

DOCTORAL THESIS

Self in community: twentieth-century American drama by women

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Date of Award:
2016

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Abstract

This thesis argues that twentieth-century American women playwrights spearhead the drama of transformation, and their plays become resistance discourses that protest, subvert, or change the representation of the female self in community. Many create antisocial, deviant, and self-reflexive characters who become misfits, criminals, or activists in order to lay bare women's moral-psychological crises in community. This thesis highlights how selected women playwrights engage with, and question various dominant, regional, racial, or ethnic female communities in order to redefine themselves.

Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* and Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* are representative texts that explore how the dominant culture can pose a barrier for radical women who long for self-fulfillment. To cultivate their personhood, working class Caucasian women are forced to go against their existing community so as to seek sexual freedom and reproductive rights, which are regarded as new forms of resistance or transgression. While they struggle hard to conform to the traditional, gendered notion of female altruism, self-sacrifice and care ethics, they cannot hide their discontent with the gendered division of labor. They are troubled doubly by the fact that they have to work in the public sphere, but conform to their gender roles in the private sphere. Different female protagonists resort to extreme homicidal or suicidal measures in order to assert their radical, contingent subjectivities, and become autonomous beings. By becoming antisocial or deviant characters, they reject their traditional conformity, and emphasize the arbitrariness and performativity of all gender roles. Treadwell and Norman both envision how the dominant Caucasian female community must experience radical changes in order to give rise to a new womanhood.

Using Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* as examples, this thesis demonstrates the difficulties women may face when living in disparate communities. The selected texts show that Southern women and African-American women desperately crave for their distinct identities, while they long to be accepted by others. Their subjectivity is a constant source of anxiety, but some women can form strong psychological bonds with women from the same community, empowering them to make new life choices. To these women, their re-fashioned self becomes a means to reexamine the dominant white culture and their racial identity. African-American women resist the discourse of assimilation, and re-identify with their African ancestry, or pan-Africanism. In the relatively traditional southern community, women can subvert the conventional southern belle stereotypes. They assert their selfhood by means of upward mobility, sexual freedom, or the rejection of woman's reproductive imperative. The present study shows these women succeed in establishing

their personhood when they refuse to compromise with the dominant ways, as well as the regional, racial communal consciousness.

Maria Irene Fornes' *Fefu and Her Friends* and Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* are analyzed to show how women struggle to claim their dialogic selfhood in minoritarian communities (New England Community and Jewish Community). Female protagonists maintain dialogues with other women in the same community, while they choose their own modes of existence, such as single parenthood or political activism. The process of transformation shows that women are often disturbed by their moral consciousness, a result of their acceptance of gender roles and their submission to patriarchal authority. Their transgressive behaviors enable them to claim their body and mind, and strive for a new source of personhood. Both playwrights also advocate women's ability to self-critique, to differentiate the self from the Other, to allow the rise of an emergent self in the dialectical flux of inter-personal and intra-personal relations.

The present study reveals that twentieth-century American female dramatists emphasize relationality in their pursuit of self. However, the transformation of the self can only be completed by going beyond, while remaining in dialogue with the dominant, residual, or emergent communities. For American women playwrights, the emerging female selves come with a strong sense of "in-betweenness," for it foregrounds the individualistic and communal dimensions of women, celebrating the rise of inclusive, mutable, and dialogic subjectivities.

Table of Contents

Declaration	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	vi
Introduction Self in Community: An Overview of Twentieth-century American Drama by Women.....	1
Chapter One Women and the Communal Moral Ideal: Sophie Treadwell’s <i>Machinal</i> and Marsha Norman’s <i>’Night, Mother</i>	49
Chapter Two The Configuration of the Self through Communal Cultural Bonding: Lorraine Hansberry’s <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> and Beth Henley’s <i>Crimes of the Heart</i>	107
Chapter Three Be One’s Own Subject: Maria Irene Fornes’ <i>Fefu and Her Friends</i> and Wendy Wasserstein’s <i>The Heidi Chronicles</i>	165
Conclusion A Volatile Self in a Changing World.....	212
Works Cited	233
Curriculum Vitae	265