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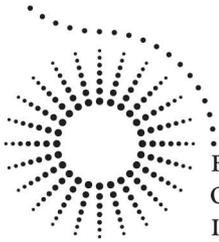
**Supervisor's Review**

Jan Hovorka, "The Family in Modern American Drama," MA thesis

Jan Hovorka's dissertation takes up a recurring motif in post-war American drama, the family, and the changing representations of family relationships on the American stage. Underwriting the examination of this motif is an understanding of theatre reflective of social anxieties, a public form where the interrogation of social realities may take place. As explicitly stated in section 1.1, the family unit as it appears in the plays surveyed is understood to function as a "microcosm" of and as a "metaphor" for society as a whole. As stated in the opening chapter the aim of the project is to examine the ways in which the institution of the family is depicted as being firstly in conflict with the ideology of individualism and success, later as dysfunctional, and finally as an eclipsed entity. There is much to commend Mr Hovorka's selection of playwrights and plays, as it is a rich field for investigation.

The work is structured as follows: Chapter 1 provides an overview of social and contextual issues that pertain to the core theme; Chapter 2 is organised around analyses of the work of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard and David Mamet. Chapter 3 concludes the project with an attempt to chart a course through the changing representations of the family in drama and to align this with the social transformations in the American post-war era and the concomitant critique and revision of myths of American life and "the American Dream." Arguably this structure is rather flawed; it would have proved more strategic to divide the central long chapter into individual ones with a distinct focus that foregrounded the contextual differences pertaining to each writer. At it stands the heading for chapter 2, "Family is Falling Apart" does not accurately reflect the range of material subsequently covered and tends to simplify the complexity of the issue.

The first main subsection in chapter 2 groups Arthur Miller's *Death of A Salesman* with Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. Hovorka convincingly compares these two works as examples of dramas of loss, entrapment and a desire to escape and how these themes are filtered through family relationships. Here, Mr Hovorka partially reiterates Christopher Bigsby's focus on the motif of loss in American drama. Extended close reading of the plays unpacks the various expressions of disillusionment, frustration and unfulfilled desire in order to "scrutinize the power of illusions" (21). This section, however, would be enriched by more discussion of a number of matters: First, the impact of the Depression on both Miller and Williams' perspectives on American society is mentioned but could be more clearly emphasised in the discussion the values both plays debate. In conjunction with this, oppositions like risk versus security, the individual versus the collective/society might have worked to focus the analysis more precisely. In addition, the reception contexts for each of plays would have been interesting here as a means of linking the points advanced in the opening chapter with the specific environments (political and social) in which Miller and Williams were writing. Second, the role of gender deserves more consideration. The role of masculinity in American culture is a topic that has recently engaged a number of scholars (cf. Bigsby, Kimmel (cited in 2.3), MacDonough, Vorlicky, Savran) and is an intrinsic element in debates around the family. If success is aligned with a kind of "rugged individualism" and masculinity, how can the American Dream be interpreted from a female perspective? The



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family experiences in *Death of a Salesman* and *The Glass Menagerie* undoubtedly share some common characteristics, not least the central male characters who long for escape. However whereas the dreamer Willy Loman is supported by his long suffering and self-effacing wife Linda and is presented as a tragic hero, a victim of shifting social values, in *The Glass Menagerie* Amanda Wingfield, equally a dreamer and significantly is an abandoned wife, is a comical, even absurd figure. Both Willy and Amanda voice (false) nostalgia for a bygone age, yet they are presented in utterly different modes. By extension Laura Wingfield, also a fantasist is defined by a retreat from public existence into the bosom of a dysfunctional domesticity, while Tom Wingfield's self-realisation is founded upon flight from the bonds of kinship.

Subsection 2.2 turns to Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and *The American Dream*. A number of negative assessments of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* are cited at the outset but are not commented upon, nor are they explained in the analysis of the play. Nevertheless, the overview of Albee as an Absurdist playwright is a useful means of distinguishing Albee's dramaturgy and attitudes to the past from those of Miller and Williams. Hovorka discusses *The American Dream* in terms of "the power of illusions" and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* in terms of loss. Strong points are made in the analyses of both works, yet what would seem to unite them is, more accurately, a sense of sterility. The family in Albee becomes a site of sterility that serves as metaphor for the American society of the era. Sterility is in evidence thematically—Mommy and Daddy's, George and Martha's childlessness—but also metaphorically—the deaths of the 'adopted' child in *The American Dream* and the imagined child in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* represent extinguished values, hopes and illusions. Also the symbolic significance of sterility is powerful in these plays; the amputation of the future here is one feature that might serve to align Albee's vision with that of Esslin's Absurdist.

Mr Hovorka follows the variations of the theme of the lost child in his analysis of Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* and *True West*. His observations about the spatial transformation in Shepard's work are apt. The home and its associations are actively dismantled by Shepard to the extent that the family home in *True West* is trashed and finally abandoned by its inhabitants. Mr Hovorka examines the dominant masculine tenor of Shepard's families and their deep ambivalence quite well. Some of the secondary materials cited here, in particular Forth's *Masculinity in the Modern West*, bring a valuable and potentially fascinating direction to the exploration of the American Dream, but the concluding observations in this section could do more with the issue of family bonds in relation to this discourse of masculinity.

The final sub-section on two plays, *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*, follows the distorted traces of family relations in David Mamet's drama. Mr Hovorka makes strong points here about the ways in which Mamet replaces traditional domestic relations with all-male casts of characters. The connections drawn between Miller's salesman and Mamet's businessmen are persuasive and perceptive. He also produces an insightful analysis of the absent female figures in both plays.

The conclusion makes a concerted effort to survey the various elements discussed throughout. The dissertation makes a persuasive case for the nexus between capitalism, self-



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realisation and family structures as a significant stress point in the work of Miller, Williams, Albee, Shepard and Mamet.

Overall, the dissertation demonstrates Mr Hovorka's ability to research and analyse the work selected, and to frame a sustainable argument. As mentioned above, the structure of the dissertation while functional leaves something to be desired. Finally, more critically, one lack in evidence here is a sustained engagement with the critical discourse around the work. Especially in the opening subsection of chapter 2, the extended description might have been reduced and more strategically organised with greater attention to critical work on the authors. Stylistically, the work is good, with only minor slippages expression and typography.

This being the case, I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work "very good" / 2.

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