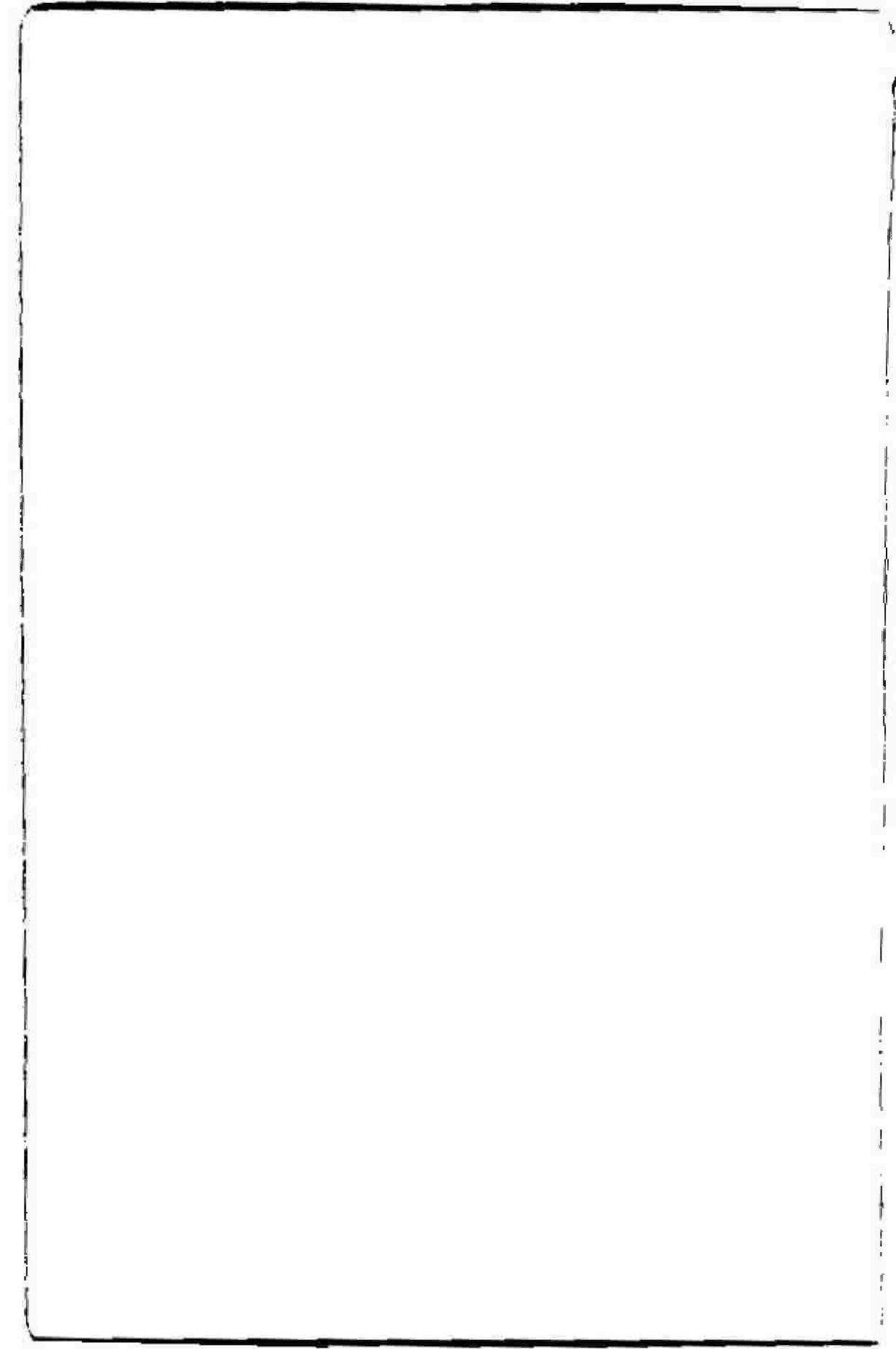


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POSSIBILITIES FOR FEMINIST  
REPRESENTATION**

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The inquiry into possibilities of a feminist mimesis has been one of the main concerns for some feminists in theatre. <sup>1</sup> The conventional realist representation seems, for materialist feminist critics, to serve only the ideology of the patriarchal society. It encourages us to forget the borderline between spelling stage and audience and, thus, disguises the construction of the dominant culture. It makes all appear seamless and natural, therefore appropriate and acceptable. In her article "Constructing the subject : deconstructing the text, " Catherine Belsey argues that realism or " classic realism" as she calls it, creates an " illusionism" which is nothing but a reinscription of the dominant male order :

Classic realism is characterized by 'illusionism', narrative which leads to 'closure', and a 'hierarchy of discourses' which establishes the 'truth' of the story. 'Illusionism' is, I hope, self-explanatory. The other two defining characteristics of classic realism need some discussion. Narrative tends to follow certain recurrent patterns. Classic realist narrative, as Barthes demonstrates in *S/Z*, turns on the creation of enigma through the precipitation of disorder which throws into disarray the conventional cultural and signifying systems. Among the the commonest sources of disorder at the level of plot in classic realism are murder, war, a journey or love. But the story moves inevitably towards closure which is also disclosure, the dissolution of enigma through the re-establishment of order, recognizable as a reinstatement or a development of the order which is understood to have preceded the events of the story itself <sup>2</sup>.

By 'the moment of closure' Belsey means the point at which the events of the story become fully intelligible to the reader. In this realist story, add a comma inscribed subject positions are always kept for men. The

process excludes women from the role of the subject. In her book **Feminism and Theatre**, Sue-Ellen Case explains that the exclusion of women from the role of subject is tied to "a cultural castration" which, according to Freud and Lacan, locates "the symbolic order in relation to the phallus of the child and the cultural 'Law of the Father,' situating the entire production of art within the patriarchal order of father and son.' Within this symbolic order of female desire and castration, 'the only role for women is as objects of this desire. "Thus, women become" fixed in the position of object of the gaze, rather than as the subject directing it." This is how woman is constituted as "other." In life and on stage women appear in order to be looked upon" rather than to do the looking." In the theatrical representation woman is "perceived as possible site for the fulfillment of that desire, transformed into a kind of a cultural courtesan. " In this sense, women within the patriarchal system of signs do not have" the cultural mechanisms of meaning to construct themselves as the subject rather than as the object of the performance.". <sup>3</sup>

Case believes that the study of woman as a sign and

the study of woman as object are deconstructive strategies which help in exposing the patriarchal encodings in the dominant system of representation. This will encourage women to emerge as subjects, which opens up a field of new possibilities for women in theatre and its system of representation : "constructing woman as subject is the future , liberating work of a feminist new poetics."<sup>4</sup> Belsey goes further to explain how to deconstruct the realist text. She argues that "in its attempt to create a coherent and internally consistent fictive world the text, in spite of itself, exposes incoherences, omissions, absences and transgressions, which in turn reveal the inability of the language of ideology to create coherence." The aim of feminists should be to "locate the point of contradiction within the text, the point at which it transgresses the limit within which it is constructed, breaks free of the constraints imposed by its own realist form."<sup>5</sup>

In their article " From Formalism to Feminism," Sue-Ellen Case and Jeanne K. Forte argue that "the problem is that in the closed system of deconstruction the only possible reference is to the dominant ideology

it deconstructs. In effect, it reproduces things as they are." Therefore, feminist playwrights should find an alternative representation outside of patriarchal reference to systems :

When women on stage vocalize their experience as women rather than reflect the representation of them by men, the possibility for a new discourse arises, one never constituted within the patriarchal canon of plays. Yet what action could this subject play which would generate an alternative discourse, one constituted outside of the patriarchal codes? The action of the desiring subject, the drama of the woman who desires, is in contrast to the passive role traditionally granted woman as the object of male desire. The desiring female subject frustrates the mystifications of morality, challenges the colonization of her body, and denies the use of her sexuality as a commodity in the market of marriage and pornography.<sup>6</sup>

Brechtian techniques seem to offer a strong alternative to realism. In her article "Beyond Brecht : Britain's New Feminist Drama," Janelle Reint suggests feminist transformations of Brechtian techniques could

help in revealing "relations between sexes." Brechtian notions of the social gest ( a singular, symbetic gesture associated with each character that controls and articulates the spectator's relation to the actor - as - character), epic structure (episodic structure in which each scene is isolated and has a crucial turning point), and alienation effect provide "the means to reveal material relations as the basis of social reality, to foreground and examine ideologically - determined beliefs and unconscious habitual perceptions, and to make visible those signs inscribed on the body which distinguish social behavior in relation to class, gender, and history."<sup>7</sup>

In her book *Unmaking Mimesis* Elin Diamond discusses the potentialities of Brecht's theory for feminism. She finds that " the cornerstone of Brecht's theory is the *Verfremdungseffeki* ('alienation-effect'), the technique of defamiliarizing a word, an idea, a gesture so as to enable the spectator to see or hear it afresh."<sup>8</sup> The feminist practice can use some version of the Brechtian A-effect to "expose or mock the strictures of gender" and "reveal gender-as appearance, as the

effect, not the precondition, of regulatory practices."<sup>9</sup> The A-effect can be used to "dismantle the gaze and demystify representation "showing how and when the object of pleasure is made, releasing the spectator from imaginary and illusory identifications"<sup>10</sup>

Some other feminist critics and playwrights, on the other hand, call for a "new realism." In "Realism, Narrative and the Feminist playwright-A Problem of Reception", Jeannie Forte argues that Feminists should make use of the fact that realism is 'readable' on stage as well as off. Realism is "a matter of style and content : it is a representation of recognizable settings, characters and events reaccentuated by the newness of the material to the stage ... typified by juxtaposition along with continuity of incident from scene to scene, and references to popular culture." A feminist dramaturgy can use these features to explore a "subversive text" which " would not provide the detached view-point, the illusion of seamlessness, the narrative closure, but instead would open up the negotiation of meaning to contradictions, circularity, multiple viewpoints."<sup>11</sup> In this sense, the conventions of realism narrative will not

be used to reinforce or perpetuate the dominant ideology but rather to "thwart the illusion of real life" and "threaten the patriarchal ideology embedded in the story."<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Patricia R. Schroeder observes that "in their enthusiasm to isolate what is unique about feminist drama, some scholars overlook or even reject the feminist possibilities inherent in more traditional dramatic forms." While Schroeder admits that the experimental feminist theatres "have opened up new exciting possibilities for the stage", she also believes that the "traditional dramatic form is a flexible instrument that can also respond to feminist concerns."<sup>13</sup> For her, the traditional dramatic forms can be used to support feminist values by depicting the entrapment of female characters in an unyielding traditional society.

The purpose of this article is to examine mimesis or representation in three feminist plays : Lillian Hellman's **The Little Foxes**, Marsha Norman's **'night Mother**, and Adrienne Kennedy's **The Owl Answers**. While the first two plays are agreed upon by most critics as realist plays, the third one is described as a non-realist play. It

is hoped that the examination of the dramatic forms in the first two plays will show how a realist mode of writing, if creatively used, can vigorously serve feminist concerns. Also, the examination of the dramatic form in the third play will show why and how Kennedy resorts to non-realist form.

## II

Lillian Hellman- acclaimed as one of America's most distinguished female playwrights-made an entrance into a predominantly male-dominated field in the first half of the twentieth century. Her dramatic output includes eight original plays and four adaptations written between 1934 and 1963. She wrote realistic well-made plays that dealt with sociological issues in the tradition of Ibsen and Chekhov. Remembered as her best play, *The Little Foxes* (1939) is about a family trying to attain wealth through pursuing industrial fortune on the ruins of the old south. Though Hellman was "amazed at being considered as a standard bearer" of the feminist cause, some critics have investigated her reputation as a "precursor of feminism, examining the roles and status of the women of her plays."<sup>14</sup> In her

article "Into the Foxhole : Feminism, Realism , and Lillian Hellman," Judith E. Barlow argues that Hellman" used realism as a tool to explore and expose a capitalist society with narrowly inscribed gender roles, and to counter the demeaning portrait of women typically proffered by male playwrights."<sup>15</sup>

It is true , as materialist feminist critics have pointed out, that a realistically constructed play can offer no alternative to class and gender hierarchies. **The Little Foxes**, however, demonstrates that, if modified, realism can be still used to serve the feminist conscious and determined and scrupulous writer."<sup>16</sup> Louis Kroneberger praises the power and the significance of the work and the overwhelming moral sense that has direct social meaning. **The Little Foxes**, for him, comes through as the most effective kind of protest, sending its audience out of the theatre "not purged, not released, but still aroused and indignant."<sup>17</sup>

The plot of the play comprises a linear sequence of causal events that leads necessarily to conflict. Oscar and Benjamin Hubbard with their sister Regina Giddens arrange to get Northern capital to finance a cotton mill.

One third of the investment money has to come from Regina's husband , Horace, who has been treated at a hospital in Baltimore for a heart condition for several months. Since he refuses to answer his wife's correspondence, she asks their daughter Alexandra to go to the hospital to fetch him. He arrives home tired , weakened from the journey, and ill-disposed to finance the project that his wife has negotiated. Eager to bring the deal to its end, Regina's brother, Oscar and Benjamin, steal bonds worth \$ 88,000 from Horace's safe-deposit , bonds which are as negotiable as money. Oscar takes them to Chicago to make up the missing third of the deal, cutting Regina out of the share in the deal. They let Regina think an outsider has come up with the money required. Horace discovers the theft and tells Regina that he will not report it to the authorities but tell the brothers that the bonds are a loan from Regina. Furthermore, Horace tells Regina that he intends to revise his will, leaving only the stolen bonds to her.

Regina is thus trapped in a world dominated by her brothers and husband; she will receive nothing from her brother except as they choose to pay back that loan. The

next move, however, is hers. She causes Horace to have a heart attack and mercilessly refuses to help him. When she is sure he is unconscious, she calls the servants. In the end, she blackmails her brothers into a seventy-five percent share in exchange for the bonds. Ben retaliates with the threat that he will expose her for murder of her husband, and Alexandra comes in to announce that Horace has died. The play ends with Alexandra, in her own way, blaming her mother for killing Horace and announcing she will go off on her own.

The plot, thus, consists of a series of crises , each one only partly resolved. Hellman manages to keep the audience waiting for the resolution to be completed, only to be shocked by a reversal which leads to a new crisis. Each twist in this realistic plot causes excitement. Nothing is expected or inevitable because every event comes as a surprise. The climax is reached in the quarrel between Regina and her husband, which ends with the death of Horace. Then comes the denouement or the unraveling of plot strands. Surprisingly, Hellman leaves some strands raveled.

Though Hellman wrote *The Little Foxes* before she had even heard of Brecht's anti-empathetic theories, the final scene in which Alexandra faces Regina could, indeed, be seen as a Brechtian device which forces the audience to question the rationale behind the actions of both Regina and Alexandra. In this scene, Hellman alienates the final event and the two characters of mother and daughter encouraging us not to take sides but rather to think :

Regina : (going up the steps) Alexandra, I've come to the end of my rope. Somewhere there has to be what I want. Life goes too fast. Do what you want ; think what you want; go where you want. I'd like to keep you with me, but I won't make you stay. Too many people used to make me do too many things. No, won't make you stay.

Alexandra : You couldn't , Mama , because I want to leave here. As I've never wanted anything in my life before. Because now I understand what Papa was trying to tell me. (Pause) All in one day : Addie said there were people who ate the earth and other people who stood around and watched them do it. And just now Uncle Ben said the same things. Really, he said the same thing. (Tensely) Well, tell

him for me, Mama, I'm not going to stand around and watch you do it. Tell him I'll be fighting as hard as he'll be fighting (rises) some place where people don't just stand around and watch

Regina : Well, you have spirit, after all. I used to think you were all sugar water. We don't have to be bad friends. I don't want us to be bad friends, Alexandra.

(Starts, stops, turns to Alexandra) Would you like to come and talk to me, Alexandra? Would you-would you like to sleep in my room tonight?

Alexandra : (takes a step toward her ) Are you afraid Mama?

(Regina does not answer. She moves slowly out of sight. Addie comes to Alexandra, presses her arm.)

The Curtain Falls .<sup>18</sup>

Within this realistic plot, Hellman, as we have seen, has experimented. Also, the realistic set of the play indicates the kind of people living in it. The scene of the three acts is "the living room of the Giddents house, in a small town in the South." Significantly, Hellman describes the room as "good-looking, the furniture expensive; but it reflects no particular taste. Everything

is of the best and that is all."<sup>19</sup> The scene does not change which gradually creates the atmosphere of prisons and traps. This domestic scene which is the setting for "business negotiations"<sup>20</sup> in *The Little Foxes*, is also where the female characters are traded. Judith E. Barlow rightly notes that "By locating *Foxes* in the home, Hellman demystifies the relationship between the domestic on the one hand and the economic and political on the other."<sup>21</sup>

There are four female characters in the play : Addie, Birdie, Alexandra, and Regina. Addie is a black maid who is helpless and almost forgotten till the end of the play when Horace before his death asks her to take care of Alexandra . Birdie has become alcoholic and defeatist from the tyranny of her husband, Ben. In Act one, add a comma when a Chicago industrialist, Marshall, visits the family to make the deal, Ben tells him how his grandfather and father took over everything belonging to Birdie's family. Birdie herself was part of the deal :

Ben : Perhaps. (He sees that Marshall is listening to the music. Irritated , he turns to

Birdie and Alexandra at the piano , then back to Marshall) You're right , Mr. Marshall. It is difficult to learn new ways. But maybe that's why it's profitable. Our grandfather and father learned the new ways and learned how to make them pay. (Smiles nastily) They were in trade. Hubbard Sons, Merchandise. Others , Birdie's family, for example, looked down on them . (Settles back in chair) To make a long story short, Lionnet now belongs to us. (Birdie stops playing) Twenty years ago we took over their land, their cotton, and their daughter. (Birdie rises and stands stiffly by the piano. Marshall, who has been watching her, rises).<sup>22</sup>

The presentation of sex roles in *Foxes* becomes clear in the relationship between Regina and Ben, on the one hand, and between Regina and Horace, on the other. From the beginning of the play, the battle for supremacy between Regina and Ben is quite evident. He repeatedly reminds her of her social role as a woman, invoking their mother as an example : "Sometimes it is better to wait for the sun to rise again ... and sometimes, as our mother used to tell you... it's unwise for a good -looking woman to frown .. Softness and a smile do more to the heart of man."<sup>23</sup> Regina, however, wins the battle with

her two brothers and becomes "the desiring subject". Now she has the upper hand after her husband's death: "I'm smiling, Ben. I'm smiling because you are quite safe while Horace lives. But I don't think Horace will live. And if he doesn't live I shall want seventy-five percent in exchange of the bonds ... And if I don't get what I want I am going to put all three of you in jail."<sup>24</sup> Both Regina and Alexandra survive the gender battle but Alexandra refuses to stay with Regina, to watch the foxes "eat the earth." Alexandra's refusal to be like her mother, at the end of the play, demonstrates that there is still a choice for the younger generation of women to make. Thus, Hellman manages to use a realistic mode to show that realism, if modified, is not a closed form.

### III

Like *The Little Foxes*, Marsha Norman's *night Mother* is a realist play. Robert Brustein observes that *night Mother* is "chastely classical in its observance of the unities,"<sup>25</sup> especially time, which, as the stage directions indicate, is measured synchronously on stage and in the audience :

The time is the present , with the action beginning about 8 : 15. Clocks on stage in the

kitchen and on a table in the living room should run throughout the performance and be visible to the audience.<sup>26</sup>

The illusion of realism is also reinforced by the set and its dressing. The action of the play takes place in a living room which is "cluttered with magazines and needle-work catalogues, ashtrays, and candy dishes. Examples of Mama's needlework are everywhere-pillows, afghans, and quilts, doilies and rugs, and they are quite nice examples."<sup>27</sup>

The plot, though simple, comprises a linear sequence of causal events. Jessie Cates, a woman in her late thirties or early forties, tells her mother, Thelma, that she intends to commit suicide and proceeds to carry out her promise, after having organized the details of her mother's life and her own death. Jessie insists she is informing Thelma in advance simply to have the older woman prepared when it happens. After much argument, during which time the mother tries to change her daughter's mind, the play ends with Jessie killing herself.

Jeanie Forte argues that "night Mother" inscribes the dominant ideology in its realist form." For her,

Norman's text "may not be feminist or political in terms of its writing strategies, or in its naive conception of the self/ subjectivity-even in performance, the structure and design elements of *'night Mother* perpetuate narrative closure, the Oedipal constructions of identity ."<sup>28</sup> I would counter, however, that Norman manages, through an imaginative use of those same features of the realist form,-to expose what has been concealed and evaded in the lives of two women . Norman, from the very beginning of the play, promises a modified creative use of the realist form. The play's simple set, for example, is,as C.W.E.Bigsby notes,"charged with significance."<sup>29</sup>

We learn that Jessie plans to shoot herself in an adjacent room. The stage directions indicate that this room which opens directly onto the hall, and its entry should be invisible to everyone in the audience, is "the focal point of the entire set... a point of both threat and promise."<sup>30</sup> The door to that room, Bigsby explains, is "the route to her death but also, in her mind, to her release."<sup>31</sup> To keep the set and the entire presentation" detached from ideological readings,"<sup>32</sup> Norman warns us that :

... Under no circumstances should the set and its dressing make a judgment about the intelligence or taste of Jessie and Mana. It should simply indicate that they are very specific real people who happen to live in a particular part of the country. Heavy accents, which would further distance the audience from Jessie and Mana are also wrong.<sup>33</sup>

Norman's main contribution lies in her ability to use a realistic dialogue to explore a mad and unacceptable situation, subtly making her audience eventually resigned to accepting the suicide. Although Jessie wants her last evening with her mother to be, like all their previous evenings together, quiet and uneventful, the evening becomes a dreadful one. Ironically, every approach the mother tries to prevent the daughter from her intention to commit suicide becomes a probing exploration into the reasons for the daughter's choice.

A few minutes after the action of the play starts, Jessie, while talking about towels, Mama's snowball wrapper and manicure, asks her mother where she could find her Daddy's gun. Norman swiftly inserts the threatening element, and before Jennie says she is

going to take her own life, the mother reveals a disturbing fact about Jessie when she advises her to come down from the attic before Jessie has a fit. This is how Norman introduces the prime motivating factor for Jessie's ruined life-her inability to hold a job, her failed marriage, her delinquent son, and ultimately her intention to kill herself. The minute realistic details which are subtly brought in demonstrate how epilepsy has turned Jessie's life into a painful humiliating experience :

Mama : ..... And then you turn blue and the jerks start up like I'm standing their poking you with a cattle prod or you're sticking your finger in a light socket as fast as you can ...

Jessie:Foaming like a mad dog the whole time.

Mama : It's bubbling, Jess, not foam like the washer overflowed, for God's sake; it's bubbling like a baby spitting up. I go get a wet washcloth, that's all. And then the jerks show down and you wet yourself and it's over . Two minutes tops.

Jessie : How do I get to the bed?

Mama : How do you think?

Jessie : I'm too heavy for you now. How do you do it?

Mama : I call Dowson, But I get you cleaned up before he gets here and I make him leave before you wake up ....<sup>34</sup>

In her desperate attempts to prevent Jessie from committing suicide, her mother unknowingly makes her more convinced of her decision. Now Jessie learns that she has had these fits since she was a child. This explains why Cecil, her husband, leaves her though she begs him to take her with him. She promises him she would leave everything if he would take her but he refuses and she understands why. She cannot keep a job and has never been around people all her life because they really feel "uncomfortable" when she smiles at them the way she does. Epilepsy has ruined her and she cannot live with the idea that she can live only as dependent on her mother :

Mama : You are my child!

Jessie : I am what became of your child.  
(Mama cannot answer) I found an old baby picture of me. And it was somebody else, not me. It was somebody pink and fat who never heard of sick or lonely, somebody who cried and got fed, and reached up and got held and kicked but didn't hurt anybody, and slept

whenever she wanted to, just by closing her eyes. Somebody who mainly just laid there and laughed at the colors waving around over her head and chewed on a polka-dot whale and woke up knowing some new trick nearly every day, and rolled over and drooled on the sheet and felt your hand pulling my quilt back up over me. That's who I started out and this is who is left. (There is no self-pity here) That's what this is about. It's somebody I lost, alright, it's my own self. Who I never was. Or who I tried to be and never got there. Somebody I waited for who never came. And never will. So, see, it doesn't much matter what else happens in the world in this house, even. I'm what was worth waiting for and I didn't make it. Me .... who might have made a difference to me ... I'm not going to show up, so there's no reason to stay, except to keep you company, and that's ...not reason enough because I'm not ... very good company. (pause)  
Am I.

Mama (Knowing she must tell the truth) : No, and neither am I.<sup>35</sup>

Some feminist critics reject Jessie's idea that she can get her identity affirmed through its ultimate denial. They also argue that the play confirms "a model of

women as inadequates whose lives drained of meaning once the stereotyped gender roles of wife and mother proved fallible or unsupportable."<sup>36</sup> Norman, however, finds that the relationship between mother and daughter is a central territory neglected by male writers. This relationship, she explains,

..... is one of the world's great mysteries' it has confused and confounded men and women for centuries .. and yet it has not been perceived to have critical impact on either the life of the family, whereas the man's ability to earn money, his success out in the world, his conflicts with his father - these are all things that have been seen as directly influencing the survival of the family. Part of what we have begun to do, because of the increasing voice of women in the world, is to redefine survival . What it means is the ability to carry on your life in such a way that it fulfils and satisfies you. With this definition of survival, Mother looms large. What you hope for your life, how you define the various parameters of what's possible for you, those are all things with which Mother is connected .... As women, our historical role has been to clear chaos, and I will not stop until I have it. <sup>37</sup>

Norman's concept of ultimate denial as an affirmation of identity is contradictory but the experience she depicts in *'night Mother* is also full of contradictions. The creative use of the realist form has helped Norman not only to explore Jessie's dilemma but her mother's ability to give, to sustain, to fight for her child's life, and ultimately, to accept her daughter's decision to commit suicide.

#### IV

Unlike *The little Foxes* and *'nigh Mother*, Adrienne Kennedy's *The Owl Answers* falls outside of what can be described as realist. Indeed the play, like all of Kennedy's early plays, uses a totally non-realistic form which seems to go even beyond "the experimental theatre's racial, sexual, and formal boundaries."<sup>38</sup> From *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964), through such plays as *The Owl Answers* (1965), *A Rat's Mass* (1966), *A Lesson in Deal Language* (1970), *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* (1976), Kennedy has been "defying the conventions of American play writing to create a new, dangerous, and delirious dramaturgy."<sup>39</sup> In her theatre, she has tried to reinvent the traditional

notions of plot, character, and setting.

**The Owl Answers** expresses the black American woman's search for identity. Gender and race, however, made this search doubly difficult. The central character in the play is young black woman called **She Who Is Clara Passmore Who Is The Virgin Mary Who Is The Bastard Who Is The Owl**. **She Who Is** encounters other characters of multiple identities who include a white **Father** who rejects her claim as his child, **Bastard's Black Mother** who is the **Reverend's Wife** who is **Anne Boleyn**, **Goddam Father** who is the **Richest White Man In The Town** Who is the **Dead White Father** who is **Reverend Passmore**, **The White Bird**, a **Negro Man**, **Shakespeare**, **Chaucer**, and **William the Conqueror**. These characters, except the **Negro Man**, as a note to the play illustrates, "change slowly back and forth into and out of themselves leaving some garment from their previous selves upon the always to remind us of the nature of **She who is Clara Passmore who is the Virgin Mary who is the Bastard who is the Owl's World**."<sup>40</sup> Kennedy's theatre, Elin Diamond states, is "a theatre not of identity, but of identification."<sup>41</sup>

In her search for identity, Clara (or She who is) ambiguously moves to different places, but Kennedy indicates that the scene, like her characters, "is a New York subway is the Tower of London is a Harlem hotel room is St. Peter's."<sup>42</sup> The scene is a combination of the old and new places in the world queerly co-existing . This is where Clara is "caught in a deadly struggle with herself and her culture. " <sup>43</sup> In this struggle, there is no possibility for a stable fixed identity and Clara's search is doomed to fail. From the very beginning of the play, Clara's search for identity by relating to her father is rejected by all :

THEY : Bastard . (They start at a distance , eventually Crowding her . Their Lines are spoken coldly. SHE WHO IS is only a prisoner to them.)

You are not his ancestor.

Keep her Locked there, guard.

Bastard

SHE . You must let me go down to the chapel to see him. He is my father.

THEY . Your father? (Jeering.)

SHE. He is my father.

THEY . Keep her locked ther guard ... if you are his ancestor why are you a Negro?

Fuchs observes that there is a strong affinity between Kennedy's early plays and Strindberg's later dream and chamber plays in which he developed the transformational dream form.<sup>47</sup> In this form, the traditional time and space do not exist, as the psyche "roams freely over fragments of reality; imagination spins and weaves new patterns made up of memories, experiences, unfettered fancies, absurdities and improvisations. The characters are split, double and multiply; they evaporate, crystallize, scatter, and coverage."<sup>48</sup>

The text of *The Owl Answers*, however, reveals that the composite protagonist, Clara, is the bastard daughter of a poor black mother and the "Richest White Man in Town." Although she is adopted by the Reverend Passmore and bears her mother's color, she idolizes the culture of her father and England "the home of dear Chaucer, Dickens and dearest Shakespeare."<sup>49</sup> She yearns to be accepted in the father's world but her Dead Father rejects her: "If you are my ancestor why are you a Negro, Bastard? What is a Negro doing in the Tower of London, staying at Queen's House? Clara, I

Yes, Why is it you are a Negro if you are his  
ancestor?  
Keep her locked there.<sup>44</sup>

Deborah R. Geis notes that the structure of *The Owl Answers* "resists the temporal linearity of the classic realist narrative."<sup>45</sup> Forte argues that the conventional narrative, in Clara's case, is absolutely oppressive because,

She is locked outside of it and within it, by virtue of her race/ gender double-bind. The play's ambiguity and near-incomprehensibility articulate the impossibility of identification with a narrative position, least of all one which might provide closure, or the fiction of a coherent self. Clara... instead traverses narrative, zigzagging across various systems of signification, seeking herself in gaps, the spaces of unnarrated silence wherein her persistently elusive subjectivity might be found.<sup>46</sup>

The structure of *The Owl Answers* does not follow the linearity of the traditional narrative. It is a collage whose form is similar to that of a dream. In her article "Adrienne Kennedy and the First Avant-Garde," Elinore

am your Goddam Father who was the Richest White Man in the Town and you are a schoolteacher in Savannah who spends her summers in Teachers College. You are not my ancestor. You are my bastard. Keep her locked there, William."<sup>50</sup>

Clara's search for identity continues. She screams at the Dead Father and her Mother but the Bastard's Black Mother who is the Reverend's Wife who is Anne Boleyn asks : "Why be confused? The Owl was your beginning Mary."<sup>51</sup> Now Clara admits "I am Clara Passmore. I am not His ancestor. I ride, look for men to take to a Harlem hotel room , to love, to dress them as my father, beg to take me."<sup>52</sup> Her looking for men, however, turns out to be not exactly what she yearns for :

**NEGRO MAN :** What is it ? What is it ? What is wrong?

(He tries to undress her. Underneath her body is black. He throws off the crown she has placed on him. She is wildly trying to get away from him.) What is it? ... Are you sick?

**SHE :** (Smiles.) No, God. (She is in a trance.) No, I am not sick. I only have a dream of love. A dream. Open the cell door and let me go down to St. Paul's Chapel. (The blue crepe

shawl is half about her. She shows the Negro Man her notebooks, from which a mass of papers fall. She crazily tries to gather them up. During this She walks around the bed. He follows her.) Communications, God, communications, letters to my father every day of the year... They took him away and would not let me see him ... Now they, my Black Mother and my Goddam father who pretended to Chaucer, Shakespeare and Eliot and all my beloved English, come to my cell and stare and I can see they despise me and I despise them. They are dragging his body across the green his white hair hanging down. They are taking off his shoes and he is stiff. I must get into the chapel to see him. He is my blood father. God, let me into his burial. (He grabs her Down Center. She Kneeling) I call God and the Owl answers. (Softer.) It haunts my Tower calling, its feathers are blowing against the cell wall, speckled in the garden on the fig tree, it comes, feathered, great hollow-eyed with yellow skin and yellow eyes, the flying bastard. From my Tower I keep calling and the only answer is the Owl, God (pause.) I am only yearning for our kingdom, God.<sup>53</sup>

Finally, the Mother stabs herself with a butcher knife saying, "I know the way to St. Paul's Chapel, Clara."<sup>54</sup> But Clara refuses to follow her and chooses to find her dead father through her own death. Trying to attack the Negro Man with the knife, she "suddenly looks like an owl and speaks the last words: "Ow ... oww," whereupon her Dead Father" rises and slowly blows out candles on the bed."<sup>55</sup> Thus, Clara's search for identity ends with her transformation into an owl.

Identification and transformation are possible in dreams because this is where Clara's soul can roam freely over the intersecting boundaries and contradictory fragments of reality. Being the outcome of these boundaries and fragments in her society, Clara, like Kennedy and protagonists in her early plays, resorts to the dream form in which she can try to identify with those she cannot relate to in reality. She is Clara Passmore who is the Virgin Mary who is the Bastard who is the Owl who is trying to relate to Goddam Father who is the Richest White Man in the Town who is the Dead Father who is Reverend Passmore. But the dominant culture in her society offers her the chance to be transformed only into an owl.

The examination of the dramatic forms of **The little Foxes**, **' night Mother**, and **The owl Answers** has demonstrated that the three playwrights managed to expose the contradictions in the dominant patriarchal culture. Both Hellman and Norman could creatively use a realist narrative to serve feminist concerns. Similarly through the use of a non-realist dramatic form in **The Owl Answers**, Kennedy successfully shows how difficult it is for a black female to establish her own identity in a white male-dominated society.

Notes

- 1- There has been a major disagreement as to the precise definition of Aristotle's mimesis. For my purposes here, I will adopt representation. Stephen Halliwell's new translation of the *Poetics* consistently prefers 'representation' over 'imitation' : "Representation is closest to the 'meanings covered by the mimesis word-group in Greek. Thus a picture can represent a subject, an actor represent a character, a play represent an action event or story' while 'imitation' has none of these senses in modern English." Stephen Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 71.
- 2- Catherine Belsey, "Constructing the subject : deconstructing the text," in **FEMINIST CRITICISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE : Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture**, Eds. Judith Newton and Deborah Rsenfelt (new York and London : Methuen, 1985), p. 53
- 3- Sue-Ellen Case, **FEMINISM AND THEATRE** (New York : Methuen, 1988), p. 120.
- 4- Ibid. p. 121.
- 5- Belsey, "Constructing the subject ...", p. 54.
- 6- Sue-Ellen Case and Jeannie K. Forte, "From Formalism to Feminism." *Theatre* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1985) : p. 65.

- 7- Janelle Reinelt, "Beyond Brecht : Britain's New Feminist Drama," in **FEMINIST THEATRE AND THEORY**, ed. Helene Keyssar (New York : St. Martin's Press, 1996), p. 40.
- 8- Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 54.
- 9- Ibid. p. 46.
- 10- Ibid. p. 44.
- 11- Jeanne Forte, "Realism, Narrative, and The Feminist Playwright, " in **FEMINIST THEATRE AND THEORY**, ed. Helene Keyssar (New York : St. Martin's Press, 1996), p. 21
- 12- Ibid. p. 21.
- 13- Patricia R. Schroeder, "Locked Behind The Proscenium Feminist Strategies in *Getting Out* and *My Sister in This House*, " in **FEMINIST THEATRE AND THEORY**, ed. Helene Keyssar (New York : St. Martin's Press, 1996), pp. 156-157.
- 14- Barbara Lee Horn , *Lillian Hellman : A Research and Production Sourcebook* (London : Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 18.
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- 16- Barret Clark, "Lillian Wellman," *College English* 6 Dec. 1944 : p. 130.
- 17- Llouis Kronenberger , "Greed," *STAGE* 16 (25 Feb. 1939): p. 55.
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- 19- Ibid. p. 151.
- 20- Sharon Friendman, "Feminism as Theme in Twentieth-Century American Women's Drama," *American Studies* 25, 1 (1984) : 82.
- 21- Barlow , *Into the Foxhole*, p. 161.
- 22- Ibid. pp. 157-158.
- 23- Ibid. p. 194.
- 24- Ibid. p. 219.
- 25- Robert Brustein, *New Republic*, May 2, 1983.
- 26- Marsha Norman *night Mother* (New York : Hill and Wang, 1983), p. 5.
- 27- Ibid. p. 3.
- 28- Forte, " Rcalisimm Narrative , And The Feminist Playwright, " p. 22.
- 29- C.W.E. Bigsby **MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA, 1945-1990**, (New York : Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 316.

- 30- Norman's 'nigh Mother, p. 3.
- 31- Bigsby, **MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA**, p. 316.
- 32- Jill Dolan, **The Feminist Spectator as Critic**, (London : U.M.I. Research Press, 1988), p. 25.
- 33- Norman, 'nigh Mother, p.3.
- 34- Ibid., pp. 65-66.
- 35- Ibid., pp. 76-77.
- 36- Bigsby, **MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA**, P. 316.
- 37- Belsko and Koenig , **Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights**, p. 339.
- 38- Alia Soloman, A foreword, **The Alexandr Plays : Adrienne Kennedy** (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. ix.
- 39- Ibid. p. ix.
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- 41- Diamond, **Unmaking Mimesis**, p. 117.
- 42- Kennedy, **The Owl Answers**, p. 26.
- 43- Forte, "Realism, Narrative, and The Feminist Playwright," p. 25.
- 44- Kennedy, **The Owl Answers**, p. 27.
- 45- Deborah R. Geis, "A Spectator Watching My Life," in **Intersecting Boundaries : The Theatre of Adrienne**

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- 46- Forte, "Realism, Narrative, and Feminist Playwrights," p. 26.
- 47- Elinore Fuchs, "Adrienne Kennedy and The First Avant-Garde," in *Intersecting Boundaries*, p. 77.
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- 49- Kennedy, *The Owl Answers*, p. 31.
- 50- *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.
- 51- *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 52- *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.
- 53- *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.
- 54- *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- 55- *Ibid.*, p. 45.