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## Staging Urbanism: A Study of City Life in Selected American Plays

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### Abstract

The mid-20<sup>th</sup> century saw many American playwrights explore the realities of city life to powerful effect. Plays that emerged during this time paint an interesting picture of urban America as a paradoxical place of endless opportunity and limited resources. The characters of this setting have the dramatic potential to be uniquely tragic, often attracted to cities by promises of economic freedom only to be destroyed by the tough and competitive nature of urban life. The study aims at constructing a contextual reference framework within which Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Arthur Laurents' *West Side Story*, and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* are analyzed to explore how the stressful environments of the city shaped life for different groups of urban residents. This study employs a textual analysis method to investigate how these three iconic plays of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century create the tragic and tumultuous setting of the American city. By analyzing selections of dialogue from each play, the influence of city life on the words and actions of characters in each play will be shown to be instrumental in conjuring the hectic and often desperate realities of urban life in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America.

**Keywords:** Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American Drama, Williams, Laurents, Hansberry, Melting Pot, Ethnic Tensions, Urbanization, Urban Poverty.

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مسرحة التمدن: دراسة لحياة المدينة في مسرحيات أمريكية مختارة

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جامعة تكريت/ كلية التربية للبنات/ قسم اللغة الانكليزية

**الملخص:** شهد منتصف القرن العشرين محاولة العديد من الكتاب المسرحيين الأمريكيين باستكشاف حقائق التأثير الكبير لحياة المدينة. حيث رسمت المسرحيات التي ظهرت خلال تلك الفترة صورة جديدة بالاهتمام لأمريكا المتحضرة كمكان متناقض لفرص لا نهاية لها وموارد محدودة. تتمتع شخصيات هذا المكان بإمكانية درامية لتكون مأساوية بشكل فريد كونها غالبًا ما تنجذب إلى المدن بوعود الحرية الاقتصادية لتدمرها الطبيعة الصعبة والتنافسية للحياة الحضرية. تهدف الدراسة إلى بناء إطار مرجعي سياقي يتم ضمنه تحليل كلا من عربة اسمها الرغبة لتينيسي ويليامز، قصة الجانب الغربي لأرثر لورنتيس، وزيبية في الشمس للورين هانزبيري لاستكشاف كيف شكلت البيئات المجهدة للمدينة الحياة لمجموعات مختلفة من سكان المناطق الحضرية. تستخدم هذه الدراسة طريقة تحليل نصية للتحقيق في كيفية قيام هذه المسرحيات الثلاث الأيقونية بإنشاء بيئة مأساوية وصاخبة للمدينة الأمريكية. من خلال تحليل نصوص مختارة من حوار كل مسرحية، سيظهر تأثير حياة المدينة على كلمات وأفعال الشخصيات في كل مسرحية على أنه فعال في استحضار الحقائق المحمومة واليائسة في كثير من الأحيان للحياة الحضرية في منتصف القرن العشرين في أمريكا.

**الكلمات الدالة:** الدراما الأمريكية في منتصف القرن العشرين، ويليامز، لورنتيس، هانزبيري، بوتقة الانصهار، التوترات العرقية، التمدن، الفقر الحضري.

## Introduction

The powerful urban dramas of Tennessee Williams, Arthur Laurents, and Lorraine Hansberry reveal that life in a city can have a palpable influence on the words and actions of a character. Active in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America, these playwrights collectively make clear that this was a time and place in which people were increasingly drawn to cities by promises of economic success. The tragedy of their characters also reveals that the pressures of urban life can more readily lead a person to ruin than triumph. The following analysis will look at how playwrights of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America explored the dichotomous nature of urban life, examining its potential for success and its capacity to lead people to destruction, as well as investigating what character-based devices each of these playwrights employed in constructing an urban setting. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams pits a sophisticated, rural woman against a brutish New Orleans urbanite. Laurents' *West Side Story* retells the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet between two warring ethnic communities forced to co-exist in Manhattan. The tragic realities of urban poverty in Chicago are made palpable by the

struggles of the Younger family in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Together, these plays will reveal that the setting of a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American city is often conjured through the unique and tragic stress it places on the desperate people who seek their fortunes there.

### ***A Streetcar Named Desire and the Disruptive Urban Soundscape***

Tennessee Williams' 1947 drama, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, is set in the French Quarter of New Orleans. The play focuses on the growing conflict between Blanche DuBois, an English teacher recovering from a divorce, and Stanley Kowalski, the boisterous husband of Blanche's sister. Blanche is often described as a "Southern Belle," an aristocratic debutante characteristic of the wealthy, slave-owning aristocracy that existed prior to the American Civil War. The Southern Belle character is historically associated with the rural environs that surrounded the agricultural estates of slave owners (Fang, 2008, p.103). This contrasts dramatically with Stanley, a working-class personality that is most comfortable in the busy environment of urban New Orleans. In building the urban setting of the play, Williams often employs the contrast between these two characters to great effect.

The tension between Blanche and Stanley is apparent from their first interaction. This scene is already made awkward by the fact that, prior to the play's events, Blanche has been forced to move into her sister's cramped New Orleans apartment after a series of misfortunes cause her to lose the family's rural estate. A conflict between Blanche's rural sensibilities and the busy world of the city is already set in motion when she has the following exchange with Stanley:

STANLEY. You going to shack up here?

BLANCHE. I thought I would if it's not inconvenient for you all.

STANLEY. Good.

BLANCHE. Traveling wears me out.

STANLEY. Well, take it easy.

[A cat screeches near the window. Blanche springs up.]

BLANCHE. What's that?

STANLEY. Cats... Hey, Stella! (Williams, 2004, 1:16).

Blanche's contributions to this dialogue are both thoughtful and articulate, indicating her intentions are to make polite conversation as she might in the aristocratic society she is accustomed to. Stanley's responses have a nearly percussive quality by comparison. His statements are blunt, spontaneous, and hurried. The nature of each character's speech reflects their respective backgrounds. As Wei Fang notes in her analysis of *Streetcar*, the essence of both of these characters harkens back to the environment they grew up in (2008, p. 103). In this dialogue, the audience is hearing a direct comparison between the dialects of rural and urban America. This comparison is drawn to conclusion by the sudden interruption of a stray cat passing by. Like Stanley, the cat's appearance is spontaneous and disruptive. This event is greatly unnerving to Blanche, while Stanley hardly notices at all.

Analyses of *Streetcar* typically view Blanche as a hero brought to ruin by a series of tragic events culminating in her conflict with Stanley. These interpretations describe Blanche as representing gentle sensibility, whereas Stanley is a character of animalistic impulse (Vlasopolos, 1986, p. 331). Pitting these characters against one another allows Williams to depict the American city as a brutal environment gradually encroaching on what was once the picturesque environs of the rural South. Like Blanche, this representation of the American city is tragic. The progress of modern cities has enabled an industrious working class, represented by Stanley, to thrive. Blanche's decline throughout the play makes clear that this progress comes at the cost of the gentle rural character of the past. Throughout *Streetcar*, a noisy urban soundscape is forever in the background, bringing the sounds of bar piano and noisy neighbors into the apartment. In a climactic scene, Stanley himself becomes a key element of this disruptive soundscape, shouting out his wife's name over and over again from his apartment building's courtyard. These disruptions exacerbate the already stressful circumstances of the play and ultimately hasten the demise of the sophisticated, rural Blanche.

### ***West Side Story* and the “Melting Pot” Concept of American Cities**

Arthur Laurents' *West Side Story* is considered by many to be an iconic depiction of an American metropolis in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Set in Manhattan during the late 1950s, the play reimagines Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in the context of a modern urban conflict between Puerto Rican and white American communities (Vallance, 2011, para. 4). The urban setting of New York City is developed through this conflict as a historic location where immigrants seek a promising new life only to be met by resistance by those who came before them. As Puerto Rican scholar, Alberto Sanchez, explains, “*West Side Story* depicts a fight for urban space, a space that has already been impregnated with cultural symbols and political significations for the relations, interactions, and social actions according to the American Way of Life” (2008, P. 167).

At the time of *West Side Story*'s writing, communities of Puerto Rican migrants had just begun to emerge in New York and were being heavily discriminated against (Negron-Muntaner, 2000, p. 84). Laurents' choice to focus on this new, struggling ethnic community brought the racial tensions of American cities to the forefront of the play. The dialogue of the play's Puerto Rican characters reflects a keen awareness of the fact that they are not welcomed. An example can be found in an argument between the Puerto Rican couple, Bernardo and Anita, that precedes the musical number, “America”. In the scene, Anita jeers Bernardo as he complains about their treatment in the United States:

BERNARDO. Si! And Chino makes half what the Polak makes – the Polak is American!

ANITA. Ai! Here comes the whole commercial! (*A burlesque oration in mock Puerto Rican accent. BERNARDO starts the first line with her*) The mother of Tony was born in Poland; the father still goes to night school. Tony was born in America, so that makes him an American. But us? Foreigners! (Laurents, 1958, pp. 39-40).

Beyond awareness of their outsider status, this exchange recognizes that Puerto Ricans are not the first ethnic community to be met with resistance in New York City.

Bernardo's use of the slur 'Polak' (a derogatory term for Polish in American English) invites a tacit comparison between Puerto Ricans and the ethnic groups that became established in the city before them. Similar references are made throughout the play to Irish and Italian communities. These references to the city's many ethnic groups and their historic discrimination invoke the American myth of the "melting pot". This was an early 20<sup>th</sup> century belief that American cities were places where divisions between ethnic and cultural groups disappeared. In reality, however, discrimination and entitlement have historically maintained the segregation of the urban United States (Hirschman, 1983, p. 400).

A crucial component of the melting pot concept is that immigrants are attracted to the United States by promising economic opportunities. Ethnic communities already established within American cities often feel a sense of entitlement to these opportunities, leading to resentment of new comers (Hirschman, 1983, p.398). Both this sense of entitlement and xenophobic resentment emerge frequently in dialogue between the Jets, the play's American gang. In the opening scene of *West Side Story*, members of the Jets blame the Puerto Rican immigrants for what they perceive as the decline of their neighborhood. As they argue about what should be done, a senior member of gang, Riff, makes a bombastic statement that reflects his sense of entitlement:

RIFF. We fought hard for this territory and its ours. But with those cops servin' as cover, the PRs can move right in under our noses and take it away. UNLESS we speed fast and clean 'em up in one all-out fight! (Laurents, 1958, p. 6).

Riff's brashness and manner of speaking make clear that he is an immature and impulsive character, as are most of the Jets. The unfounded entitlement they feel to control of their neighborhood will become increasingly absurd throughout the play as the audience comes to know the struggles and motivations of the Puerto Rican characters.

Through frequent references to different ethnicities, the realities of ethnic prejudice, and growing tensions regarding who is entitled to control of a shared space, Laurents creates the setting of a crowded metropolis. Like the ideal of the melting pot, the hopes of *West Side Story's* Puerto Rican characters cast the American city as a place that attracts people from all over the world with its endless promise. The resentment of the Jets and their violent reaction to the new immigrants also shows that the American city can be very small. It is a crowded place where communities of different cultures and ethnicities are forced to live in close proximity. What results is a racially-motivated conflict for limited resources that is characteristic of urban America.

### ***A Raisin in the Sun and the Limited Resources of Poverty***

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* provides a brief look into the life of an urban black family living in poverty in Chicago's Southside neighborhood. The central characters of the play are the several members of the Younger family. Sharing a small apartment, the trials and ambitions of each family member have little choice but to intersect in their tight living space. Hansberry's decision to focus on a black family actually complicated her efforts to depict an urban space. Early critical praise for the play often centered on the claim that the problems facing the characters in *Raisin* could occur in the lives of people of any race or class. In one interview, Hansberry replied to this comment by stating, "I had always been under the impression that Negroes are people" (Bernstein, 1999, p. 16). Hansberry's comments reference the fact that white

critics often missed the universality of the black experience. In addition to this, her statement also reveals, to a certain extent, what critics expected from a depiction of urban life. The setting of a poor, black household in a city was clearly expected to be a markedly different environment from that of what someone may find in a suburban or rural home.

Hansberry's depiction of urban life is subtle, but makes effective use of the space in which the play takes place. *A Raisin in the Sun* occurs entirely inside the Younger family's small apartment. It is described by the family's matriarch, the character, Mama, as a place where, "too many people have lived for too long" and has only one window in which natural light enters. This presents a situation in which the economy of a shared space must be maximized (May, 2006, p. 130). References to how little space is available to the family members are common in the dialogue and often lead to tense dramatic moments. In the second scene of Act I, for example, one of the Younger daughters, Ruth, reveals to her mother and sister that she is pregnant. This prompts the following exchange:

BENEATHA. How far along are you?

RUTH. Two months.

BENEATHA. Did you mean to? I mean did you plan it or was it an accident?

MAMA. What do you know about planning or not planning?

BENEATHA. Oh, Mama.

RUTH. (wearily) She's twenty years old, Lena

BENEATHA. Did you plan it, Ruth?

RUTH. Mind your own business.

BENEATHA. It is my business – where is he going to live, on the *roof*? (There is silence following the remark as the three women react to the sense of it). Gee – I didn't mean that, Ruth, honest. Gee, I don't feel like that at all. (Hansberry, 2004, 1:2).

In an apartment crowded with people already struggling to survive, the revelation of a new baby soon to join the family presents a dire situation. Beneatha does not have the luxury of celebrating her sister's pregnancy, but is instead immediately concerned with where they will find space for the baby. As noted by professor of drama, Theresa May, the Younger family lives in a neighborhood of Chicago known for being a safe haven for black families (2006, p. 130). This means that Beneatha is faced with very limited opportunity to find a better life elsewhere. The urban setting is created, in this instant, by her immediate concern that the Younger family will have no option but to stretch what little they have even further. What happens to her sister, or any of her family members, also happens to her. As she says, "it is my business".

The limited space afforded the Younger family is also expressed in a number of mannerisms. Members of the family often communicate with their neighbors by simply opening their apartment door and yelling out, giving the impression that other families in the apartment building are within easy shouting distance. A houseplant is

occasionally mentioned and moved around the apartment to ensure that it can absorb what little natural light enters. At one point, Beneatha describes these mannerisms to a suitor as, "acute ghetto-itis" (Hansberry, 2004, 1:1), referencing the crowded districts in which Jews were historically isolated. These elements of *Raisin* cast the Southside neighborhood as a collection of small spaces and limited resources. Though, as many critics noted, poverty may impact people of all races in both urban and rural locations, there is a unique scarcity of space in this urban setting. The only sanctuary available to the Younger family is their small apartment, a reality emphasized by Hansberry through the lack of any scene changes. All events, both positive and negative, occur against the backdrop of the crowded and perpetually busy apartment.

## **Discussion**

*A Streetcar Named Desire*, *West Side Story*, and *A Raisin in the Sun* collectively describe the time period of roughly 1947–1959. By discussing these three plays and how their authors built the urban setting, we can see how Americans defined "the city" at that time. First, all three playwrights emphasize the geographical and social mobility of the characters in the plays, highlighting movement that is important to their development as individuals. Second, each playwright depicts the city in which the characters live and move as a space of exciting opportunity but also of troubling division, conflict, and danger. Finally, the urban settings of these plays are imagined in three very different ways, showing how diverse Americans are in their conception of urban space.

Economic opportunity and the potential to thrive is a significant theme. Large American cities were seen as bustling places where anyone could find gainful employment and, eventually, afford the newest modern luxuries. Such an opportunity is what attracted Blanche's sister from their family home prior to the events of *Streetcar*. The belief that anyone can find economic opportunity in the city is further emphasized by the oafish Stanley, who is able to thrive in the urban environment despite (or perhaps because of) his blunt disposition. Blanche, by contrast, is made uncomfortable in such a setting because she finds that true success in the city requires immorality, deception, and ruthlessness. Blanche initially finds the nightlife in New Orleans captivating and exciting, but she eventually becomes desensitized to the sleaze and sins of Basin Street. *Streetcar* describes New Orleans as a city in transition; as the boundaries between country and city become increasingly blurred, Blanche's world becomes more and more entwined with the working-class world of Stanley.

In *West Side Story*, the international draw of the American city is a central plot point. The Puerto Rican characters are lured into the events of the play through their confident belief that they can begin a new and fruitful life in New York City. However, it quickly becomes evident that they are outsiders who do not fit into the established urban environment and that they, and their new American dream, are destined to be violently expelled from it. Even the desperate Younger family of *Raisin in the Sun* seems reticent to leave their cramped urban surroundings because they do not know what opportunity a black family may find elsewhere. Having grown up in a racially segregated community, the Younger family is unprepared for the possibility that they might find more space and freedom outside of their familiar surroundings.

In all three of these plays, the city's promise of opportunity is revealed to be a tragic illusion. Cities are shown to be crowded places where resources are scarce and

competition for them is extreme. This can be seen in the anger the Puerto Ricans of *West Side Story* feel at how they are treated and the deadly struggle they find themselves in with their American neighbors. Blanche's demise at the hands of Stanley in *Streetcar* makes it appear that the gentle character of rural America has little chance of surviving in an urban future, where a brutal and impulsive personality like Stanley's may be seen as a necessity for survival. In *Raisin*, Beneatha's cold and angry response to news of her sister's pregnancy emphasizes that the family is struggling to survive in the crowded, brutal environment of Chicago. Taken together, these plays describe urban America as a place that promises ample opportunity but, in reality, offers only pain and struggle. Furthermore, the grand opportunities of the city are not equally distributed, but rather reserved for a privileged group of white, wealthy Americans. The city's many other residents are left with little choice but to fight one another for what resources are left for them.

### **Conclusion**

Tennessee Williams, Arthur Laurents, and Lorraine Hansberry build their respective urban settings by emphasizing the tragic nature of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American cities. During that period of time, these cities were depicted as microcosms of a darkly oppressive society that offered glimmers of hope but ultimately denied those hopes to those who arrived in search of success. All three dramatists create urban worlds in which their characters are marginalized, exploited, and transformed. Cities are shown to be places that attract people with promises of spectacular opportunity. Such opportunities are eventually revealed to be scarce, however, and reserved for a select few. Those lured to the city through the hope of a better future are left, instead, to struggle against the many others who came before them. Many of these people ultimately end up losing themselves in a desperate struggle to survive.

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