something that Mamet described as a “myth rooted in greed” (p. 213). Mamet sets the scene for us: a “medieval” (Mamet, 1983, p. 32) competition against salesmen, all of them desperate to save their jobs, and in that desperation they become “alienated products not of their labour but of their desires” (Bigsby, p. 209). In Act One, Scene One, two men “speak in a code impenetrable to the audience” (p. 219), Shelley Levene begs and barter with his superior, John Williamson in order to acquire the leads he needs to save his job; “Give me a lead hotter than that, I’ll go in and close it. Give me a chance. That’s all I want” (Mamet, p. 22). Williamson argues back: “Then I’m *fucked*. You see...? Then it’s *my* job” (p. 23). Mamet illiterates and puts stress on multiple words throughout this sentence to highlight the stress that Levene is putting on Williamson. Despite this, the money in closing the leads entices Williamson as he barter back “Twenty percent” and “fifty bucks a lead” which constitutes an ironic reaction in Levene. He attempts to undermine Williamson, patronising him: “I’m older than you” though, as his speech continues, he once again gets flustered, realising the severity of his situation and eventually succumbs under pressure, agreeing with Williamsons’ terms: “That’s fine. For now. That’s fine” (p. 24). He repeats ‘that’s fine’ as a way to convince himself of it, though it’s clear that he’s angry over being undermined, especially when, due to his circumstances, he has no other choice. In this moment, Williamson becomes aware of the power he holds in controlling the leads. He breaks their agreement almost immediately, instead demanding “a hundred bucks” (p. 25) from Levene, who in turn begs him for mercy and turns the conversation personal by bringing his daughter into it as an attempt to gain sympathy from Williamson. Without money though, he tells Levene that there’s nothing he can do, something we as the audience know to be a lie as he admits before he leaves that he’s doing this “Because I say so” (p. 26) further highlighting how “the corrupt ones can be so powerful in the business world” (Adilee, 2021, p. 618).

Mamet cleverly uses language to “show the essence of the capital system” (Adilee, p. 618) and the desperation in Levene – shorter, blunt sentences and incessant rambling

throughout the scene, contribute to the “terror of an empty universe or an empty life” (Biggsby, p. 202) and indicates how people were more focused on public values rather than their own private needs. This concept is balanced throughout the play through acts of greed that in turn “breeds resentment and provokes criminality”, something that Mamet declares is “implicit in capitalism” (p. 213). Notably, Dave Moss would fit this ideology best. During the second scene, he and George Aaronow engage in conversation discussing the competition and the strain it is putting on them both. Moss brings up stealing the leads from the office; something that Aaronow believes to be a purely theoretical concept, turns out to be a deception – “to the law, you’re an accessory” (Mamet, p. 45). Here, “language becomes a trap: simply to listen is to become guilty” and it furthers the sense of power play that is complicit within the “paradigm of a competitive capitalist society” (Biggsby, p. 219). Mamet makes it clear that capitalism is unethical as it greatly encourages manipulation and dishonesty as methods within the world of business. The anxiety over losing their jobs – something they consider to be their lives as “a man’s his job” (Mamet, p. 75) – sends such an array of panic in the salesmen, that it triggers their sense of fight or flight. This leads us onto the discussion of morals within the play and how “American society is disregarding all the moral standards” (Adilee, p. 618). Despite being forced into the competition, the salesmen are free individuals and still have the freedom of choice when it comes to their own morals and values, yet virtually all of them “stick to deceitful methods and forgot about honest ways” (p. 619). Mamet is clearly attempting to depict how capitalism is equal to the values of public need as morals are often overlooked within the business world; morality, on the other hand, reflects the private needs of people. George Aaronow is the best representation of this, as throughout the play we can see he is much more timid than the others and is struggling mentally on being a bystander in an operation that he truly hates, something he confirms at the very end of the play when he says “God, I hate this job” (Mamet, p. 108). While the others fight to defend their jobs, he accepts defeat immediately, “Where am I going to work?” (p. 28) which explains why he was so easily overpowered by Moss. We can see his morals fighting the urge to turn Moss in after the robbery, “I’m, I’m, I’m, I’m fucked on the board. You. You see how...I...(pause) I can’t...my mind must be in other places” (p. 56), shown through the repetition and pauses which also indicate his anxiety. Though despite this he recognises still that Moss will accuse him of being a bystander in the robbery if he turns him in and so he chooses not to, highlighting that even the weakest continue to succumb under the pressure of capitalism and the greed for wealth.

Masculinity is another key theme within the play. It’s clear that Mamet’s works are stimulated by ‘an overriding interest in male characters’ which is emphasised in *Glengarry Glen Ross* through his all male cast and in the ways that he creates “vivid, masculine characters and putting them into traditionally masculine worlds” (McDonough, 1992, p. 196). Through this and his critiques on capitalist society, Mamet portrays how “the world of business, therefore, is intrinsically connected to masculinity” (Greenbaum, 1999, p. 35). Mamet highlights this masculine energy through numerous devices; he uses language with the consistent swearing amongst majority of the characters, specifically derogatory terms such as “cocksucker” and “you don’t have the balls”. Mamet uses language such as this not only to indicate how the world of business is inherently male dominated but to further highlight the issues regarding social distinctions between men and women as these are phrases that are intentional on making the one receiving them feel feminine and weak.

Richard Roma, the highest earning salesman due to his success in closing leads, is undoubtedly the most masculine figure within the play. After Williamson gets involved in his conversation with Lingk, Roma is in a state of fury: “whoever told you you could work with *men*?” (Mamet, p. 99). He uses the term ‘fairy’ (p. 100) against Williamson, and though not derogatory, it is a term used to “feminise men and suggest homosexuality” (Greenbaum, p. 36). The salesmen embody the idea that the only way to be a man is to have the ability to assert power over others and through his characters. Mamet declares that the only way to assert this power is through being successful in your work and earning money as his characters are “constituted by American capitalism” (p. 37). In conclusion, *Glengarry Glen Ross* highlights the pressures of capitalist society and in maintaining a masculine and powerful status within the business world. He criticises this system, indicating how these are values taken from a public’s perspective and that they ignore the true private needs of the individual, shown through the lack of positivity and the “obliteration of compassion, loyalty and trustworthiness” (p. 37) within the play.

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