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Modern Drama

Gould

Flawed Humanities and Destruction in *A Streetcar Named Desire, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? and Fences*

The difference between drama and other genres of literature is the inherent community building that comes with seeing a play; drama is meant to be performed in front of an audience in an attempt to tell stories. The deep silence, as Shelley Winters describes, is a product in the dramas that strike a chord with the audience. For me, that chord lies in a drama becoming a mirror, a reflection of humanity, that encourages me as an audience member to ponder my own social locations and motivations for how I live my life. While many of the plays we have read this quarter employ experimental techniques and storytelling that influence the landscape of modern drama, I found that Tenessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire,* Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and August Wilson's *Fences* were the plays that show real people with their flaws on full display, and thus are truer reflections of the broader human experience. Furthermore, these plays all work with the concept of destruction; that is, they destroy and rebuild certain phenomena, whether that be archetypes, relationships, or metaphysical barriers, in order to illuminate how people and ideas are constantly evolving through explication. With these plays, I found myself lost in the stories and left with an

emotional, contemplative mood about my own humanity, which is why these three plays hit me "where I live."

Tenessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* is largely a family drama that deals with gender roles; however, there is much to be said about how Williams chose to deconstruct and destroy archetypes during a highly transitional time. Set in a bustling New Orleans in the late 40s, the typical gender roles of subservient wife, Stella, and hypermasculine breadwinner, Stanley, are presented, but the introduction Stella's perplexing sister Blanche serves as a catalyst for the destruction of any kind of salient roles. This time period was a transitional era, where these gender stereotypes were being broken down in the typically rigidly defined South. I imagine many people, especially more women, during this time period felt that they could embrace aspects of their individuality. This can be seen a bit in how Stella interacts with the world around her: she is a good housewife, but she also stands up to Stanley when she believes he is irrational, as indicated in the scene where Stanley explodes and begs for her to come back down their flat from Eunice's, screaming the iconic line "STELL-LAHHHHH!" Yet, it must be noted that she returns to him with tenderness. Behavior like this enforces Stanley's toxic hypermasculinity, but Blanche's persona combats and complicates it.

Blanche's archetype as the prim and proper Southern belle is also an interesting phenomenon, broken down as it is revealed that it is just a facade because she has lost her childhood home Belle Reve, been a perpetrator to her late husband's suicide by telling him that his homosexuality disgusted her, and has been sexually promiscuous. Here, the Southern belle archetype is being disintegrated to illustrate a flawed person; similarly, Stanley's typical Southern masculinity is challenged by his questionable rape of Blanche and subverted through

Mitch, his friend, because he does not fall into these toxic masculine traits. My sympathy and alliance with Stanley decayed as he revealed himself to be a vulgar, arrogant person shallowly defined by his masculine dominance over others. Both Blanche and Stanley are deeply flawed in their archaic behavior and their progression as people do not align with the transitory time period. Gender roles are always hard to deconstruct and the way Williams presents these characters assures us that they understand to the fullest extent how difficult it is. While I do not identify with the hypermasculinity Stanley embodies or the disintegrating persona Blanche uses, I can sympathize with the difficulty of understanding individuality. In my opinion, Williams was suggesting that people are often products of the time they exist in, but sometimes they get left behind as ideologies and behaviors progress. Blanche and Stanley are well-developed, flawed characters, but they also showcase being stuck in-between spaces of time. After reading this play, I was left pondering my own social location in relation to this modern time period. The liminal space of being young and growing into adulthood has prompted me to use my agency to break down archetypes and cultivate individuality; this is a feat that I do not think Stanley or Blanche was able to achieve because their identities were too intimately entwined with the Southern archetypes of a previous era.

Additionally, it is evident that Williams was particularly interested in the atmospherics involved in playwriting, which is the kind of attention-to-detail that intrigues me. Usually, I think literature involves a mix of technical precision and emotional impact of the words on the page; Williams achieves both through deliberate stage direction and a poetic realism that sets a distinctly Southern —humid, charged, and uncertain— ambiance. Williams' ability to plunge me into a location during a specific time is alarming and satisfying all at once. The play is written

with little room for interpretation; it is a piece of drama that is a controlled exercise of realism as expressionism, heightening the emotional impact. This play struck such a deep chord within me because it simultaneously defines and deconstructs a region through melodrama, a type of destruction that works on a micro and macro level. At first, this play appears to be a simple story about a woman slowly entering insanity, but the working parts reveal that there are much deeper themes present, providing a prime example of how literature can use controlled juxtaposition and poetic language to push seemingly niche genres like drama forward.

Similarly, Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a play bursting with layered drama, but it never allows the dramatic qualities to overwhelm its portrayal of humanity. I have seen the film three different times, yet each viewing reveals nuances I hadn't previously seen or considered. In the most recent viewing in class, I was particularly struck by how deeply ingrained the art and act of storytelling is in the drama. At the surface, it feels as though Martha and George are destroying each other due to marital issues; that is true on some level, but their conflict really rests in the constancy of telling lies and stories in order to cope with the difficult parts of their lives. George's relationship to storytelling is evident through the Bergen story, where it is implied that the boy who accidentally killed his mother and then swerved to avoid a porcupine, killing his father in the process is actually an autobiographical account of his own adolescence. Martha malevolently tells Nick and Honey that George was indeed the boy in the story and that when he tried to publish a novel about it, her father forbade it. His distraught pleas for Martha to stop telling such a personal story showcase how George is only comfortable telling stories if he is in control; for me, the true tipping point of the play is when Martha strips her husband of the agency to present his story the way he wants, taking liberties because she

understands the hierarchical power of their relationship. In reality, I know how easy it is for small actions to exacerbate explosions in interpersonal relationships. This play is no doubt melodramatic, but it also reflects everyday person-to-person interaction.

It is heartwrenching to see George laughed at for such a tragic story, even more so when he states that the boy remains at the asylum, suggesting that his marriage —or, more broadly, his life— is imprisonment from which he cannot escape. He wrote the novel in order to cope with what happened in his past, but the lack of acceptance has left him hurt and broken-down. As a writer myself, seeing someone who attempted to use literature as a medium to achieve consciousness and reconciliation but being rejected was emotional; I have not known rejection at this level, but I can imagine the loneliness, isolation, and shame that George feels. Albee wrote George as someone who has a tenuous relationship to storytelling. While he goes along with Martha's lies and even has baggage of his own, George has a seemingly quieter and more painful interaction with storytelling that makes his final eruption a bit more justified.

Martha is the other character that primarily uses storytelling as a coping mechanism. Her whole persona, histrionic and alcohol-induced, is infused with the lies she tells. It is evident from the beginning that she is an angry, broken person who partakes in erratic and hurtful behavior because something terrible has happened to her. By the climax of the story, it is revealed that she has possibly undergone the trauma of infertility; that is, she and George could not have a child of their own, so they manifested a son for sixteen years in order to feel less shattered about it. While both she and George contribute to breaking each other down, Martha uses her lies, her banter, and her explosive behavior in order to cope with their trauma. The idea of destroying each other

to cope is impactful, illustrating how love and relationships are always messy and can often be exploitative.

Nick and Honey embody this phenomenon, as well, though in more subtle ways. Honey's implied miscarriage or possible intentional abortion is a tragic way to tell a story of two young lovers forced to marry because of a pregnancy that they weren't ready for. The irony that Honey may have "blew up" and then deflated (implying a hysterical pregnancy or a forced abortion) because she did not want a child, while Martha and George physically could not have children is prudent to understand the genius of this play. The reason why this play hit me "where I live" is because it is a beautifully nuanced portrayal of how people are flawed and that humanity is often too defined by the trauma we endure. It is uncertain where Honey and Nick stand in terms of their relationship by the end, especially after Nick and Martha attempted to sleep together, but the audience sees the couple stripped down of any facade to cope with the unhappy parts of their lives. The final scene where Martha is left broken, saying "I am" when George sings "who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?" is heart wrenching because, despite her flaws, she is a person that ultimately had unhealthy coping mechanisms. Yet, as an audience member, I cannot help but sit and consider the sympathy I have for both her and George because, after all, they are interesting characters who depict how the arts of destruction and storytelling overlap in our everyday lives.

It is important to note that the first two plays do in fact comment on social location, identities, and the flaws of humankind, but they also present distinctly white narratives. August Wilson's *Fences* works in similar ways to the aforementioned dramas, but it illuminates that flaws cannot simply be attributed to one kind of person. This play is about the location of identity and the salient aspects of generational development. Wilson suggests that the African

American experience must be understood through history and racial memory. Personally, I find the relationship between memory and knowledge or understanding to be fascinating. Whether we acknowledge it or not, people are developed through how they process their experiences and understand their memories. Culture, including the genre of art and subgenre of drama, is heavily influenced by historical contexts and what we as people make of them. This can arguably be said for all of the dramas read during this course, but I did not truly see the intrinsic link of history and memory to human psychology, behaviors, and beliefs until seeing how Troy, Cory, and Rose grapple with racial memory. In one of the most poignant scenes of the play, Troy describes sneaking off to be a with a girl and when his father caught him, he was punished using horse reins, connoting the harsh reality of African American enslavement; this kind of behavior trickled down into how Troy treats his son, Cory, indicating how the African American consciousness is influenced and cannot escape the historical racial contexts that defined it in previous eras. Here, memory is inherent and difficult to understand, but nonetheless powerful.

Fences is also particularly compelling because it works with the concept of destruction. The degradation of stereotypes and the pigeon-holed identities for African Americans leads to a broader understanding of how stereotypes must be destroyed in order for progression to occur. Troy is a father who could never find much success in baseball because of his age, but he bitterly blames his race as the reason, thus creating a prejudice that was superfluous to his personal situation. He also blames race for his inability to move up and become a driver for the garbage trucks; yet, his boldness in identifying this race issue gets him the job he desired. His inclination to blame race is not always unjustified, but the fact that he was able to move up in his career despite being African American showcases how his situation is not entirely based on prejudice.

Besides, his biggest issues are not directly about stereotypes or racism. He is often a cruel father to his son Cory and never really cultivates a loving, vulnerable relationship with him. Troy thinks that his only responsibility is to provide a home and food. This is a result of fragile masculinity that is a product of racial history fueled by stereotypes and discrimination, which struck me as another portrayal of flawed humanity, both for the African American and for the white counterparts that perpetuate this painful history.

For me, Rose as a character is the heroine of sorts. Whereas the other two plays present women in complex ways, Wilson gives a poignant acknowledgment of the African American mother as a concept. Rose is rational but never stagnant; that is, she understands the sacrifice she has had to made and is not afraid to let Troy know that she stood by him for years as the ideal housewife despite having felt that she could have had more in life. While Troy illustrates how history can halt progression and intimacy in parenthood, Rose shows how history can be understood and used to inform a progressive outlook on life. When Cory describes himself as always being a shadow to his father and refuses to go to the funeral, Rose challenges this irreverence and says that Troy may have not been an ideal father at times, but that was not necessarily his fault. She was able to find fulfillment in being a mother, to both Cory and later Raynell, a responsibility that gives her autonomy. What was interesting to me in these critical moments in the play is that Rose tried to instill in Cory the consciousness that he has agency in a transitional time period to take ownership of his past and future. In a stroke of genius, Wilson elucidates the notion that parenthood and racial memory reflect each other and that an understanding of both can inform an outlook on life that acknowledges history but does not let it define future endeavors.

The ending of this play hit me "where I live" greatly because it ultimately gives redemption to a character who is inherently flawed. Troy was vilified throughout the entirety of the story, but at the end, his brother Gabriel metaphorically opens the gates to heaven. This implies that Troy is able to go to heaven despite his misgivings. The periphery characters do the work to destroy expectations, stereotypes, and archetypes, while Troy never really changes; yet, it is comforting thinking that he gets a second chance in the afterlife. I am not religious whatsoever, but this idea of redemption is appealing because people will always make mistakes and will not always get the opportunity to make amends for them. In Albee's play, there is little optimism that George and Martha's relationship will benefit because the play rests heavily on the drama pushing the story forward. In Williams' work, there is some notion of progression with Stella and Stanley's baby and a sense of moving forward for Stella as she relinquishes Blanche to the doctors, but I do not buy that the characters really find any kind of redemption. However, *Fences* ends with Gabriel sounding the horn, allowing the story to taper into poetic sensibilities and aestheticism that give broader implications of forgiveness and possibility than the other two plays do. After finishing this play, I was left in an emotional state, knowing that humanity is a complex paradigm that not only possesses faults, but also the ability to forgive and learn from these shortcomings.

As someone who writes creatively, I know the importance of a title and the titles of these three plays had many implications that deepened their respective stories. *A Streetcar Named Desire* not only connects to how Blanche arrived in New Orleans but the implication of a streetcar is that they are constantly moving from one place to another, contrasting the flawed stagnancy Stanley and Blanche possess; additionally, the word "desire" has great meaning to this

story, as it relates the sexual undertones and occurrences in the play. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* seems to imply the precarity in the art of storytelling, along with underpinnings of feminism and stream-of-consciousness that defined much of Woolf's work. The title *Fences* serves as a symbol of the barriers people build to keep the outside in or vice versa. These three plays are so nuanced that their titles contain multitudes, another perplexing way that these dramas struck a chord in me.

In conclusion, all of the aforementioned plays find an understanding of many sorts of different phenomena, yet they do it in similar ways. The concept of using destruction as a means of finding reconciliation is perplexing, supporting ideas that some parts of humanity must be deconstructed and subverted in order to find progression. I think this link between Williams', Albee's, and Wilson's plays allows the dramas to reach broader implications on the public; indeed, all of these plays have been adapted into notable films and the characters have become recognizable in popular culture. I am not suggesting that all plays need to be adapted in order to be considered notable, but I think that the reason that these were so easily adaptable is that the stories resonate with people. I think that all good art—including literature, cinema, etc—function to leave the public feeling contemplative about something. These plays showed me reflections of humanity in provocative manners that were uncomfortable, but they displayed the flaws that people can possess. If you strip away the technical parts of the play, the stories are realistic (albeit dramatized for entertainment's sake) portrayals of how people function in the societies they live in. In three completely different stories, I was able to resonate with some part of the play; additionally, I was left pondering my own social location within the society and enclaves I exist in. Due to this accessibility and provocation, these dramas "hit me where I live",

meaning they reached farther than much of the art and media I consume and allowed me to have new considerations about the way I live my life.

Work Cited

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