Comparing social and ethnic tensions in a streetcar named desire and blues for mi...

Entertainment, Movie

A Streetcar Named Desire and Blues for Mister Charlie are both concerned to a large extent with tensions between different ethnic groups and, since in both plays the ethnicity of each group defines its social position, different social groups as well. The two plays are stylistically similar, employing expressionist techniques while maintaining naturalistic dialogue and only occasionally making forays into lyricism. The plays differ in that while A Streetcar Named Desire explores the tension between two specific characters, each implicitly representative of a particular group, Blues for Mister Charlie deals explicitly with large societal groups at loggerheads. After the founding of the Washington Square Players and Provincetown Players in 1920, American drama grew more concerned with bringing social analysis to the stage. This movement towards ' social drama,' of which A Streetcar Named Desire is a product, found its impetus in admiration for turn-of-the-century European drama from the likes of Ibsen and Brecht. American drama quickly detached itself from Europe by developing a style of its own, merging expressionism and naturalism to express concerns central to America. The economic boom and civil unrest after World War II led many writers to question the essence of the American identity. In A Streetcar Named Desire, Williams seeks to define America's new identity in relation to its old one by adopting a form present in many of Ibsen's plays (e. g. Ghosts), an exploration of how suppressed emotion from the past erupts in the present. Though principally an American, Williams was also a Southerner. Through films like Gone With The Wind, American cinema had fostered a national fascination with romantic perceptions of the South. In A Streetcar Named Desire, Williams probes that notion of a romantic South and its relation to

modern America. The tension between past and present finds expression in the conflict between Stanley and Blanche, representatives of, respectively, the booming industrial North and the fading bucolic South. Stanley descended from 20th century Polish immigrants and Blanche from French founding fathers. This difference points to not only the ethnic, but also the temporal separation between their respective social groups. Thus the tension between Stanley and Blanche mirrors the tension between the old and new America, the recently immigrated and long-established, the North and the South. Bound up with these conflicts are those between the poor and the wealthy, crude and refined, animalistic and artistic. These tensions emerge in the language, appearance and mannerisms of Streetcar's characters, as well as the workings of its plot. Stanley does not speak, but " hollers", favoring monosyllables and simple sentence structures and often employing flawed grammar, as in: " When we first met, me and you, you thought I was common. How right you was, baby. I was common as dirt." Stanley values directness of expression and rarely uses imagery. When he does use imagery, it is hackneyed and primitive (" Common as dirt…shut her up like a clam"). His language is equivalent to the " grunt", as Blanche comments, of Stone Age man: perfunctory, purely at the service of reality. When asked for a compliment by Blanche, Stanley replies that he does not " go in for that stuff." Such language is fitting for a man who dwells so much in the world of the physical, rather than the intellectual or emotional, and who sees things in terms of what they are, rather than what they suggest. In contrast, Blanche's language is ornate and often lyrical: " I, I, I took the blows in my face and body! All of those deaths!…funerals are pretty compared to

deaths.” She also uses images from literature in everyday speech, comparing New Orleans to the “ ghost-haunted woodland of Weir.” For Blanche, language is less a tool for communicating reality than obscuring it. She frequently uses euphemism (Belle Reve is “ lost” and Mr Graves “ suggested [she] take a leave of absence”) to preserve the illusion of her happiness and beauty and, by implication, that of the romantic South. Blanche sustains this illusion through her appearance and behaviour as well as her language. She wears a “ rhinestone tiara,” an image of opulence the hollowness of which is demonstrated when Stella describes it as “ costume… next door to glass.” Blanche’s avoidance of harsh light is symptomatic of her avoidance of truth – she does not wish to be perceived as she is. In contrast to Blanche’s nebulousness, Stanley is vivid and vital, surrounded by bright “ primary colours”: “ yellow linoleum…vivid green…solid blue…purple…red-and-white”. Moreover, despite his apparent simplicity, Stanley is highly perceptive and often witty. He perceives Blanche’s artificiality and her concealed baseness, and hence is able to destroy her. For example, when Blanche claims that she “ rarely touch[es]” alcohol, Stanley replies that “ some people rarely touch it, but it touches them often”. The stage directions concerning Stanley are telling. He is “ primitive” in his physicality and animalism, tossing bloody meat to Stella like a prehistoric hunter depositing his catch. Stanley does not walk but “ stalks;” he “ hurls” furs and “ jerks open” drawers: his every move is forceful and savage. In comparison, Blanche is a picture of delicacy and fragility. She is physically weak and sickly (“ I’m going to be sick”) and Williams likens her to a “ moth,” suggesting her fragility and the airiness of her movement. She frets about

not having “ washed or powdered” her face, and her clothes are made from “ feathers and furs.” Even the name “ Dubois” sounds delicate compared to the harsher “ Kowalski”. At certain points of tension between Stanley and Blanche in the play, Williams interrupts the action with the noisy passing of a tram. This expressionist technique underlines the importance of the moment and helps build an association between Stanley and the tram, a symbol of industrialisation. It is significant that in an earlier draft of the play, Williams had Blanche die by running in front of a tram. Stella may be considered the focal point of A Streetcar Named Desire, the woman over whom Stanley and Blanche conduct their battles. A constant interchange of power occurs as the play proceeds, with Blanche and Stanley alternately gaining and losing influence over Stella. For example, after the poker incident, Blanche gains influence and seizes the opportunity to lead Stella away from Stanley’s apartment. The stage directions describe her with “ arms around” Stella, “ guiding her.” When Stanley wins her back with a display of animal passion (shouting “ STELL-LAHHHHHH”) he has defeated Blanche, who walks “ fearfully…as if struck.” The battles between Stanley and Blanche are also enacted over territory. They argue over Blanche’s extensive use of the bathroom, for instance, and Blanche even re-covers one of Stanley’s chairs as if to claim it for her own. Whereas A Streetcar Named Desire dramatizes the conflict between two social groups (or, more accurately, two sets of values) in terms of a conflict between two individuals, Blues for Mister Charlie deals with conflict at the level of the community. Furthermore, whereas in Streetcar Blanche’s systematic lying is exposed and Stanley emerges as a clear victor, no clear winner appears in Blues for Mister Charlie.

Rather, the conflict is seen as purposeless and detrimental to both sides. Blues for Mister Charlie was written later than A Streetcar Named Desire, and so the societal groups upon which it focuses are different. Baldwin wrote his play in 1964, when racial tensions were at fever pitch. In 1963, Martin Luther King had led his march on Washington and delivered his " I have a dream…" speech, protesting about the widespread discrimination against black Americans. The play was in fact precipitated by real events: the murder of a black man in Mississippi by a white shopkeeper. It focuses on conflict between black and white sectors of society and takes place in the South, where such conflict was most intense. Baldwin's set is highly expressionistic and contributes greatly to the sense of a community at war with itself. A central aisle separates action involving whites and that involving blacks. Baldwin calls the aisle a " gulf" and indicates that " The stage should be built so that the audience reacts to the enormity of this gulf." As another example, Baldwin writes that in final act, the " audience [should be] aware of the steeple, of the church and the cross". Since religion is shared by both blacks and whites and is yet used as justification for discrimination, this arrangement is starkly ironic. The conflict between blacks and whites in Blues for Mister Charlie is similar to the conflict between Stanley and Blanche in many ways, and characteristics of Stanley and Blanche can be perceived in each racial group. In the same way that Stanley, representing the new, destroys Blanche, who represents the old, the growing Negro unrest threatens the old order of white supremacy. It was in the North that Richard developed his rebellious ideas. When he brings them to his Southern hometown, he engenders a conflict between progressive Northern values

and conservative Southern values similar to the one that developed in Streetcar. Also, Richard’s method of confrontation is akin to Stanley’s in its physical violence. He uses his sexuality to injure his enemies (“ to screw up their minds forever”) in the same way that Stanley does when he rapes Blanche. Like Williams, Baldwin explores the question of the essence of the American. Stanley, though an immigrant, claims to be “ one hundred percent American;” in the face of oppression, the blacks are struggling to assert their identity as Americans. To them, America is still “ a strange land” although it is their “ home.” Indeed, much of the struggle between the whites and blacks is primitively territorial and tribalistic. Juanita ironically describes Lyle as an “ honourable tribesman [who has] defended, with blood, the honour and purity of his tribe.” Just as Stanley and Blanche each feel they need to protect Stella, white characters frequently cite their need to protect their women against black men. For example, Lyle complains that he won’t have “ no big buck nigger lying up next to Josephine.” Baldwin cultivates a sense that the whites are trapped within their prejudice, and conflict results from their inability to adapt to black empowerment. As Parnell remarks, “ It is not so easy to leap over fences.” Similarly, it is Blanche’s inability to adapt to her changing situation after the loss of Belle Reve that leads to her destruction. Whereas there is very little pathos evoked for Stanley in A Streetcar Named Desire, it is important to Baldwin that his audience feels sympathy for every participant in the tragedy of racial prejudice. He emphasizes the entrapment of each group within its prejucides and highlights the characters’ sensitive natures (e. g. Lyle: “ she looked at me like she loved me. It was in her eyes. And it was just like somebody had lifted a great big load off my heart”). The

plots of Baldwin's and Williams' plays work similarly. In Streetcar, suspense and tragedy develop by the slow revelation of Blanche's past and her consequent collapse. In Blues for Mister Charlie, Baldwin establishes tension by slowly revealing information in flashbacks, a method drawn from Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. The plots differ in that Blues for Mister Charlie has no real resolution. Lyle's last words are " I ain't sorry," and the audience is left feeling that the sequence of events could easily be repeated. We are reminded throughout the play that Richard is Lyle's second victim: there might easily be a third. Both plays reflect the tensions of the historical moments in which they were written, Streetcar by encapsulating social and cultural differences in two individual characters and Blues for Mister Charlie by examining two entire communities. Through two different approaches, they both successfully convey the gravity of their times.