

Public Values and Private Needs in *Machinal* and *A Raisin in the Sun*

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In this essay I am going to discuss the contrast between the public values in America, and the private needs of individuals in Twentieth Century Modern American Drama.

The 1928 Expressionist drama *Machinal*, by Sophie Treadwell, portrays the life of women in 1920's America as neither liberal nor opportunistic. Looking back at the female progression recorded throughout the Twentieth Century, 'social scientists' realised that women 'remained oppressed victims' of their society, despite their winning of the vote (Freedman, 1974, p. 374). Regardless of this political milestone, the feminist movement slowly dissolved, with many women going back to their domestic spheres (Bywaters, 1990, pp. 97, 99 in: Shlueter, 1990, p. 97). One of the key public values of the 1920s explored in *Machinal* is the continuous cycle of the gender oppression women experience due to patriarchy. The opening lines of the play labelling the Young Woman as 'any' woman point out that the private needs of every woman in America are not being met through female oppression in marriage, domesticity and economic environments (Treadwell, 1993, p. xi; Bywaters, 1990, p. 99, 101 in: Shlueter, 1990, p. 97). *Machinal* questions the legitimacy of changes to the role of the woman through new freedoms such as access to 'contraception', marriage out of love and the ability to work as equals amongst men (Fass, 1978, pp. 69-71).

Gender oppression in the home environment remained at the heart of the public values of an ideal 1920's American household. Frances Early observes that whilst men continued to develop their 'already substantial' place in the public sphere of work and politics, women remained chained to their unchanging role of 'reproduction and homemaking' (Early, 1984, p. 199). The traditional values of a woman as a homemaker are represented through the body language and dialogue of the Mother, who has strong opinions about the importance of marriage and the role of the woman in the domestic sphere. This can be seen when she repeatedly 'nag(s)' her daughter to 'eat' her 'potato', therefore fulfilling her maternal responsibility to make sure her child is fed. The repetitiveness of this command used by the Mother highlights how strongly and naturally her maternal instincts come to her. Furthermore, her 'dull voice brightens' when the 'garbage' is collected from the flat. The term 'brightens' implies that the Mother feels uplifted and joyful when she is able to carry out duties in the household (Treadwell, 1993, pp. 13-15). These household-related themes being at the centre of the dialogue for the Mother show that she is dedicated to serving in the traditional role of a domesticated housewife. She therefore becomes the symbol of feminine public values of 1920's America.

Marriage also remained a strong value within the society, and young women were pressured to get married to be able to provide for themselves, their future children and their parents. Therefore, marriage was considered to be at the forefront of the purpose of any young woman (Early, 1984, pp. 204-205). This pressure from the public can be seen when the Mother does not allow the Young Woman to 'ask' her a

question, or 'talk' to her, by repeatedly ignoring her attempts to do so (Treadwell, 1993, pp. 13-14). Once the topic of marriage is mentioned, there is a visible change in the attitude of the Mother through her body language - she 'stops clattering-sits' (Treadwell, 1993, p. 15). This reaction emphasises the ideal that marriage is a worthy topic for a woman to discuss, as the Mother, who is a symbol of the public values of women, pays attention to it.

In addition, women experienced gender oppression through the 'restrictive' custom of 'marriage' (Bywaters, 1990, pp. 97, 99 in: Shlueter, 1990, p. 97). This can be seen when the Mother insists that marriage is not about 'love', but basic survival for women. Her tone is shocked when her daughter takes 'love' into consideration when making her decision regarding her marriage to Mr J. The mother tells her that the vital question to base her decision on should be whether he can provide the daily necessities such as 'clothe(s)', 'feed(ing)' and paying for the 'bills' (Treadwell, 1993, p. 17). This portrays the ongoing dependence women had on men, and the restrictive values the society placed on women when deciding to marry. Moreover, the tone of the Mother is angry and confused, as seen through the repetitiveness of the exclamation mark and question mark in her speech. She is frustrated at her daughter, for not grasping the idea that marriage to a 'decent man' is a necessity not a choice in life, and the idea of emotionally fuelled marriage is 'crazy' (Treadwell, 1993, pp. 17-18). The term 'crazy' has connotations of being out of place, delusional and insane, which highlights the fact that marriage out of love is not considered to be socially acceptable.

Although the public values of women belonging in the domestic sphere and being expected to marry are represented in the play, they are criticised by Treadwell through Episode Three, through the rebellious dialogue of the Young Woman after she gives birth. Firstly, the Young Woman 'signs no' when the nurse asks her if she 'didn't want either' a boy or a girl baby (Treadwell, 1993, p. 27). The body language here makes a statement of the Young Woman not desiring to fulfil the role/duties of a mother, meaning her private needs differ to the values of the public. This contrasts the attitude of her mother, who is still looking after her child even though she is an adult. Also, she feels alienated from her role as a mother, which can be seen through her repetitive 'no response' to the encouragement of others to engage with the baby, the hospital staff and her husband (Walker, 2005, p. 216; Treadwell 1993, pp. 27-28). This contrast between the public values and private needs is vital to the message of the play; that the desires and goals of women may differ to the public ideals of the stay-at-home wife.

Treadwell uses the expressionist device of contrasting the openly discussed themes of marriage, reproduction and homemaking in short and direct sentences, and the private, long streams of thought in monologue, to represent the disparity between the public values of the 1920s American society, and the private needs of the Young Woman (Krasner, 2005, p. 46). According to Barbara Bywaters, the play portrays what she calls "' Every Woman'" (Bywaters, 1990, p. 99 in: Shlueter, 1990, pp. 97, 99). Treadwell therefore implies that this may in fact be the case of every single woman in America. The Young Woman understands that the society around her

regards her as a breeder, as she compares herself to a 'Vixen'. She believes that now she has lived up to the expectations of the society around her as a procreator, she can 'rest' (Treadwell, 1993, p. 31). The ambiguity of the term 'rest' meaning relaxation as well as laying someone to 'rest' after death, highlights a woman has no other value to the society, apart from being a procreator. The rebellion of the Young Woman against the public values is represented when she tells the doctor and the nurse to 'let her alone' and says that she will 'not submit anymore' (Treadwell, 1993, pp. 30-31). As she says this to two figures who are valued and necessary in the public, she makes a public statement of rebellion towards childbirth, and the expectations of her as a woman in general. She is making a statement of her private needs do not conform to the public values of her society. Furthermore, the orders of the doctor to feed the woman 'solids' when she 'says she can't' tolerate them, and the persistency of her husband that having a baby is 'natural', despite the clear uninterest of the Young Woman towards her child, portrays how the society around her acts as a compass for the direction of her life. Nothing in her life is her own choice, it is the decision of the societal values around her (Treadwell, 1993, pp. 27-30; Walker, 2005, p. 2017).

Treadwell makes use of the expressionist implement of the continuous office sounds through her stage directions which are present all the way through Episode One and remain during the stream of thoughts of the Young at the end (Krasner, 2005, p. 46). The harsh sounds of typewriters, telephone buzzers and steel riveting symbolise the continuous theme of gender oppression in *Machinal*. Amy Koritz explains that 'repetitive' rhythms are used in plays to emphasise 'the subjective experience' of individual character's 'social identities' (Koritz, 2001, p. 552). The stage directions of a sound of 'office machines' and 'steel riveting' is used by Treadwell throughout the play whenever the Young Woman experiences a variety of forms of oppression, which also violate her private needs. For example, when she experiences marital rape at the end of Episode Two. The sound of 'rhythms of the music' turns into the sound of 'steel riveting', as the Young Woman stands in and cries for help as her husband 'starts towards her' despite her 'animal terror'. The sound continues to Episode Four, where she succumbs to the societal expectations of motherhood (Treadwell, 1993, pp. 26-27). The connotations of 'mechanical' and 'steel riveting' are harsh and violent, and these reflect how the private needs of the Young Woman are violated through the societal oppression of her gender.

Racial segregation in America was an established practice in the 1900s. A cartoon from the 'Chicago Defender', where a 'streetcar conductor' reprimands a woman for queuing in the 'white' queue, pointing to a sign that says 'FROM HERE BACK FOR NEGROES'. The humour behind the cartoon is the subtitle, which says 'But I'm not! I got this tan out at the beach'. The body language and facial expression of the woman accused of being black is shocked and offended (Anonymous, 1945, 'Figure 1' Chicago Defender (1945)). This cartoon shows that being black in America at this time was undesirable, offensive and derogatory. The message of this cartoon gives background to the segregation of blacks and whites, including in the city of Chicago where *A Raisin in the Sun* is set. Although the Southern part of America eradicated housing racial zoning in 1917, the North remained practising this. The public values

on segregation remained very strong for separation of white and black citizens, and not only did white Americans use restrictive housing covenants to 'fight off racial integration', they refused to 'sell, rent or provide real estate financing to African Americans' (Plotkin, 2001, pp. 39-40). The desperation to keep African Americans out of white neighbourhoods resulted in racially-fuelled violence of riots and bombings. When looking at the identity of the rioters and bombers in 'Chicago's worst post-war riots', the 'participants' were mainly people who lived in the attacked area. White neighbourhoods worked together to keep away any 'intruders' (Hirsch, 2009, p. 69). The living conditions of Lorraine Hansberry, the author of *A Raisin in the Sun*, were not as poor as that of the Younger family. Yet she experienced the racially-fuelled hatred and violence of white neighbourhoods when her family tried to make a move into one (Gavin, 1996, p. 61). This shows that the struggles the Younger family face in the play are very real in the Cold War America, and are true for all black people, despite of their social class.

Housing covenants led to a vast difference in the living conditions between African Americans and white Americans. The issues of over-crowding can be seen in the description of the flat in Scene One which has been accommodating 'too many people for too many years', which represents the lengthy amount of time the Youngers have struggled with over-crowding. Furthermore, although the flat is tiny, the 'landlord's lease' is over-priced for what he is giving them. White Americans used higher rents to financially exploit African Americans. Statistically, due to the 'housing shortage' in black neighbourhoods, the cost of renting was '15%-50%' higher in black areas compared to white. The cost of buying property was also higher, which meant that the black housing shortage acted as 'most instrumental' when it came to maintaining 'restrictive covenants' (Hirsch, 2009, pp. 28-29). There is a repetition of words such as 'small', 'single', 'sole' and 'little' in the description which summarises the crowded living conditions of the family. Most importantly, the frustration of the private needs of African Americans for humane living conditions is highlighted through the sentence, 'they are tired' (Hansberry, 2001, p. 9). The difference in living conditions between white and black people is emphasised via the new house in Clybourne Park having 'a whole lot of sunlight', which is associated with brightness/happiness and warmth (Hansberry, 2001, p. 71). This direct comparison of the living conditions of the white and black Americans shows the opposition of the public values of racial segregation and the private needs of the black communities being forced to live in deprived and over-crowded conditions.

Racially discriminating housing covenants are one of the key racial issues displaying the contrast between the public values of white Americans and the private needs of African Americans. Due to the segregated neighbourhoods in Chicago, over-crowding became an issue, and resulted in 'housing shortage for all black Chicagoans' (Cooley, 2010, p. 488). Furthermore, housing covenants remained an issue even after they were 'declared unconstitutional' in 1948 (Gordon, 2008, p. 121). In *A Raisin in the Sun*, when Mama buys a house in Clybourn Park, a white neighbourhood, they send Lindner, their 'welcoming committee', to threaten the Youngers not to make the move into their white neighbourhood. The idea that white Americans are superior to black is shown when Lindner tells the Youngers that they are not welcome to live

within the Clybourne Community due to having a different 'background', and being a 'Negro family' (Hansberry, 1959, pp. 89, 91). Here, Hansberry showcases the 'white supremacist social order' in America during the Cold War years (Gordon, 2008, p. 122). Despite the ruling of housing covenants being undemocratic in 1948, Mr Lindner represents the ways in which they continued in a legally inconspicuous manner. He offers to 'buy' the house from the family at a 'financial gain' to them, through the 'collective effort' of his neighbourhood (Hansberry, 2001, p. 93). The term 'collective' shows that racial prejudice and discrimination was a common public value in the North, and the idea of the white neighbourhood being willing to pay more money for the house than it was worth, shows the extremes whites are willing to go to, in order to keep African Americans from their communities. Furthermore, racial segregation is represented in the dialogue via the way Lindner repeatedly refers to the Youngers as 'you people' and calls himself and his neighbourhood 'us' (Hansberry, 2001, pp. 90-91). This represents the alienation and differentiation made between people based on their skin colour and sets a tone of 'us' vs 'them'.

African Americans faced with the harassment of neighbourhood welcoming committees such as that of Clybourne Park. They were also experiencing physical violence and threats, including bombings, of which a record number of over 250 happened between 1956 to 1958 (Matthews, 2008, p. 556). These attacks are mentioned repeatedly in *A Raisin in the Sun*, as a constant reminder that racial segregation was not solely about laws and regulations, it was a public value taken to the extreme of potentially fatal violence. The casual attitude both Walter and Ruth show towards the bombing shows that violent threats have become a day-to-day experience for African Americans. Walter mentions that there was 'another bomb' set off, passively during discussing breakfast with Ruth, who then asks 'Did they?' with 'maximum indifference' (Hansberry, 2001, p. 11). The theme of violence being mentioned alongside breakfast shows how common it is, as breakfast is something that is eaten daily - a regular part of life. Also, the 'maximum indifference' in her voice shows the habitualness of violence against African Americans.

The 'Aesthetics of segregation' are represented in *A Raisin in the Sun* through the way violence acts as a barrier to the Youngers moving out of their over-crowded flat in the black neighbourhood (Gordon, 2008, p. 126). The constant threats of violence towards black families for attempting to integrate into white communities made escaping the living conditions of the ghetto very difficult and resulted in conditions such as Travis having to sleep on a 'make-down bed' in the living room (Hansberry, 2001, p. 10). The desperation African Americans like Ruth feel to escape the ghetto is stronger than the fear of violence, which is shown in the contradiction of Ruth stating that nobody is scared of 'crackers' yet asks if there were any houses at a different location to Clybourne Park (Hansberry, 2001, p. 71). The claim that the threat of a bombing is not scary is eradicated by her immediate questioning of location of the new home, meaning she knows the danger of the violence her and her family will be faced with. She sits and evaluates the 'various degrees of goodness and trouble', which is an example of the 'weighing of the dangers' between the 'ghetto' and that of 'anti-black terrorism'. Through this, Hansberry shows the audience the life-threatening decisions African Americans faced on a daily bases due

'anti-integration' bombing (Hansberry, 2001, p. 71; Gordon, 2008, p. 127). The choice between providing the private needs of a 'nice house' with more space for the family, yet potentially dying, or staying over-crowded but safe, shows how hard the public values of whites made it for African Americans to meet their needs. The expectation of violence against African Americans upon trying to move out to white neighbourhoods, is represented by Mrs Johnson. She says that the Younger name will be 'in' the 'papers plenty' of times, when they are 'bombed' after they 'invade' Clybourne Park. She is so sure of this, that she is 'holding up her hands' to point at every word she 'can see in front of her' (Hansberry, 2001, p. 77). The body language highlights how truthful she feels to this being reality, and the fact that she can 'see' the title page in front of her suggests she has seen such articles before.

The public values of the white Americans consisted of a 'capitalist economic system' which was only beneficial for the white (Matthews, 2008, p. 559). Finances were a 'vice' used to keep African American families away from white neighbourhoods, as they were refused sales, rentals and 'real estate financing' (Cooley, 2010, p. 491; Plotkin, 2001, pp. 39-40). This financial discrimination can be seen in the play when Walter reflects on having nothing else to give his son but 'stories of how rich white people live'. He feels as though he is 'choking to death' living the way he is (Hansberry 2001, p. 18). The combination of 'rich white' highlights that money plays a big part in the living conditions in Southside Chicago, as well as the colour of the skin. The word 'choking' has connotations of danger, pain and death, and represents the hopelessness Walter feels as a black man, unable to provide safe housing for his family.

In conclusion, both *Machinal* and *A Raisin in the Sun* show that although the law during their relevant periods in the Twentieth Century changed in an attempt to give oppressed groups a better chance at meeting their private needs, these were ignored in the social and private spheres. Both the Young Woman and the Youngers feel their private needs are not being understood and met due to the oppression of their gender/race. Therefore, both plays represent oppression through public values as a barrier to meeting private needs.

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