

THE IMAGE OF THE CITY IN AMERICAN DRAMA

Mahmoud F. Al-Shetawi (University of Qatar)

From the beginning, Americans conceived of their society as urban and founded cities in the New World.¹ Since most of the early settlers of America originally came from Europe, they brought with them the process of urbanization which took America by storm; thus burgeoning industrial cities systematically mushroomed everywhere in the country. Indeed, through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and by the turn of the nineteenth century America was turning into a predominantly urban nation and the majority of Americans were becoming city dwellers. With the advent of the twentieth century the city or urban center became the characteristic landmark of American landscape. The urban development of the United States of America has been exhaustively discussed in different studies, and it is not the concern of this paper to look into this matter again.² Instead I propose to examine the varied treatment of the city in modern American drama and reveal the attitude of American dramatists toward their urban society. Though the subject has been duly documented with respect to fiction and, to some extent, poetry, its consideration in drama remains yet to be fully investigated.³

The corpus of American drama set in urban milieus is too large to be considered in an article of this length, and perhaps needs to have a full-length book devoted to it. Therefore, the topic will be limited to some selected plays which, in my opinion, highlight the treatment of the city quite significantly and are commonly recognized as major plays. These include, as examples, Street Scene, Awake and Sing! The Glass Menagerie, Death of a Salesman, A Raisin in the Sun and others which will be cited in the course of the paper. Diverse as these plays may be in terms of style and social outlook, they still deal with a common theme: the petty conditions of American cities and the struggle, though mostly futile, of the protagonists to escape from a deterministic urban environment to which they find themselves bound. This negative depiction of the city is mainly conveyed in using the city as *mise-en-scene* for the plays. Mostly set in urban settings (New York City is the most popular), these plays associate the city with images of entrapment and desperation suggesting the alienation and unfulfilled hopes of the characters.

Before discussing the image of the city in American drama, let me recapitulate briefly the main points that have been established so far relating to the treatment of the subject in American literature. Generally speaking, American writers have shown serious interest in the urban transformations taking place in their society. They more or less express an ambivalent attitude toward the industrial city which they see as the locus of socio-economic success and labor opportunity, and yet condemn it as inhibitive of the freedom of the human spirit. Commenting on the negative depiction of the city in American letters, Morton and Lucia White point out that:

the American intellectual has been alienated from the society in which he has lived, that he has been typically in revolt against it. For while our society became more and more urban throughout the nineteenth century, the literary tendency to denigrate the city hardly declined; if anything, its intensity increased. One of the most typical elements in our national life, the growing city, became the bete-noire of our most distinguished intellectuals rather than their favourite.⁴

In discussing American literature with respect to urban and social change, Michael Spindler observes that the growth of the industrial city has provided writers, especially novelists, with real-life experiences which they use to depict the urbanization of modern American society in a rather negative way. He particularly points out to American novels written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (e.g. Sister Carrie, The Jungle, U.S.A. and others) which meticulously portray the industrial city as a pessimistic environment infested with images of death and desperation.⁵

Let us now consider how American playwrights react to the same phenomenon – the negative portrayal of the city in American belles-lettres. A scrutiny of American drama written in the twentieth century from this perspective reveals that American playwrights have also been aware of the exigencies imposed by the urban milieu and looked at the city as a force inimical to the fulfilment of the American Dream. They depict the city as the locus of desperation associating it, as Leslie Fielder suggests, with infernal images which enhance our sense of alienation.⁶ It should be pointed out,

though, that the city-image a writer creates is not necessarily a true copy of the real one, but only a medium or metaphor which expresses the writer's attitude toward urban environment.

In dealing with the negative aspects of the city, a host of American dramatists insistently make us aware of the urban scene by setting their plays in tenements and other cul-de-sacs (e.g. honky-tonks, subways, etc.) which are at odds with human freedom. For instance, Elmer Rice's Street Scene takes place in an ugly brownstone tenement building located in "a mean quarter of New York."⁷ The Berger family of Clifford Odets' Awake and Sing! lives in a tenement apartment in the Bronx, New York. Set in St. Louis, Missouri, the Wingfield apartment in Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie "is in the rear of the building, one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded, urban centers...."⁸ And Sidney Kingsley's Dead End presents an awful naturalistic view of urban poverty and misery in New York. Set at the dead end of a filthy street, the play depicts the squalid conditions of the characters and reveals their total isolation from the urban environment around them.⁹ These plays clearly reveal the diminished space allowed the individual and convey a sense of menace created by the urban environment.

The tenement house, which is widely used as a scene for many American plays, is a multi-story building inhabited by the poor. Owing to the abject living conditions of the tenement, it has gradually gained negative meanings associated with diseases, sanitation problems, squalor and crime.¹⁰ The following excerpt from Milton D. Speizman's Urban America in the Twentieth Century is significant for its bearing on the topic under consideration:

the tenement house system has become fraught with so much danger to the welfare of the community... . The tenement districts of New York are places in which thousands of people are living in the smallest space in which it is possible for human

beings to exist-crowded together in dark, ill-ventillated rooms, in many of which the sunlight never enters and in most of which fresh air is unknown. They are centres of disease, poverty, vice, and crime, where it is a marvel, not that some children grow up to be thieves, drunkards, and prostitutes, but that so many should ever grow up to be decent and self-repelling.¹¹

The playwrights dealt with in this paper raise the same issues summed up in the above quotation. They highlight, each in his own way, the plight of the common city dweller and his vulnerability to his environment.

Rice's Street Scene, which is a useful starting point, depicts the terrible conditions prevalent in New York tenements and delineates the nightmarish city milieu. The play presents a tenement house packed with all sorts of people: native-born Americans and other immigrants representative of the social structure of middle-class America. The tenants are shaped by their socio-economic environment. Reduced to mere figures more like the ciphers of Rice's other play The Adding Machine these people become victims of a deterministic urban environment which they are helpless to change or surmount.¹²

Throughout the play the tenement house is described as unsuitable for human habitation. For instance, Rice's characters complain of the heat and the narrowness of their space. They are always seen crowding at the windows and on the porch for fresh air. The examples to be cited here disclose the awful conditions of the tenement. Trying to persuade Rose to leave her living quarters for a better life somewhere else, Easter calls the house a "dirty old tenement" (p.346), unfit for human living. Complaining of the bad living conditions in the house, Sam cries, "Oh, God, why do we go on living in this sewer?" (p.356) Later he complains to Rose saying, "Do you think I can stay here, stifling to death, in this slum,...?" (p.411) And Rose wishes to escape to the suburbs, where "people are much nicer and friendlier, when you get outside of New York." (p.385) One may add other evidence to denote the inhuman living conditions of the tenement and point out the desire of the protagonists to escape from this predicament. As Sam puts it, "It's to escape all that, that we must be together. It's only because we love each other and belong to each other, that we can find the strength to

escape." (p.412) However, despite his rhetoric the play ends with the sense of entrapment in full control.

Likewise, Clifford Odets, who came to prominence in the 1930's, is closely related to Rice in his social vision.¹³ His drama depicts the appalling conditions of the poor crowded in slum tenements which lack basic services. In Awake and Sing! Odets dramatizes the plight of lower-middle class Americans whose lives and dreams have been subverted by their urban environment. Setting his play in a tenement house, the dramatist depicts the Berger family trapped by its setting, exactly like the characters in Street Scene. In his stage-directions Odets indicates: "All of the characters in Awake and Sing! share a fundamental activity: a struggle for life amidst petty conditions".¹⁴

Packed in a small living space (an apartment), there live three generations of the Berger family: the grand father, the parents and the children, and also Moe Axle Rod, a boarder.¹⁵ The characters are conscious of the narrowness of the space they occupy. For instance, personal privacy is totally absent, which we also observe in Street Scene Ralph moans that he does not have a private room all for himself, and his mother, Bessie, can only comfort him by saying, "...when Hennie here marries you'll have her room-I should only live to see the day." (p42) Space for recreation does not exist; Jacob has to walk the dog on the roof. Moreover, the tenement lacks all civilized amenities – the dumbwaiter, for example, does not work, a fact revealed by Bessie's complaint against the landlord: "For seven years already, he's sending new ropes. No dumbwaiter, no hot water, no steam – In a respectable house they don't allow such conditions".(P.46)

The examples from Street Scene and Awake and Sing! reveal the victimization of city people by a ruthless urban milieu in which, contrary to the optimistic Marxist rhetoric of Jacob of Awake and Sing! and Sam of Street Scene, life is indeed printed on "dollar bills." Ironically Jacob (like Willy Loman of Death of a Salesman) commits suicide to leave the insurance money for his grand children.

The Glass Menagerie is also set in a dreadful physical space which

reflects the depraved lives of the protagonists. The stage directions read: "At the rise of the curtain, the audience is faced with the dark, grim rear wall of the Wingfield tenement. This building is flanked on both sides by dark, narrow alleys which run into murky canyons of tangled clotheslines, garbage cans, and the sinister lattice-work of neighboring fire escapes." (p.21) Williams' description of the setting is historically reminiscent of the dumbbell tenement model popular in New York and elsewhere in other American cities. Howard Chudacoff describes this kind of housing accommodation as follows: "The largest room in any dumbbell apartment measured only 10 by 11 feet. The narrow air shaft originally designed to provide light and air, acted as a receptacle for garbage, as a breeding place for vermin and insects, and as a duct for fire and noise. The major consequence of the dumbbell was not comfort, but more crowding."¹⁶ In fact, the Wingfield apartment is so small that a sense of claustrophobia engulfs the entire space. For example, one can only enter the apartment via the fire exit (a symbol of human desperation, as Tom points out), and because the apartment is so small the living room also serves as Laura's sleeping room.

The number of plays set in tenements is too large to be discussed here, and one has to be eclectic to keep the topic in focus. It suffices to cite a few other salient examples for further elaboration. Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun and Eugene O'Neill's All God's Chillun Got Wings. (both plays will be later discussed to highlight racial conflict in an urban context) are set in tenements in major cities, and use the urban milieu as an image to indicate the nightmarish existence of the protagonists. By setting her play in a poor residential slum in Chicago, which is commonly populated by blacks, Hansberry shows how setting becomes an element of confinement detrimental to the aspirations of the characters. Similarly, O'Neill's play which is set in a New York slum district inhabited by blacks and whites alike, though segregated by a street, uses setting expressionistically to depict racial conflict. Finally, though Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman does not take place in a tenement, the playwright makes us aware of the slum area in the background: "We see a solid vault of apartment houses around the small, fragile-seeming home"¹⁷ of Willy Loman.

The mode of American plays set in cities is generally one of 'impasse'.¹⁸ The protagonists are constantly obsessed with a desire to escape from their living quarters because of their futile existence and frustration. They express this desire in different ways. Some characters feel nostalgic for the past and rural America; others try to move to better residential areas in the suburbs. But for most characters there is 'no exit', to use the title of Sartre's play, No Exit, which is incidentally most pertinent in this context; they can only seek haven in honky-tonks and other isolated places, or perhaps commit suicide.

In this instance, Miller's Death of a Salesman reveals the predicament of the small city dweller, Willy Loman, trapped in the sophisticated commercial society of Post-War America. Not able to keep pace with the urban transformations of American society, he feels alienated from society.¹⁹ His alienation is suggested in different ways. From the beginning nostalgia for the past and for the simple life of rural America comes to the fore. For example, the flute music we hear at the outset of the play juxtaposes Willy's loneliness with his reminiscences of a happy past. Besieged by high-rising towers which make him feel imprisoned within his space, Willy goes into reveries remembering what Ben told him about his father and the freedom of life he had enjoyed: "Father was a very great and a very wild-hearted man. We would start in Boston, and he'd toss the whole family into the wagon, and then he'd drive the team right across the country; And we'd stop in the towns and sell the flutes that he'd make on the way." (p.49) But now things have changed and Willy finds himself in a world in which nobody recognises him.²⁰

In Willy's mind the flute music is also associated with rural America, "the grass and trees and the horizon." (p.11) Rural landscape has recuperative therapy on the 'tired' mind of the salesman. For instance, he is delighted whenever he talks about the countryside. Telling Linda about what has happened to him on his way to New England, he says, "You can imagine, me looking at scenery, on the road every week of my life. But it's so beautiful

up there, Linda, the trees are so thick, and the sun is so warm." (p14) Still hoping that Biff will eventually make it in the city, Willy plans to 'escape' from the city:

Willy: You wait, kid, before it's all over we're gonna get a little place out in the country, and I'll raise some vegetables, a couple of chickens,

Linda: You'll do it yet, dear.

Willy: And they'll get married, and come for a weekend. I'd build a little guest house. 'Cause I got so many fine tools, all I'd need would be a little lumber and some peace of mind (p.72).

In contrast with this open landscape which Willy Loman envisions is the claustrophobic reality of towering buildings and tenements that surround the salesman's home, and the lack of space for recreation – even the two elm trees (again memories of a more happy past) have been felled to clear space for apartment houses. Willy's suicide shows his desperation and total failure to come to grips with the progressive urbanism of American society.

The protagonists of The Glass Menagerie, Street Scene, and A Raisin in the Sun are no less besieged by their urban environment than Willy Loman. Some succeed to escape, but others are stuck for good. For instance, Tom finally gets out of his enslaving living conditions, though at the cost of leaving his mother and sister floundering all alone in a merciless urban world. The tenants in Street Scene are also hampered by their petty conditions, like those in Awake and Sing! They can only wish to escape from their confining space. For example, beleaguered by her next door neighbours who are always eyeing her and her mother, Mrs Maurant, with suspicion and contempt, Rose tells her mother: "I sometimes wonder if it wouldn't be better for us all, if we moved out to the suburbs somewhere – you know, some place in Jersey or Staten Island." (p.372) However, the play ends with a note of complete desperation – murder, eviction and disintegration.

In A Raisin in the Sun the characters are also tied by their impoverished conditions. Complaining of the narrowness of his space Walter calls it, a "beat-up hole,"²¹ and Ruth describes it as a 'rat trap.' (p.124) The only hope

to get out of this slum is to purchase a home in a nice residential suburb. Mama, the redeeming spirit of the play, says, "...Been thinking that we may be could meet the notes on a little old two-storey somewhere, with a yard where Travis could play in the summertime, if we use part of the insurance for a down payment and everybody kind of pitch in." (p.123) This has been an old wish, for since the time Mama and her late husband had landed in the present place they planned to stay for a couple of weeks intending to buy a house of their own. However, they were bogged down and never managed to fulfil their first dream. Finally after years of suffering and waiting the wish comes true, though ironically the money comes from her husband's life insurance. However, despite the opposition of the whites this black family moves to their new house. The play ends with a most effective dramatic image -- the moving men carrying the furniture and Ruth yelling, "Let's Get The Hell Out Of Here!" (p.203)

III

Closely related to the treatment of space in the context of American urban experience is the question of eviction and the plight of the homeless which have become phenomenal in American urban society. The fear to lose one's home and be turned out on the streets is a constant nightmare haunting large sections of city population, especially the poor and the working class. Street Scene depicts also the lives of poor city dwellers who could not cope with their bad economic circumstances and are therefore mercilessly thrown out on the streets. Among the lost lives of the house one finds a poor family consisting of a mother and her two small children. Charity is their source of income. Failing to pay the rent, the family is forced to evict the premises. In fact, besides the murder of Mrs Maurant and her lover by the jealous husband, the moving of the furniture out of the house becomes a significant reminder of the gravity of the problem.

A product of the Depression era, Street Scene suggests that eviction, which is toally caused by economic failures, has become a common eyesore in American cities. By making the children comment on their predicament which they do not understand, Rice wants his audience to realize the consequences of the problem on the human level:

Mary (chattily, as they reach the sidewalk). We are going to be dispossessed today.

Rose. what a shame!

Mary. Yes, ma'am. My father went away and so we couldn't pay the rent.

Charlie (tugging at her arm). Aw, come on, Mary.

Rose. Have you another place to live, Mary ?

Mary. No. ma'am,..... (p.375)

Later the city marshal carries out the eviction order, dumping the furniture on the street sidewalk. Though the neighbours feel sorry for the plight of this family, they are virtually helpless to stop eviction, which is legally carried out by the city authorities.

The 'depression' plays of Odets, particularly Paradise Lost and Awake and Sing! also deal with the plight of evicted families. Set in an American city, Paradise Lost presents the Gordon family which is passing through difficult economic straits caused by the Great Depression. What seems to be a happy and prospering family at the outset of the play becomes lost and displaced at the end. When Leo Gordon's business fails he is forced to go into bankruptcy. The banks foreclose upon his house and his family is therefore forced to vacate the house which is mortgaged to the banks. Despite Leo Gordon's optimistic rhetoric at the end of the play, the fact remains that he is now homeless and his furniture is lying on the streets. Odets' Awake and Sing! also depicts the suffering of the Berger family caused by the economic woes of the Depression, and the constant fear of losing home. Bessie Berger is terribly afraid of this prospect, for she knows that other families have already been evicted: "They threw out a family on Dawson Street today. All the furniture on the sidewalk. A fine old woman with gray hair." (p.43) Later Jacob bitterly comments, "Someone tells a few jokes... and they forget the street is filled with starving beggars." (p.49)

Though the drama of the 1930's is dated in the sense that it is only concerned with the exigencies of the Great Depression, eviction and homelessness are not 50. They have become perennial problems besetting American urban society. Many plays written during the booming years which followed the Depression era raise the fear of losing one's home and deal with the problems of homelessness. For example, Death of a Salesman and The Glass Menagerie, both representative of the Post-War drama, raise much concern about having a 'home'— a place to belong to. More recently Elizabeth Swados' musical drama, Runaways (1978) deals with the lives of runaways, those children who for various reasons have quit their homes to tramp the streets. In the long run they fall victims of abuse, drugs, prostitution, and other common city vices.

The issue is still much alive today. For example, the audience of the 1988 Humana Theater Festival, an annual event of new American plays held in Louisville, Kentucky, saw Barbara Damashek's Whereabouts Unknown, a musical play which highlights the problems of homelessness in American cities. The playwright considers the plight of countless American citizens who for different reasons find themselves thrown out to the mercy of the streets. They populate street corners, flyovers, public parks and such like deserted places feeding on garbage and junk.

IV

Like American novelists who commonly treat the industrial city rather negatively equating it with the jungle and hell interchangeably, American dramatists create stage images which denote their negative views on the city and urban society. They use the city setting, putting emphasis on the physical scene where the action takes place, not only to delineate the characters or make thematic statements, but also to depict the milieu which has produced the problems raised in the plays. In other words, by means of the mise-en-scene, the playwrights imprint certain images on the minds of the audience reminding them of the urban environment to which they belong. For example, in two different dramatic works the city is directly equated with the jungle. In a rather revealing statement in Death of a Salesman Ben tells Biff, "Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way." (p.49) And in describing Bessie Berger of

Awake and Sing! Odets says, "She knows that when one lives in the jungle one must look out for the wild life." (.37) Obviously Miller and Odets associate the city with the jungle, suggesting violence which has become a salient aspect of the modern city.

The depiction of the city as jungle is rather common in American drama, especially in plays set in the city. Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun, Saroyan's The Time of Your Life, O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh, Le Guare's Landscape of the Body and Michael Gazzo's A Hatful of Rain are examples that expose the violent nature of city life.²² Hansberry opens a window onto the world of the jungle (Chicago) which is totally violent. For example, Walter realizes the gist of Ben's previous statement only after he has been ripped off by his partner, Willy Harris. He desperately cries, "Mama, you know it's all divided up. Life is. Sure enough. Between the takers and the 'tooken.' (He laughs) I've figured it out finally. (He looks around them) Yeah. Some of us always getting 'tooken' (He laughs) People like Willy Harris, they don't never get 'tooken.' And you know why the rest of us do? 'Cause we all mixed up. Mixed up bad." (p.197).

In The Time of Your Life (the play is set in San Francisco), Nick's drinking bar teems with social outcasts who seek refuge from the outside world which is characteristically violent. Similarly, O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh takes place in an isolated drinking bar in New York where derelicts huddle together feeling safe from the violence of the outside world. Le Guare's play, which is set in New York, unfolds a gruesome murder of a boy in the absence of his mother. The boy's head is decapitated and his body mutilated to hide the crime. The last example is A Hatful of Rain. Set in a New York tenement, the play highlights the world of organized crime and the problems of drug addiction most common nowadays in American cities.

Most of the plays dealt with in this paper associate the city with an infernal experience in the sense that they depict half-lived human beings subjected to a deterministic enslaving environment. In addition, Edward Albee's The Zoo Story and LeRoi Jones' Dutchman stand out for their depiction of the city as hell. Interestingly both plays take place in New York and express urban violence characteristic of modern American society. They also reveal a sense of entrapment and the 'dead end' existence of human

beings who stand totally powerless and alienated from their society.

Albee's play is widely recognized as an absurdist drama written in line with the theater of the absurd. The play shows two characters, Jerry and Peter. Obviously it is Jerry's play for he develops the action and determines the outcome. Though the stage scene, Central Park, does not suggest hell at all, the play gradually reveals the infernal social and economic circumstances which 'push' Jerry to the brink of despair.

The title of the play conveys the sense of confinement the protagonists find themselves bound to. Like animals kept in small compartments at the zoo, thus losing their freedom, Jerry, who says that he visited a zoo that day, has lost control over his fate to invisible forces which he cannot recognize or see but only alludes to. Jerry who has been wandering aimlessly on the streets of New York talks about his predicament. His living conditions are most inimical to self-fulfilment. He tells Peter that he occupies a room in a dingy tenement which is also inhabited by a medley of people including a next-door queer who wears a kimono and plucks his eyebrows and the landlady who never shies away from trapping him into her lascivious den. Jerry's description of his living quarters connotes the Greek Hades, guarded by a dog: "I am a permanent transient, and my home is the sickening roominghouses on the West Side of New York City, which is the greatest city in the world. Amen."²³ Earlier he calls the landlady's dog which he poisons, "a descendant of the puppy that guarded the gates of hell." (p33)

Jerry's social background which is revealed piecemeal in the course of the play indicates his miserable existence. He tells Peter that his mother walked out on his father when he was a kid to become a prostitute, later to be found dead in a dump in Alabama. His father died in a car accident and since then he had to live with an aunt. After her death on his high school graduation day he was left alone. He became homosexual for awhile and eventually drifted on the streets. The only way for Jerry to get out of his infernal existence is to die. For this reason he looks for someone to kill him. Indeed his final speech shows his 'felicity' in dying, "Thank you, Peter. I mean that, now... I was so afraid I'd drive you away. (He laughs as best he can) You don't know how afraid I was you'd go away and leave me." (p.48)

Similarly LeRoi Jones' Dutchman conveys a hellish image of the city (here New York). Suggestive of the infernal underground of Ellison's Invisible Man, the play takes place in a subway. Jones describes the setting as follows: "In the flying underbelly of the city. Steaming hot, and summer on top outside. Underground. The sub-way heaped in modern myth."²⁴ Trapped in an inescapable situation the protagonists of the play (a black boy and a white woman) are locked in an existential fight which only ends in death. The play depicts an encounter with death – the white woman kills the black boy for no apparent reason except that he is black (racial conflict). Philosophically the play expresses the victimization of the individual in a deterministic urban context.

V

The preceding pages show that American dramatists associate the city with images of confinement and nightmarish existence and depict the victimization of the individual by the deterministic urban environment which one cannot change. The study thus far focuses on the topic in terms of space and milieu in a way which ostensibly expresses the negative attitude of American playwrights toward their urban society. However, two other points should be mentioned in passing for future consideration: racial violence and ethnic conflict common in American cities.

As mentioned before, O'Neill's All God's Chillun Got Wings, Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun, and Jones' Dutchman consider the ramifications of the racial issue within an urban context. O'Neill's play is a psychological study of the predicament of an unhappy couple, Jim Harris, a black, and Ella Downey, a white woman. Raised up in the same tenement neighbourhood in New York, Jim falls in love with Ella and eventually they get married. They flee to France for two years to escape from their racial environment but finally decide to return to fight for their marriage. However, Ella has got a nervous breakdown because of 'shame' and Jim always fails his Bar Examination as a result of his feeling of guilt and inferiority. The play ends with their total psychological annihilation – reduced to 'children' playing marble games like they used to do when they were kids.

The thesis of the play is put forth by Jim's mother who has been against the marriage from the beginning: "De white and de black shouldn't mix dat close. Dere's one road where de white goes on alone; dere's anudder road where de black goes on alone."²⁵ The play reveals that Jim and Ella are victims of a racial complex which cuts deep into their souls. For them racial legacy is a nightmare which they cannot shake off. The play suggests that both races are equally responsible for the tragedy of the protagonists – blacks are no less obstinate than the whites in their prejudice against each other.

LeRoi Jones is more radical in treating the racial issue, pointing at the black boy as a victim murdered by the white woman who will, symbolically speaking, eventually annihilate his race as suggested by the cyclic ending of the play. The murder occurs on a moving subway coach amidst white passengers who express no concern whatsoever for what is happening except throwing the body of the black boy outside the train.

However, Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun and Les Blancs (completed by her husband after her death) express a rather ameliorating compromise and a call for dialogue. Acknowledging the existence of bad feelings between the two races Hansberry suggests that, with understanding and perseverance on both sides, whites and blacks may live together in the same setting.

America is basically an immigrant society. Since colonial times the country lured immigrants from all over Europe and other parts of the world who emigrated to the New World seeking among other things better life and labor opportunities which the growing industrial cities seemed to offer. This situation created tremendous upheavals in American urban society, for these new comers brought with them their old cultures, traditions, and beliefs and they needed a period of adjustment to the American way of life. Most of these people crowded in cities and looked for work, hence replacing native-born American workers because of cheap labor. A feeling of animosity gradually developed especially when American workers felt that they had been pushed over by these people. Therefore, ethnic conflict frequently flared up in American cities and urban centers where the immigrants had settled.

American dramatists take 'note' of such changes and social upheavals taking place in American society. Perhaps Rice's Street Scene is most representative in this respect, for the play is packed with native-born Americans and an array of immigrants who include Italians, Germans, Jews and Russians. The house becomes a microcosm of American society which hosts all kinds of subcultures.²⁶ Ethnic friction explodes from time to time as in real life. For instance, some of the house residents never hide their animosity toward the Jews. Mrs Jones, a typical American matron, shows no good feelings for her Jewish neighbours. Commenting on the relation between Sam, the Jewish student, and Rose, Mrs Jones derisively notes to Mrs Fiorentino:

Mrs Fiorentino. I think he is loving the girl.

Mrs Jones. Yeah? Well, that's all the Maurants need is to have their daughter get hooked up wit' a Jew. It's a fine house to be livin' in' ain't it, between the Maurants upstairs, an' that bunch o' crazy Jews down here. (p.342)

Later Mrs Jones' son, Vincent, beats Sam up and derides him in these words, "Fightin' Kaplan, de pride o' Jerusalem!..." (p.384) These excerpts are only specimens of ethnic prejudice treated in numerous American plays set in the city (e.g. A view from the Bridge, Awake and Sing! and others).

VI

The city! It is certainly more than bricks and cement, skyscrapers, commercial centers and smoggy streets. It is certainly more than slums, ghetto tenements and social prejudice. The negative image of the city should not tarnish its beauty and veil its vital accomplishments. The city is a world teeming with throbbing life. It is the locus of culture where thinkers, artists and writers flourish. It is the center of mass communication, and money and the seat of government. In short, the city is the product of human progress, the reward of man's endeavors to tame the wilderness and the positive image of human civilization. However, despite the positive attributes of the city, Western writers have commonly associated it with death and infernal images. As this paper has shown, a host of American playwrights express their negative attitude toward the city, which they use as a metaphor

for American urban progress and industrial civilization. Surprisingly these playwrights have become anti-urban, expressing their fear and anxiety at the deperonalization of the individual and the annihilation of the human spirit under the crushing wheel of material progress. They depict the city as the locus of desperation, violence, crime and pollution and all that negates the freedom of the human spirit.

NOTES

1. Richard Lingeman, "A Consonance of Towns," in Making America: the Society and Culture of the United States, ed. Luther S. Luedtke (Washington D.C. : the United States Information Agency, 1988) pp. 104.
2. See, for instance, Sam Bass Warner, Jr "Urban America," in Making America, pp. 105-130; Howard P. Chudacoff, The Evolution of American Urban Society, 2nd ed. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1981); and Milton D. Speizman, ed., Urban American in the Twentieth Century (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1968).
3. See Michael Spindler, American Literature and Social Change (London : The Macmillan press, Ltd., 1983) ; Michael C. Jaye and Anne Chalmers Watts, eds., Literature and the American Urban Experience (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981); Donald Pizer, Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth Century American Literature (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984); and Burton Pike, The Image of the City in Modern Literature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).
4. Morton White and Lucia White, The Intellectual Versus the City from Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd (New York: New American Library, 1962), pp.13-14.
5. Spindler, p.39.
6. Leslie Fiedler, "Mythicizing the city," in Literature and the American Urban Experience, pp. 113-121.
7. Elmer Rice, Street Scene in Famous American Plays , ed. Kenneth

Macgowan (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1959), p.311. All other references to this work appear in the text.

8. Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1945), p.29. All other references to this work appear in the text.

9. Brenda Murphy discusses Kingsley's play in comparison with Street Scene, drawing attention to the similarities between the two plays, especially in their depiction of the petty conditions of the city. See Murphy's American Realism and American Drama (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 115 - 119

10. Chudacoff, pp. 114-124.

11. Speizman, p.16

12. Bernard F. Dukore, American Dramatists 1918-1945 (London: Macmillan Publishers, Ltd., 1984) pp. 35-45.

13. Mahmoud Al-Shetawi, "The Thirties Revisited: Clifford Odets and the Depression," Arab Journal for the humanities , 8, No. 32 (Autumn 1988), 422-433.

14. Clifford Odets, Awake and Sing! in Six Plays of Clifford Odets , ed. Howard Clurman (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1979) p.37. All other references to this work appear in the text.

15. To help defray the cost of living and to cope with the economic crisis brought about by the Great Depression it was common to board non-family members – thus privacy was totally absent. See Chudacoff, pp.123-124.

16. Chudacoff, p.117

17. Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), p.11. All other references to this work appear in the text.

18. I am using the term "impasse" in the same sense used by Carol Rosen in Plays of Impasse: Contemporary Drama Set in Confining Institutions (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

19. Spindler discusses the play in the context of new patterns of economic consumption in America following World War II. See pp. 202-213

20. Using David Riesman's analysis of American social character Willy Loman belongs to an era which has already elapsed. David Riesman, The Lonely Crowd (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1961), pp.3-36.

21. Lorraine Hansberry, A Raisin in the Sun in Four Contemporary American Plays, ed., Bennet Cerf (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. 113. All other references to this work appear in the text.

22. The corpus of American plays noted for their violence is too large to be discussed here. However, for further elaboration one may add the plays of David Mamet which expose both verbal and physical violence lurking in American cities. These include, as examples, American Buffalo, Duck Variations and Sexual Perversity in Chicago (double-bill) and Glengarry Glen Ross.

23. Edward Albee, The Zoo Story (New York: Signet Books, 1959), p.37. All other references to this work appear in the text.

24. LeRoi Jones, Dutchman (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1964), p.3.

25. Eugene O'Neill, All God's Chillun Got Wings in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill, ed. Howard Clurman (New York: The Modern Library, 1959), p.113.

26. Christopher W.C. Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 126-129.