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Brno studies in English. 2008, vol. 34, iss. 1, pp. [79]-88

ISBN 978-80-210-4763-1
ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104239
Access Date: 16. 02. 2024
Version: 20220831

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SBORNÍK PRACÍ FILOZOFICKÉ FAKULTY BRNĚNSKÉ UNIVERZITY
STUDIA MINORA FACULTATIS PHILOSOPHICAE UNIVERSITATIS BRUNENSIS
S 14, 2008 — BRNO STUDIES IN ENGLISH 34

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CRITICISM OF APARTHEID IN *BLOOD KNOT* IN COMPARISON WITH *TWO TRAINS RUNNING* AND *PHILADELPHIA, HERE I COME!*

Abstract

The three plays' plots are from the same period and deal with marginalized groups and they are all critical to the regimes they "bear witness" to. Athol Fugard's *Blood Knot* and its portrayal of apartheid, which is in the main focus of this paper, is analyzed from the points of view of unfulfilled love, use of derogatory language and a desire for private space, that all contribute to the complex criticism of the racist regime of South African apartheid of the 1960s. The criticism, although implicit, becomes even more apparent and radical when presented in comparison with August Wilson's *Two Trains Running* and Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*

Key words

Apartheid; civil rights; drama; Brian Friel; Athol Fugard; Northern Ireland; postcolonialism; racism; South Africa; August Wilson; United States

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The three plays offer an insight into small communities on the background of important changes and historical context in the particular societies. They portray and powerfully reflect three different societies in various stages of social-political transformation. They are all set in the 1960s. *Blood Knot* by Athol Fugard (first staged in 1961 as *The Blood Knot*, revised in 1988) is situated in the racially segregated township of Port Elizabeth in South Africa; *Two Trains Running* by August Wilson (first staged in 1990) is set in the African American neighbourhood in Pittsburgh, USA; and *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* by Brian Friel (first staged in 1964) in the fictional small town of Ballybeg in the North of Ireland. Experiencing either a direct impact of a totalitarian regime (South Africa), or the turbulence of a historical change in progress (USA), or an aftermath of the British imperialism

(North of Ireland), the characters of all three plays are, to a certain degree, affected by certain form of oppression and/or disadvantage that they have to face.

All three authors are among the most prominent dramatists in their countries. They have earned the high acclaim because of their artistic skills and their use of the art to powerfully comment on the situation of the disadvantaged communities in their countries. They can accurately portray the situation in their societies, and they present social issues through a lens of a dramatic composition focused on a small-scale environment. These abilities add the analytical dimension to their work. The authors serve their own communities by identifying and presenting the most important and pressing issues. It is also due to the fact that they all write in English that their works could reach broad audiences worldwide and inform them about the problems, as well as entertain.

English playwright Tom Stoppard once compared in an interview the work of a journalist to that of a playwright: "While journalism may throw light on an immediate situation, art puts the immediate situation within a universal or timeless context" (Delaney 1990: 7–8). Stoppard then explains that dramatist's possibilities to change the situation immediately are very limited ("Athol Fugard can't [cause the immediate change of wages of underpaid South African workers]" (Stoppard quoted in Delaney 1990: 8)); on the other hand, a dramatist's role which lies in bearing witness, pointing out problems within a frame of a (timeless) work of art makes him an important observer and a critic of the human condition in a particular society at a particular time. Such is the case of the three plays.

The three critical voices are heard through the local varieties of English. They, however, differ in the degree of criticism depending on the time of origin of the plays as well as the level of oppressiveness of the regimes. Thus, *Blood Knot* describes the worst conditions out of the plays. Its criticism is not open, but merely hidden in the absurdity of the situation the play describes. *Two Trains Running* operates in conditions where open racism is a matter of the past but still keeps its traces – the play, written in 1990, also contains open critical passages of the past with references to the American slavery and its results. *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* focuses on the bright future which lies in leaving the community and, thus, the past which stands for the colonized, pauperized and oppressed time for the Irish nation; the depiction of life in the post-colonial present in a free and racially not-stigmatized society is not critical, but there is still the sense of desperation in the dead-end situation.

The silent and implicit criticism of *Blood Knot* deals primarily with racism of the apartheid regime. Yet, the play is the strongest of the three in its criticism. It is doubtlessly because the source of discrimination, the right-wing totalitarian government, was effective at the time of the creation of the play and its political message is thus directed towards the present and the past; the other two plays are focused on the criticism of the past in which there are the roots of the misfortunate conditions of African Americans and the Irish working-class. In comparison, the acuteness of the inexplicit "laying blame" of *Blood Knot* will become apparent.

Blood Knot was a radical play at the time when it was first performed in South Africa. The main source of controversy lay in "the play's daring presentation of a black and a white actor on the same stage in an apartheid-bound, Verwoerdian South Africa, where before *The Blood Knot* such a gesture would have been considered nearly unthinkable" (Wertheim 2000: 17). It tells a story of two brothers Morris and Zachariah Pietersens who live in "a one room shack in the 'non-white location' of Korsten, Port Elizabeth" (Fugard 2000: 52). The brothers are the only two characters of the play. In the original production at Dorkay House, Johannesburg, Morris was played by white author/actor Athol Fugard and Zachariah by black actor Zakes Mokae. The play opened in 1961 at the time when racially mixed audience, let alone cast, was a risky enterprise in South Africa. Yet Morris and Zach are both born from the same mother (the issue of their father is never addressed and therefore it is difficult to guess whether they are full or half brothers) and they are both subject to discrimination due to their status of coloured citizens. Morris is lighter to the degree of almost "passing as white" (the South African expression for coloureds who looked as whites), but the name of their township immediately signifies their race to the audiences:

> Although Morrie and Zach appear to the audience as white and black respectively, the fact that in 1961 South Africa was divided into group areas cues the audience that the two brothers who live in their small space in Korsten must, by virtue of their location, be classified as coloured. Thus Fugard paradoxically creates a space that is at once the everywhere of Beckett yet has the specificity of a particular Port Elizabeth coloured area. (Wertheim 2000: 20)

Morris stays at home during the day and takes care of the household and prepares meal and bath for Zach who goes to work. A story of brotherly love and longing for the better future and a woman (Zach's pen-pal Ethel, who unfortunately turns out to be white and thus unattainable) simultaneously narrates the injustice of racism:

> The reality is that Fugard is a world-class playwright, who often uses the South Africa he knows so intimately as a setting for more universal examinations of human life, human interactions, and the powers of art. His several plays about South African apartheid may be set in a specific place and time, but they deftly use the space/time coordinates to graph far more imposing and larger, generally applicable patterns of race and racism. (Wertheim 2000: xi)

Later in the play, Ethel sends a letter in which she informs Zach about her plan to come to Port Elizabeth and see him. A mere possibility of black Zach meeting white Ethel causes fear in Morris – and Zach teases his brother with an improbable idea that the meeting could eventually take place, but later he realizes that there is

not a chance they could ever meet peacefully. "If she sees me … she'll scream," Zach agrees with Morris' objections (Fugard 2000: 93). Finally, he admits that an interracial meeting and let alone a relationship are simply impossible:

> Zachariah. I can never have her.
> Morris. Never ever.
> Zachariah. She wouldn't want me anyway.
> Morris. It's as simple as that. (94)

Different skin colour is the ultimate line of separation between Zach and Ethel.

Yet, there are others, too. Ethel's letters suggest that she hopes that Zach owns a car and that he is rich. But to the contrary, Zach is poor – all his savings are just enough to buy decent clothes for Morris. The setting, too, serves as evidence of their poverty: "The shack is tidy and swept, but this only enhances the poverty of the poverty of its furnishing" (52). Pauperization of the Korsten blacks is one of the results of apartheid practices. Unlike in the other two plays, there is no indication in *Blood Knot* that it is possible for blacks not to be poor. Their destitution does not signify they did not succeed in life, but is a silent accusation of apartheid's responsibility for the situation. Morris and Zach are not poor and coloured; they are poor because of the fact.

In *Two Trains Running*, on the other hand, some of the African American characters are rather rich. Although most of the visitors of the restaurant where all the action takes place are relatively poor, there are a few wealthy characters such as Mr. West, the undertaker. As a youngster, he spotted his chance of making fortune by burying victims of illegal trades rather than participating in them. The play thus shows that it is possible for courageous African Americans to start business and become rich in the 1960s. The majority that is not rich either suffers from lack of working discipline (Memphis about Sterling: "I still say that boy don't want to work" (Wilson 1993: 35)) or lost money gambling (Risa: "I don't know why people waste their money playing numbers. Time you hit you just getting back what you put in" (3)). The character of Holloway, however, sees the difference between the economical situations of white and African Americans in that it is a result of the former exploitation rooted in the black-enslavement past: "That's all you got around here is niggers with somebody else's money in their pocket. […] Sooner or later as sure as the sun shine… somebody gonna take it and give it to the white man. […] A nigger with five hundred dollars in his pocket around here is a big man. But you go out there were […] they walking around with five thousand dollars in their pocket trying to figure out how to make it into five hundred thousand" (34). The irresponsible attitude to money and gambling is an obstacle in Sterling's love of Risa, who is hard working and plans well ahead. However, when he wins money in numbers he can bridge the gap and win her, too. There is also an economical obstruction in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* which is furthermore accompanied by a difference in class. Although Kathy falls in love with Gareth, he cannot marry her – he never finds the courage to ask her hand from her father,

Senator Doogan. When they are standing at Kathy's door, she instructs him to lie to her father about his income to become acceptable to the family: "Kathy (rapidly): You have £ 20 a week and £ 5,000 in the bank and your father's about to retire" (42). But he cannot lie to him and he never asks for Kathy's hand.

Later, Gareth learns that Kathy got married to a member of the upper-middle class: "some Dublin doc" (62). In *Philadelphia*, difference in property is connected with the difference of class, an English influence on viewing the society as stratified in this way. In *Trains* and *Philadelphia*, love is possible. Although the couples face the difficulties of difference in wealth and class, the character are able of falling in love. In *Trains*, the issue of wealth must be solved first and in *Philadelphia* it is the difference of class that eventually kills love. But in *Blood Knot*, no kind of relationship let alone love is ever possible between Zach and Ethel. In the 1960s South Africa, the colour of the skin is a barrier impossible to overcome. Not only does racism kill love, it does not let it even sprout. The difference in colour separates people irreversibly.

Fugard's play, however, by a "blood knot" inseparably connects the two brothers, who are of different skin colour. They need to learn how strong their tie is first. Since Ethel is white, they decide to "pass" Morris as white, too. Zach spends all the money he earned on a white man's clothes and Morris takes them on. It works on a deeply symbolical level, because earlier, in scene one, Morris takes on Zach's coat: one can "get right inside a man when [one] can wrap up in the smell of him" (Fugard 2000: 67). Through this act, light-skinned Morris symbolically accepts Zach's dark skin colour. When he puts on a white man's dress later in scene five, he nevertheless cannot act as a proper white South African. He tries hard and finally even calls his brother "*swartgat*" – "an abusive name for black South-African, literally, 'black arse'" ("Glossary" in Fugard 2000: 255). At this moment he is assured that the blood they share connects them together and makes him black; the difference in their skin colour and the clothes Morris is wearing cannot divide them anymore:

> The blood that ties the two brothers together in the play is born out of love, the enactment of desire in the human body. The two struggle in the course of the play, at times to realise this, at times to deny it, to see, at the end, that they cannot separate. (Orkin 1991: 106)

The metaphorical "passing" is transformed into a literal one towards the end of the play. Morris cannot pass by his brother and leave their hut in Korsten. He stays there with him, not passing by him (literally) on his way out and thus neither "passing" as white:

> […] Morrie, instead of "passing" as white, must pass him by, recognize the truth of his colouredness, an silently walk his own path, a path that brings him back to the coloured Korsten township and to his dark-skinned brother. (Wertheim 2000: 28)

Their "blood knot" ties them forever, because "[all] they have is each other, their blood knot" (Wertheim 2000: 32). By accepting the colour of his own skin as black, Morris joins Zach and accepts his misfortune as his own.

Zach's job as a park guard is to secure that no coloureds nor blacks pass the gate. He, a black citizen, collaborates on the discriminating process of deciding who does "pass" and who does not. Morris rejects the possibility of passing as white in the act of sharing the skin with the brother represented on stage by the coat. The choice of Zach's work symbolically shows that "[in] an important sense then, the text presents Morrie as thinking and acting in complete subjection to prevailing ideology and its manifestation in the laws and institutions of the state" (Orkin 1991: 104). In the public place, Zach does not pass un-white South Africans through the park gate; at home, he does not "pass" Morrie. The "blood knot" between the two brothers is stronger than the difference in the colour of their skins and makes the "passing" of white Morrie as a white man impossible. The brothers submit to the discriminatory policies of the apartheid regime.

Afrikaans, the language of the oppressor which is represented in the play by the racist vulgarism, is used in the park, through whose gate only whites can "pass". The use of the word *swartgat* in Afrikaans, the language of the former colonizer and one of the official languages of South Africa, serves as a catalyst for Morris to realize his colouredness. The use of the language of the colonizer presents an important aspect in post-colonial cultures. On the one hand, the "national" language (Chinua Achebe describes as the 'national language' English, French, Portuguese, principally (Oyegoke 2001: 143)) is the heritage from the time of colonization. In the South African post-colonial heritage, there are English and Africaans; it is the latter of the two that is at the same time strongly identified with apartheid. From this perspective, Fugard's use of English is understandable from at least two perspectives: it gives him an artistic advantage in the sense that he belongs to "[those] writers who do write in English [and who] have used it as a cultural vehicle, a medium through which a world audience could be introduced to features of culturally diverse post-colonial societies" (Ashcroft 2001: 56); it also allows him to accentuate the use of the language of the apartheid government – Afrikaans, the "other" language – and create tension between the two. English was, however, a rather natural than deliberate choice for Fugard:

> [Athol Fugard] was brought up and educated in an English-speaking environment, and chose to write in English – or, more accurately, in a uniquely South African idiom, which reflects both uncertainty and the potential of his culture by mingling English, Afrikaans and, sometimes, African speech. (Walder 2000: xii)

The frequent use of Afrikaans "*Ja*" by both characters helps to maintain the presence of the missing other on the stage that is the oppressive racist regime of apartheid (represented by the non-present and unreachable Ethel Lange). The

occasional use of words in Afrikaans within the English text helps to emphasize the difference between Morris and Zach and the oppressors. Furthermore, one of the most important expressions in Afrikaans is a vulgarism that abuses black South Africans.

Wilson's characters, too, use quite frequently the counterpart of *swartgat* in American English, the word *nigger*. When uttered by a white American, it has comparably derogatory and racist implications. However, all characters in *Two Trains Running* are African Americans who use the word to call themselves. The pragmatics substantially shifts the meaning of the word from an insult to a denominator. White Americans cannot use the word for reasons of just-being-born political correctness; therefore, African Americans can exploit it to confirm their identity as that of "the others" through its use. The language of the former oppressor has been adopted and the term has moved from a periphery to the center of the vocabulary of African Americans.

The role of the s-word in *Blood Knot* differs from that of the n-word in *Two Trains Running*. While they both serve as signifiers of identity, in the former they create the identity of oppression and in the latter of unity. The s-word is harmful in *Blood Knot*:

> Morris (*with brutality and coarseness*). Hey, *swartgat*!
> (*An immediate reaction from Zachariah. His head whips round. He stares at Morris in disbelief. Morris replies with a weak little laugh, which soon dies on his lips.*)
> Just a joke! (*Softly*) I didn't mean it, Zach. Don't look at me like that! (*A step to Zachariah, who backs away*) […] (Fugard 2000: 106)

The word is an illocutionary act of racial violence, because its use is reserved for whites. In the apartheid regime, the word is an insult and when it is uttered, it is meant as an insult and also it is understood as such by both parties. There is no possibility for the s-word to become a denominator like the n-word in the United States, because its derogative meaning and use is still effective.

The common use of the n-word in *Two Trains Running* works as a unifying factor for the African American community, because it is no longer acceptable for white Americans to use it. An utterance of the word would have similar illocutionary force, but the play's plot takes place in the society that does not accept racism as a norm. The shift of meaning of the insult therefore illustrates on the linguistic level the difference in the criticisms of the two plays and how they, each through the use of similar means, "bear witness" to different cultural environments. It is, however, important to note that *Two Trains Running* does not idealize the relationship between American whites and African Americans. It quite clearly shows the pains of the process of gaining racial equality in the 1960s America (e.g. rallies commemorating M. L. King and Malcolm X are among the play's motifs). But from the perspective of the appropriation of a derogatory name, it is a sign that the excluded minority has gained enough confidence to identify themselves

by the expression formerly used by the oppressor. Such step is unimaginable in the context of the apartheid-afflicted black ghetto in *Blood Knot*.

Afrikaans, the language of the oppressor with its harmful expression, still keeping its oppressive racist meaning, is spoken in the park – a place that is inaccessible for coloureds. It becomes the spatial expression of the other with a similar symbolic value as Ethel Lange's picture and a white man's speech imitated by Morris. But the two brothers do not dream about racial equality and do not try to find ways to penetrate into the white man's space. They dream about a place that would be exclusively their own: "The thing now is to find the right place," Morris contemplates in scene one. He further describes their common wish: "It is going to be a small two-man farm, just big enough for me and you" (Fugard 2000: 59). But then the chance of becoming pen-pals with Ethel Lange changes the brothers' desire – they spend all their money on an unsuccessful attempt to "pass" Morris as white to be able to meet her. The short possibility of equality shatters the plans about the farm.

The territorial issue plays a crucial role in the play:

> Just as the brothers have not surmised from her name and address that she is white, so she, living in Oudtshoorn and unfamiliar with Port Elizabeth geography, has not recognized Korsten as a coloured area or Pietersen as a relatively common coloured name. These misunderstandings enable Fugard rather brilliantly and incisively to present and explore both the comedy and tragedy of errors possible in the given situation. (Wertheim 2000: 24)

The location enforces the sense of blackness and emphasizes the racial differences. Not only is Korsten a black area, it is also an exploited piece of land, "a black slum near 'the big motor assembly and rubber factories'. […] Marginalized people live in the marginalized zone" (Sarinjeive 2001: 136). Together with the lack of money, the probability of ever leaving the black township is minimal.

The pauperization of the oppressed group and its confinement in an enclosed space is one of the effective tools of colonization and a post-colonial routine: "The physical occupation and control of space have been crucial to British imperialism (Ashcroft 2001: 124). The spatial distribution of roles is important for maintaining the oppressor/oppressed relationship. While the oppressor has access to the oppressed's space (e.g. through institutional control – the police, army; or by economic control – employment in factories), entrance in the opposite direction is denied. The difference is visible in Korsten: the brothers are in constant "fear of being overheard" (Orkin 1991: 104) when they talk about Ethel. Although "no agent of the state is even remotely aware of the existence of these brothers or what they struggle to understand in their hut in Korsten" (104), the apartheid regime can effectively control their thoughts by the constant possibility of their presence in the neighbourhood. Therefore, they dream about their farm. If fact, they cannot walk anywhere on their own free will, or at least without the permission of the white oppressors.

The British presence in Northern Ireland has led to a similar division of space based on religious differences. The fragmentation of the country enabled Friel to reflect upon the issue of identity with the land in his work. In his plays, Friel…

> …highlights the problem of living in a community where the majority were denied basic civil rights by an ascendant Protestant minority which, through a variety of political machinations and manoeuvres, conspired to maintain control. Therefore, despite the fact that his family was middle class and economically comfortable, Friel shared with his fellow Catholics a sense of frustration and disinheritance. (Jones 2000: 2)

As the title suggests, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* tells a story about leaving Ireland and coming to America. The plot unfolds in the last day and night preceding Gareth's departure. While Gareth's father S. B. (and therefore nicknamed Screwballs by Gareth) has a strong sense of identity with the land, he cannot see the future there and is determined to leave. Philadelphia is the dream country, the space full of opportunities where he can make money and live a successful life that is not awaiting him in native Ballybeg. He affirms this decision in a dialogue between his private and public selves:

> Private. You are fully conscious of all the consequences of your decision?
> Public. Yessir.
> Private. Of leaving the country of your birth, the land of the curlew and the snipe, the Aran sweater and the Irish Sweepstakes?
> Public (*with fitting hesitation*) I-I-I-I have considered all these, Sir. (Friel 1996: 32)

Gareth's desire for the other place in America is strong enough that he accepts the idea that he is leaving Ireland with a one-way ticket. In the determination, the effects of post-colonialism are to be seen: the Empire has uprooted the country so much that it has nothing to offer to the young generation that rather chooses to leave than to stay.

The motif of the control of space in *Two Trains Running* casts yet another angle of light on the issue of space appropriation. The play is set in the black neighbourhood of Pittsburgh. However, Mayor's office has decided to renovate the blocks and offers to buy them from the owners. Memphis owns the house in which he runs a restaurant. He does not want to sell the property for less than $25,000. It may seem that he is a lucky owner of a space of his own, but the house is only a result of a former loss of property. Memphis' story well illustrates the change in the approach to African Americans in the USA during the twentieth century as well as the difference between the South and the North. He used to own a farm in Jackson, but he was driven out by local whites in the 1930s. They "cut [his] mule's belly out," (Wilson 1993: 72) and "set fire to [his] crop" (73). Thirty years later, he is ready to go back there and get his land back.

The play pictures the desired space as a dreamland of the past that is still waiting for the rightful owner to return. The story is an open criticism of the Southern racism of the pre-war era and points at the change in the situation of African Americans in the 1960s and how their presence in the North (a space that is not connected with the slave-labour in the fields and therefore lacks the memory of the master/slave relationship) contributes to the minority's emancipation. However, the desired space represents the farm in the South – for Memphis, it is accessible with the money he gets from (majority) authorities for his house in the racially defined neighbourhood of Pittsburgh. Unlike the brothers in *Blood Knot*, for Memphis there is a way out from the ghetto. In all three plays, the characters' wish is to leave the space where they currently reside. Zach and Morris' impossibility to do so becomes even more evident when compared to Gareth's and Memphis' future opportunities. The impossibility and improbability that Zach and Morris will leave Korsten, the vain desire for Ethel's love and the power of the language of the oppressive "other" show that the play's unspoken criticism of apartheid in South Africa is indeed very strong and radical. *Blood Knot* "bears witness" to the oppression and cries with a loud voice, which resonates even louder in comparison with *Two Trains Running* and *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*.

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