

Naturalism vs. Experimentalism: A Taste of Honey's ambivalent relationship with social realism

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Abstract:

The incorporation of surrealist elements in *A Taste of Honey*, at the behest of the avant-garde, anarchic, and provocative Joan Littlewood, director of the 1958 Theatre Workshop production, may provoke a hasty classification of the play as a fantastic or eccentric piece of theatre. Influenced by Brechtian techniques and so-called 'illegitimate theatre', the play's inclusion of music hall references and direct audience addresses, scored by a jazz trio, certainly demonstrates an experimental flair.

Nonetheless, the play's unrealistic facets must be reconciled with its engagement with discourses of poverty, misogyny, racism, and homophobia; discourses which enable a categorisation of *A Taste of Honey* as conforming to the profoundly political and revolutionary movement of social realism. Despite the reality that the play's depiction of the day-to-day experience of the working classes in 1958 Salford may be considered more abstract than realistic, Delaney's depiction of the neglected state of the accommodation available to the impoverished through the play's sets constitutes the first indication of the play's commitment to an authentic portrayal, and a scathing critique, of societal marginalisation. Extended to a criticism of the social and economic exploitation and oppression of the working class more generally, Delaney's commitment to social realism, and her sympathy for those ostracised within society, is manifest.

Though *A Taste of Honey* rejects the formal confines of theatrical naturalism and realism, its engagement with experimentalist techniques ultimately serves to highlight the play's commitment to issues of social justice. The radical politics of the play, accompanied by the radical practises of its director, enables a recognition of *A Taste of Honey* as an authentic, if unconventional, piece of social realism.

Christopher Innes defines social realism as a medium that “deal[s] directly with political issues, typically addressing questions of justice or calling for revolutionary change,” ranging from “presenting ethical challenges” to “raising ideological consciousness” (*Modern* 9). *A Taste of Honey*, in its naturalistic examination of the politics of poverty and misogyny, and, to a lesser extent, homophobia and racism, certainly succeeds in drawing the audience’s moral attention of the societal plights of a “single mother and part-time whore, illegitimate teenage mother, gay white man, black sailor boy” (Wandor 42). Such a radical resolve, considering the prominence of male, middle- and upper-class playwrights, known as “angry young men”, at the time of the 1958 Theatre Workshop production, certainly contributes to an interpretation of the play as a piece of social realism. Nevertheless, the inclusion of unrealistic and surreal elements, namely the drawing on Epic and other ‘illegitimate’ forms of theatre through the incorporation of music hall traditions, a jazz trio, and direct audience addresses, appears to discourage the classification of *A Taste of Honey* as an example of social realism, purely because their presence complicates any simple categorisation of the play as naturalistic.

It is thus necessary to distinguish between naturalism and realism. As Innes notes, “it would be logical to use “Naturalism” to refer to the theoretical basis shared by all the dramatists who formed the movement, and their approach to representing the world. “Realism” could then apply to the intended effect, and the stage techniques associated with it.” (*Sourcebook* 4, 6). Therefore, though the play is not wholly naturalistic in its representation of 1958 Salford, the effect of its condemnation of working-class hardships and the restraints of contemporary gender roles, themselves accentuated by the presence of unrealistic elements, permits a classification of *A Taste of Honey* as a piece of social realism.

Delaney’s “authentic portrait of the mid-twentieth century English world” (MacInnes qtd. in Esche 69) constitutes a realistic portrayal of the struggle of the working-class, particularly of working-class women, with poverty during an era when “the economic independence won during the war... was reversed” (Taylor 10) and “traditional values were gradually re-entrenched” (Taylor 9). The radicalism of this honest depiction is reflected in contemporary reviews: *The Spectator*’s Alain Brien’s likening of the working class to a “savage culture” and Delaney to a “genuine cannibal” (qtd. in Leach 157) demonstrates the revolutionary nature of a marginalised faction condemning its mistreatment in a manner emblematic of the social realist movement. Delaney’s most striking illustration of the

hardships of the impoverished masses occurs in relation to the play's sets. At the play's opening, the immediate confrontation of the audience with a "comfortless flat" (Delaney 7), followed by Helen's confessions of "Everything in it's falling apart, it's true, and we've no heating" (7) and "It's all I can afford" (7), evokes the play's social realist dimension through its blunt portrayal of the fetid nature of urban accommodation for the working classes. Indeed, it is the rundown nature of housing for the underprivileged that renders the setting socially realistic: as Esche notes, "what is a realistic set is of course not the thing itself, but a sign for what may be a realistic type of flat in Lancashire, and that type of flat must be read as squalid" (74). Moreover, in the opening of the play's second act, which parallels that of the first in revealing to the audience Jo's new residence, it is initially suggested that Jo has succeeded in achieving a degree of social mobility and can now manage to afford a home that Geof describes as "enormous" (47). Nonetheless, Delaney's arresting depiction of the appalling condition of working-class housing continues during Helen's visit, whereupon Peter's disgusted comment of "Bloody cockroaches are playing leapfrog in there" (67), and Helen's assertion that it is "Still the same old miserable hole" (59) suggests that, despite the illusion of economic improvement, little has changed. Delaney's emphasis of the sacrifices and labour necessary for Jo, "a representative... of adolescent working-class girls" (Esche 72) to afford this flat, with "I've got to work all day in a shoe shop and all night in a bar to pay for it" (47) is therefore all the more poignant. Delaney's disturbingly vivid descriptions of the vile living conditions to which Helen and Jo seem permanently bound as a result of their economic limitations thus encourage a classification of *A Taste of Honey* as a piece of social realism.

Leach's assertion that the "problem for all the characters in this play is that they exist beyond the hold of the community. They are marginalised, feckless figures, moving from one seedy flat to another, from one unsatisfactory relationship to another" (156) supports the notion that Delaney's social realism, in the form of challenging the exploitation of the working class, is not merely limited to her depiction of unsuitable accommodation, but the wider consequences of oppression. As Oberg notes "Helen and Jo's world is one of cemeteries, tenements, and slaughter houses. In response to such overcrowded surroundings where privacy and identity are difficult to maintain, they have come to view themselves as detached and ultimately alone" (163). The marginalisation and alienation of these vulnerable members of society by the wider community leads to an endless cycle of unfulfilled potential and inescapable poverty, hinted at by the motifs of the bulbs, destined never to flower, and

Jo's drawings, which demonstrate unrealised potential (Esche 75). While the failure of the bulbs is subtle in its evocation of Jo's gradual disillusionment and abandonment of the prospect of improvement, with her observations deteriorating from the optimism of "I hope they bloom" (11) to the blunt resignation of "They're dead. It makes you think, doesn't it?" (71), the declining prospects of her artistic ability are more palpable. Though, initially, Helen notes Jo's drawings are "very artistic though, I must say. Have you ever thought of going to a proper art school and getting a proper training?" (15), Jo's inability to bring her talent to fruition by pursuing professional training, a result of her financial limitations, prompts Geof's cruel remark of "there's no design, rhythm or purpose" (48) and his exasperated demanding "Why don't you go to a decent school?" (49). Furthermore, the manner in which Jo appears perfectly to replicate her mother's life may equally be extrapolated to imply a vicious class-based cycle. Though Jo responds to the boy's comment that Jo is "not at all like [Helen]" (37) with "Good. I'm glad nobody can see a resemblance between us" (38), a resemblance cannot be denied. As Esche (76) notes, both are first employed in a pub, and both become pregnant from their first sexual experience, prompting Geof's chilling observation "If you don't watch it, you'll turn out exactly like her... In some ways you are already, you know." (72). Once Jo goes into labour at the play's end, the audience is confronted with the harsh truth that "the process, the cycle of single mother trapped in poverty with its inherent possibility of neglect, may be starting all over again for the child about to be born." (Esche 78). *A Taste of Honey* thus succeeds as a piece of social realist theatre by accentuating the civil and financial degeneration of the working class, and, in particular, of working-class single mothers, who become "trapped in a downward spiral of social and economic decay" (Esche 78) from which there is no escape.

Certain fantastic or unrealistic elements in the 1958 Theatre Workshop production, under the influence of director Joan Littlewood, appear to contradict the categorisation of *A Taste of Honey* as an example of social realism, leading Patton to conclude that "the Theatre Workshop production routinely subverted realism" (331). Nonetheless, it may be argued that the experimental, illegitimate, or popular aspects of the production act to enhance the social realist facet of the play by rendering its political message more striking through the juxtaposition of what Innes terms "verisimilitude vs veracity" (*Modern* 30). As "*A Taste of Honey* remains so consistently associated with Joan Littlewood and her Theatre Workshop" (Oberg 160), it is first necessary to consider the impact of Littlewood's leadership on *A Taste of Honey*. Littlewood, who "identified her politics as 'anarchist'" (Patton 335) and made

“steps towards making the theatre a robustly egalitarian and collective enterprise” (Patton 335) had intentions of dismantling “hierarchical structures” (Taylor 18) to “break the stranglehold of the middle classes on theatre and to place representations of the working class on stage” (Taylor 18). Despite this apparent social realist sympathy for political justice, the Theatre Workshop’s almost contradictory favouring of Brechtian techniques and acknowledgement of illegitimate theatre are manifest, in *A Taste of Honey*, through the incorporation of music hall references, the use of a jazz trio, and Avis Bunnage’s direct asides. These techniques operate to produce an unrealistic, eccentric play that appears to distance itself from the everyday realities of a working-class existence. The music hall traditions of rousing songs and comic acts are littered throughout the play. Helen, Jo, Peter, Jimmie and Geof each pause to sing popular songs, while Delaney compromises the social realist aspect of the vocabulary and syntax of her working-class subjects by amalgamating it with comedy script. For instance, when Helen instructs Jo to light the gas stove, her question “Did you find it?” is met with a “Loud bang” and Jo’s timid response “Yes” (10), in what Oberg terms “combining Lancashire vernacular with the “bounce” of the music-hall line” (161). Similarly, open communication between the actors and the Apex Jazz Trio resulted in “thoroughly destroying the illusion of ‘reality’ as defined by the naturalistic theatre of the time” (Patton 334), while “Avis Bunnage’s direct comments to the audience,” for lines such as “Wouldn’t she get on your nerves?” (9) “shattered the ‘realistic’ conventions that still held sway in the West End” (Patton 331). Nonetheless, as Patton observes, the Theatre Workshop production’s apparent rejection of social realist techniques appears paradoxical: “the performers routinely undermined the ‘realism’ of the fourth wall and the generic integrity of naturalist theatre during the show, and yet the play is clearly a socially realist, if not formally realist work” (334). Pickering notes that “by rejecting Naturalist imitations of real life and appealing to audience-identification, [Epic Theatre] hoped to make it possible to analyse a social or political issue directly” (136). *A Taste of Honey* is thus consistent with social realism in that, though it uses peculiar elements and artifice, it does so purely for the purpose of accentuating a genuine social and political observation through “juxtaposing stark realism and sentimental romanticism” (Taylor 19). In line with Holdsworth’s conclusion “social realism had the potential to do more than merely replicate surface realities, but could provide a rhetoric of social responsibility, democratic principles and education by countering the absence of the working class from dominant discursive regimes and cultural output” (126), *A Taste of Honey* may be classified as a piece of social realism to the extent that social realism does not demand a perfect duplication of the mundanities of quotidian life. The play’s

chilling condemnation of the neglect of the working classes from theatrical, political, and literary discussion is emphasised, not refuted, by juxtaposition with fantastic and surreal allusions.

John Wallbank, cornet in the Apex jazz trio, describes, with the reflection “it was naturalism, but it wasn’t a naturalistic production in any way” (qtd. in Patton 335) “the promotion of a realist end by non-realistic means” (Patton 335). The incorporation, within *A Taste of Honey* of the surrealist elements of music hall inspired songs and dialogue, a jazz trio, direct addresses to the audience, and the Brechtian techniques of Epic Theatre should not be neglected. Juxtaposed with the disturbingly realistic presentation of both the deficiencies of the housing conditions of the working class, and the arresting implication of a vicious cycle of poverty and unfulfilled potential for working-class single mothers, the play “fiercely balances between fact and fantasy, reality and the timeless world of play-acting and nursery rhyme” (Oberg 165). The contradiction in *A Taste of Honey* of several comfortingly populist aspects of theatre and Delaney’s agonising depiction of the neglect and abandonment of the working class thus serves to render its political contention with injustice and marginalisation all the more striking, and signifies that, despite its apparent deviations from the conventions of social realist theatre, the play may be comfortably be classified a piece of social realism.

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