

From the Private Submissive Sphere to Public Intellectual Resistance: American Female Playwrights' Contributions to Dramaturgy and Feminism

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Received: 12 Jun. 2022, Revised: 12 Aug. 2022, Accepted: 21 Sep. 2022.

Published online: 1 Feb. 2023.

Abstract: This article joins a vibrant conversation in American literary studies about the contribution of female playwrights to dramaturgy as well as the feminist movement in the early twentieth century. In addition to assessing their contribution to American drama, the article extends the discussion to study how these female dramatists reflected the status of women in contemporary societies. We argue that the selected works of Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916) and *Bernice* (1917), Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), and Rachel Crothers' *A Man's World* (1910) reveal a process, a transformation, a theatrical presentation of the development of female awareness about the self, the masculine, and the community. The analysis of these plays reveals recurrent patterns of resistance and recreation that witness the development and advancement of American feminism into three stages – namely, resisting masculine exclusionist ideologies through instinctual, unintellectual means, recreating and maneuvering self-actualization while compromising agency, and adopting social activism to expose the private oppression of women. The analysis of these plays shows that these patterns are not just recurrent and repetitive; it also shows the response to these patterns as productively evolving. These examples of drama show the progress of American theater in general and connect the discussion to larger cultural perspectives about American feminism.

Keywords: Female, American, Dramatists, resisting, social exclusion.

1. Introduction

Before the twentieth century, commercially successful female playwrights were a rarity. Unless they had strong personal connections to secure financial support, works by female playwrights would remain unproduced. Before the twentieth century, social strictures limited how women could participate in the public domain. The advent of the twentieth century, however, coincided with movements in social reform, resulting in greater representation of female playwrights on the stage (Sullivan, 1973). Not coincidentally, female dramatists, newly empowered, used the venue for self and gender expression, demonstrating what being a woman meant to them at that time. Many of the plays responded to social exclusion and the oppression of women while portraying their pursuit of the new avenues and opportunities becoming available to women. Feminist themes dominate these plays, their focus being to highlight the impact of inequality in a patriarchal society.

This paper aims to assess the contribution of American female dramatists to theatre and the effect their contribution has had on the role and status of women in contemporary society. To accomplish this, the paper examines the plays of three American female dramatists: Susan Glaspell, Lorraine Hansberry and Rachel Crothers. The selected plays cover the period from 1910 -1959 and reveal the development of the US theatre as well as the evolution of feminine identity during this period. These female dramatists made statements about the role and status of women in society, about American dramaturgy, and the course of feminism. The plays selected for discussion in this paper suggest that these female playwrights were highly aware of the challenges that women went through and their struggles toward a better life in both public and private spheres.

In 1915, Susan Glaspell became the founder of the first modern American theatre company, known as the Provincetown Players (Sarlós, 1984). According to Gassner (1967), the Provincetown Players group significantly influenced subsequent trends in US theatre. Distinguished as a playwright with an undeniable “American quality” (Waterman, 1964), Glaspell associated the spirit of independence with the cultural history of her nation. That is why her plays feature the individual's pursuit of freedom as a central theme.

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According to Carpentier (2008), Glaspell's one-act play *Trifles* (1916) is considered by many critics as one of the greatest works of American theatre. In reference to this play, Wright (2002) argues that Glaspell condemns both social and cultural isolation of the female, especially as these limits are imposed through marriage. Wright suggests that Glaspell's characters reflect the grieved lives of females in the real world which are further subdued by the male-dominated legal system that administers and executes male supremacy. In *Trifles*, Wright explains, Glaspell unmasks the psychological and physical rage of the oppressed female to expose the centuries-old prejudice against women in the legal system. In the same vein, Gainor (2008) reveals that in works like *Trifles* and *Woman's Honor* (1918), Glaspell "is similarly calling our attention to laws that draw upon a separate spheres ideology and perpetuate the equation of a woman's reputation with her sexuality" (p.74). What Glaspell represented on the stage directly impacted her audiences. Sander (2006) argues that Glaspell "raises a mirror up to the future that awaits the audience after the play is over" (p. 32). Needless to say, Glaspell's theatrical heritage not only shaped the development of modern drama but also significantly contributed to the feminist movement of early twentieth century America.

The second female dramatist discussed in this study is Lorraine Hansberry, whose dramatic heritage sheds light on the experiences of black American women. Apart from this, Hansberry also dealt with issues associated with nationhood and general race concerns in America while presenting a wider vision of humanity in most of her plays. Some interpret her comprehensive, humanistic view as negatively impacting the strength of her arguments about race. Al-Jarrah (2018) notes how "black feminism and black feminists are attacked by some black self-righteous and conservative thinkers and considered to be drifting away from the general cause of black people" (p. 68). However, Hansberry's 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, is considered a turning point in drama because it was the first play written by an African American woman to ever win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award (NYDCCA) for the best play of the year.

Even though her professional life was brief since she died at the early age of 34, Hansberry made a memorable and significant contribution to US theatre. Hansberry's feminist experiment is clear in her portrayal of typical American personal and social issues. Friedman (1984) explains that Hansberry's works portray the condition of black women who, due to economic disempowerment, are forced to earn a living as domestic labor, often working as maids, performing domestic functions for privileged white women. Oppressed economically, the same black woman is also under the oppression of the black male in her own home because of continuing patriarchal influence. There, she must negotiate with the male's rage resulting from social inequality, racism, and poverty. Friedman's focus on race is significant, but it obscures Hansberry's contributions to feminist expression, and this oversight is typical of criticism of the playwright.

On the other hand, women's issues and suffrage were central to Rachel Crothers, the most prolific among the three playwrights discussed in this study (Mantle, 1941). Crothers' canon, which comprises 23 multi-act plays, and several shorter dramas written between 1899 and 1937, traces the full development of Modernism and projects beyond its bounds. Even though her plays differ in technique and theme, concerns for feminist issues remain a consistent feature. In her study "Empowerment of New Women in Rachel Crothers Selected Plays," Suriakumary (2014) asserts that Crothers portrayed "social forces which shaped women's activities and aspirations" and allowed her audience "to see the arguments about woman's perspective, both her own and those of her characters" (p.66). Suriakumary suggest that Crothers object is to promote freedom for women by exploring how US culture prioritizes satisfying the male ego at the expense of limiting women's choices. Black (2020) points out that the unique elements of Crothers' plays: her realistic settings and structure, as well as her reflections on the challenges brought by modernism. This distinctive approach allowed Crothers to develop stout criticism of contemporary gender roles and sexual double standards. Nevertheless, critical discourses on Crothers focus mainly on the technical aspects of her plays. Those that deal with the thematic side rarely, if ever, refer to her feminist contributions. This paper shows that, although the work is the earliest of those discussed in this study, Crothers' play is the most progressive and the most intellectual in its feminist stance.

2. Analysis of the selected plays

2.1 Susan Glaspell: Instinctual feminist resistance

The theatrical heritage of Glaspell, Hansberry and Crothers made significant contributions to both American drama and culture. Their works helped establish a place for women as playwrights. At the beginning of the twentieth century, American drama was dominated by the desire for verisimilitude in presentation and performance. Female playwrights adopted this trend and applied it to the social and political depiction of issues that were close to their real lives as women. The plays by Glaspell, for instance, show the various aspects of feminine awareness by emphasizing the particular experiences that led to the evolution of accepted ideas of gendered difference in philosophy and practice. Glaspell took advantage of the constraints of free theatre to explore forms such as expressionism and realism which were useful in portraying psychology. As a playwright with a rich imagination, her characters represented distinct points of view about the condition of twentieth-century women. Her 1916 one-act play *Trifles* mainly focuses on

women's frustrations and hints at a potential revolution against social exclusion. The play's setting is in the kitchen of a deserted farmhouse on the plains right after the arrest of Minnie, a wife suspected of killing her husband. The overt premise of the play is solving the mystery of the motive for the crime. The wives of the men performing the formal investigation accompany them to the crime scene, and the action of the play focuses on this group of women. Their conversation consistently demonstrates their sympathies for the accused, creating a gendered split between the male investigators seeking to convict and the female bystanders who feel for their friend. Given that domestic life is central to any female member of the society, and that women form close relationships in the areas they live, the women in this play understand the pain and the stagnant life of Minnie Wright, whose life is defined by her loneliness.

Beyond the natural sympathies the women evince, the male characters emphasize the separation between genders through every interaction, stressing the subordinate relationship of women to men. The women endure the men's disdain while they search the farmhouse for evidence, and this pushes the waiting wives toward even greater sympathy for what Minnie endured in her own marriage where her voice was silenced by her husband. After reflecting on these humiliations, both Mrs. Peter and Mrs. Hale decide to support Minnie, and they hide the clue that exposes Minnie's motive. Isaac Goldberg (1922), Glaspell's contemporary critic and publisher, praises Glaspell's *Trifles* by stating that "there is more than rebellious womanhood in these dramas; there is consciousness of valid self, or of a passion for freedom, of dynamic personality; there is craving for life in its innermost meaning" (p. 475). Glaspell's descriptions of Minnie before and after her marriage are crucial for understanding how marriage is seen as a masculine tool for social exclusion. In the play, Mrs. Hale shares her memories of Minnie with Mrs. Peters, recalling how Minnie

used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir. But that—oh, that was thirty years ago [...] I wish you'd seen Minnie Foster when she wore a white dress with blue ribbons and stood up there in the choir and sang (Glaspell, 1989, pp. 402-5).

These accounts and descriptions are used to highlight the changes women experience after their marriage. Glaspell contrasts the stories of Minnie's youth by developing stark *mise-en-scène* to show the present. The play takes place in a "gloomy" setting in an "abandoned farmhouse" (Glaspell, 1989, p. 399). As actions progress, Glaspell leaves it to her audience to imagine how Mr. Wright's domination and denial of self-identity for his wife has transformed that lively and pretty girl into a seclusive woman who eventually felt justified in revolting against his authority and murdering him. Throughout the play, the audience never has a chance to see Mrs. Wright. We are told about her through the conversations of the other female characters. This dramatic technique heightens the audience perception of women's marginalization and invisibility at the time when the play was staged. The message is that this ghostly figure, denied personhood, finding no other means of expression available, is forced to enact a violent, unintellectual, and physical response to resolve her oppression.

Glaspell demonstrated a similar device, featuring violence as a political and social statement available to women in a second play, her *Bernice* (1917). The play builds on relevant issues and feminist perspectives introduced in *Trifles*. *Bernice* is a play that shows a female character who is smartly aware of and shrewdly responsive to her wayward husband's possessiveness, regardless of his unfaithfulness. The woman manages to change her looks to retain her autonomy as long as she gives her husband, Craig, the false impression that he owns her. Just like in *Trifles*, the central female character is invisible because she never appears on the stage, yet the audience's attention remains consistently focused on the internal conflict of the oppressed woman. The drama begins after Bernice's death; however, Glaspell orchestrates the events surrounding Bernice's death so that she is the center of the play. Even though Bernice's death was natural, she manages to convey to Craig that she killed herself.

The character of Bernice represents the keen self-consciousness of a woman. This is significant for Glaspell to achieve her goal, to depict the relationship of husband and wife as one that is based on power. In the play, Bernice resists the stereotypical gender role as a devoted housewife. Indeed, Craig has a strong desire to fully control her as a housewife so that he could create from her an image of devotion to him. Bernice is clearly aware of the strength that her husband gains from the illusion of possessing her.

Gainor (2003) argues that the play "demonstrates how the ideological pressure to conform to specific gender and social rules comes not only through men but also through women who have internalized patriarchal views" (p. 103). This internalization of traditional gender roles is expressed through Laura, Craig's sister. She explains: "He's a man. He does want to affect – yes, dominate the woman he loves. And if Bernice didn't give him that feeling of..." (Glaspell, 1997, p. 187). Another character finishes Laura's sentence, suggesting the word she is looking for is "supremacy." Since desirability is connected to remaining distanced, Bernice knows death will only enhance how desirable she will become when she is literally unreachable. On the other hand, her husband's belief that she has sacrificed her life for him makes him certain of her devotion to her own subordinate role. Just like Minnie in *Trifles*, Bernice revolts, in her own way, against man's domination and injustice. Bernice's revolution is through creating the illusion for her husband and society that she enjoyed a happy life while she was submissive to her husband. The revelation of the truth was shocking for

people around her. Margaret, Bernice's friend, expresses her surprise when she discovers that Bernice's life was completely different from what was apparent to her. Margaret addresses Abbie the servant:

You are telling me her life was *hate*? [*Stops, half turns to the room where Craig is with Bernice.*] You are telling me she covered hate with—with the beauty that was like nothing else? Abbie! *You* are telling me that as Bernice left life she *held out her hands* and asked you to take *this* back for her? (Glaspell, 1997, p. 206)

While Margaret is disillusioned, Craig remains convinced of the reality of the front Bernice created, and this presents a point of ambiguity in the play. Lewisohn (1922) upholds that as Bernice died, she wanted to make real what she only pretended, giving her husband Craig proof of his power in their relationship. Lewisohn, however, fails to recognize the power that Bernice gained when she created the deception. Through the deception, Bernice continues to control Craig's affections and creates the self-directed existence which she was constantly denied by her husband. It is therefore important to note that through the play *Bernice*, Glaspell was able to create a woman who was conscious of what her partner expected from her and who also used her thoughts to develop alternatives for her circumstances. Knowing what her partner expected from her, Bernice used her wits to develop a substitute for the harsh reality she found herself in. Bernice did not take her own life for her husband; she created an illusion for her husband which expressed her own agency, allowing her to avoid submitting to her psychological oppressor.

2.2 Lorraine Hansberry: *Compromising intellectual resistance*

Lorraine Hansberry crafts drama about African American family life. The family in *A Raisin in the Sun* is anxious to leave their old home in Chicago's Southside and move to a better house. Hansberry portrays Mama as both a traditional and dynamic woman. Mama, the woman of the house, enters conflict with her son about how to achieve a better life for their family. Hansberry brings in the plot device of a \$10,000 insurance policy that Mama gets when her husband dies. Expressing a traditional vantage for women, Mama prioritizes the home as the place to invest this money; she desires to purchase property that removes her family from the disadvantages of the ghetto they live in. Apart from the property, she also wants to save part of the money for her daughter's education as a doctor of medicine.

Walter opposes his mother in these choices. He advocates for investing the money into a business. He is compelled by his dissatisfaction of working for low pay as a driver for well-to-do white people and the disappointing feeling of being unable to support his family. At the beginning of the play, Walter reprimands black women for not helping build their men and leaving them feeling helpless. The reason he says this is because of his experience of black women often influencing family decisions, and to him, this was an insult to manhood and masculinity. However, Hansberry's play discards the ideas Walter introduces and the belief that emasculation was a major cause of economic and social inferiority. She does this by showing the actual causes of African American frustrations which include economic exploitation and race prejudice.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry demonstrates the developing awareness in black American females respective to the self, the masculine, and the community. Her play helps dismantle stereotypical conceptions about the black woman as dominant or masculine. Mama is Hansberry's primary tool for illustrating this purpose. As a representative black female, Mama crafts a unique and sophisticated role for herself in relation to her family. She creates the illusion that her son Walter is the one who is in charge of managing family affairs while, in reality, she is the one who provides him authority; she does this specifically to protect him against emasculation. Although this shows Mama to have intellectually developed interpersonal skills and experience, she finds herself having to sacrifice her personal aspirations as an independent woman for the sake of her child. Superficially, Mama serves as the head of the household, connecting her with what would traditionally be viewed as masculine authority, but her method of practicing this power is far from authoritarian; it is dependent on her understanding of her complex roles as a woman. As the actions in the play progress, it becomes clear that Mama has no private aspirations or dreams of her own; rather, her entire life revolves around her children. Her decision to move out of the black neighborhood and buy a better house in a white neighborhood stems from her desire to improve her family's chances of a better future. Mama narrates to Ruth, Walter's wife, how her dream of a new house was hard for them: "But Lord, child, you should know all the dreams I had 'bout buying that house and fixing it up and making me a little garden in the back—(She waits and stops smiling) and didn't none of it happen" (Hansberry, 1994, p. 45).

In the play, the conflict revolves around the dispute about what to do with the \$10,000 windfall. In opposition to Mama, Walter wants to start his own business in a liquor store. Walter's fantasies about a better life are reflected in a conversation with his son, Travis. Walter dreams of being a successful businessman who spends his time in meetings and travels:

I'll come home and I'll be pretty tired, you know what I mean, after a day of conferences and secretaries getting things wrong the way they do... 'cause an executive's life is hell, man— (The more he talks the farther away he gets) And I'll pull the car up on the driveway... And I'll come up the steps to the house and the gardener will [...] say, "Good

Hansberry makes it clear that Mama’s position against Walter is informed entirely by her experience as a black woman. Although the death of her husband gave her more dominance and say in her family’s life matters, Mama becomes less stubborn and more selfless as action progresses in the play. The audience is introduced to the real Mama who endured countless hardships from racial discrimination by whites to gender discrimination and abuse by black males, not to mention the tragic death of her baby and husband.

The strong and wise mother cultivates a state of self-denial as she decides to give the younger generation some chance to draw their own path in life. Mama expresses her feminine agency as she finally abdicates her position as the head of the household and hands over the remaining \$6500 to Walter to start his liquor business:

Mama: I've helped do it to you, haven't I, son? Walter

I been wrong.

Walter: Naw you ain't never been wrong about nothing, Mama.

Mama: Listen to me, now. I say I been wrong, son. That

I been doing to you what the rest of the world been
doing to you [...] What you ain't never understood is that

I ain't got nothing, don't own nothing, ain't never really
wanted nothing that wasn't for you. There ain't nothing
as precious to me . . . There ain't nothing worth holding

on to, money, dreams, nothing else if it means if it

means it's going to destroy my boy [...] I paid

the man thirty-five hundred dollars down on the house.

That leaves sixty-five hundred dollars. Monday morning

I want you to take this money and take three thousand dollars and put it in a savings account for Beneatha's medical schooling. The rest you put in a checking account with your name on it [...] It ain't much, but it's all I got in the world and I'm putting it in your hands. I'm telling you to be the head of this family from now on like you supposed to be.

Walter: (Stares at the money) You trust me like that. Mama?

Mama: I ain't never stop trusting you. Like I ain't never stop loving you. (Hansberry, 1994, p. 106-7)

Hansberry’s portrayal of the progress of the black female’s self is unique. She presents the strong mother who is proud of her black heritage on the one hand and the unselfish mother who prioritizes her children’s decisions and plans on the other hand. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Mama undergoes a transformation of identity as she, even while not convinced, puts “all [she] got in the world” in her son’s hands. By this subordinating her own will to that of her family, she brings to the fore the hope and aspirations of a new generation. While making a concession to empower her son, Mama’s insistence on Walter keeping part of the money to finance Beneatha's medical education sheds light on her practical awareness of the importance of also empowering young and ambitious girls like Beneatha. Hansberry’s message is loud and clear here that the black American woman sacrificed everything, including her sense of self, for the sake of improving the black cause. Like Glaspell’s title character in *Bernice*, Mama creates the illusion of agency for others through her conscious choice and design. In the case of Mama, this impulse is a truly generous and noble, one derived from the pressures of racial inequality and the effects they have on gendered identity in the US.

2.3 Rachel Crothers: Uncompromising intellectual resistance

In contrast to Susan Glaspell’s female protagonists, characters in Crother's “A Man’s World” never kill themselves or their husbands, and neither do they go beyond the limits of their cause. Instead, they undergo intense conflicts which eventually lead to new, modified gender roles. Crothers portrays conflicts developing from double standards. Her play also raises awareness of the impact financial autonomy for women had on their gender roles, identities, and desires. Gottlieb (1975) describes Crothers illustrating different ideas about the evolution of women and the myriad barriers to “feminist practice.” She points to Crothers exploring the impact of choice for women able to select between traditional “feminine” goals and newly available “feminist” ones. Gottlieb portrays the new woman as a strong, smart, professional who is economically independent. The conflict in “A Man’s World” is that this strong, smart woman loves a man who,

even though he understands her desire to change her traditional role, cannot change his own life to suit her. According to Gottlieb's observation, one of the new woman's decisions was to either deny love or put a stop to her desire for the emotional support of men. In Crothers' subsequent plays, the woman gains more awareness of limits brought about by her position and thus she learns to resolve conflicts by changing herself rather than attempting to change the male character, but this resolution undercuts the strength of her feminist statement in "A Man's World."

The play is set in the early twentieth century in New York and follows the life of a young woman, Frank Ware, who works as a writer and struggles to find room in "a man's world" while taking care of an adopted child. Her novels portray the poverty and bitter conditions of poor women living in the Lower East Side of New York. These women live through the burdens of unplanned pregnancies and resort to prostitution as their only alternative for income. In the play, Frank lives a life free of patriarchal expectations. Through the challenges Frank faces, Crothers exposes the double standards commonly employed towards women in the early twentieth century. Crothers brings to the surface the traditional masculine preconceptions about women that, as the weaker sex, they cannot be the equal of men. This perception is expressed by characters like Gaskell who, in a conversation with Frank declares that "Women are only meant to be loved—and men have got to take care of them. That's the whole business. You'll acknowledge it someday—when you do—love somebody" (Crothers, 1915, p. 43). Crothers uses Frank's character to confront contemporary patriarchal views towards women who are always expected to be tame, virtuous and dependent on males. The play closes with Frank dedicating her life to social activism, helping abandoned single mothers and orphans.

Early in the play we are told how Frank enters parenthood on her own terms, setting the stage for her revolt against expectations. While in France, Frank became friends with a teenage girl who had become pregnant by a man who abandoned her. This girl later died while delivering her child, Kiddie. After Frank's father passed away, Frank decided to adopt the child, taking her back home to America. This choice in the past forecasts how Frank will treat the play's central dramatic question: what choice will Frank make when she must choose between her lover and her independence? Crothers illustrates her character's struggle against an ideology based on double-standards, armed with feminist perspectives that conflict with traditional ideals of femininity. Staging these ideas shows the different forces that influence and shape a woman's identity, values, and aspirations.

Little Kiddie changed the way Frank looked at life, connecting Crothers' character to relatable ideas of motherhood, a major aspect of contemporary cultural views on femininity. In a conversation with her friend, Fritz, Frank explains "somehow that poor, little, helpless baby was the greatest comfort in the world to me [...] I don't know who his father was I don't care who he was—but my name is better for the boy than his—for mine is honest" (Crothers, 1915, p. 35). In fact, Kiddie became a symbol of the female suffering according to Frank: "its Kiddie—Kiddie I am living for. Everything I believe about men and women has been so intensified by him that he has become a sort of symbol to me of what women suffer through men—and he's given me a purpose—something to do" (Crothers, 1915, p. 36). It is this event in Frank's life that helped her understand the complexity of the female's situation in American society, but practically, it puts Frank into an extraordinarily sympathetic relationship with the audience, relying on traditional views of women, children, and continuity in society.

Similarly, the double-standards that Crothers wants to explore put Frank in the position of moral reformer, another recognizable role for women in her contemporary world. In the play, Frank reprimanded her suitor, Gaskell, for not thinking about the effects of his sexual relationships. Frank is so angry about this, especially after seeing her friend bear the consequences of such relations alone, dying during childbirth. Through her writing and social welfare activities, Frank struggles to make the female's private and personal injustices matters of public concern. She invites her friends, like Clara, to join her efforts to establish a club for former prostitutes in an attempt to trigger a social reformation that helps these abandoned young women to have a fresh start. She addresses Clara:

Come and help me in some of the things I'm trying to do for girls. I'd like to have you teach drawing and modeling in this new club we're opening [...] Would you be willing to live there? To be one of the women in charge—and help the girls in a personal way? (Crothers, 1915, p. 87)

By engaging more people in her activism, Frank succeeds in making previously hidden issues a matter of public opinion. In the course of doing that she gives herself a platform as a mother of needy girls and a social housekeeper. By casting her social and political acts as fulfilling the role of a mother to needy girls outside her home, Frank can advocate in the public sphere and makes these girls' grievances a public concern (Sutherland, 1978).

Frank moves from the private to the public not only through social welfare activities but through her sociological novels that are taken from the lives and stories of real people. A newspaper article reads:

The "Beaten Path" by Frank received positive reviews from readers and critics as it is considered the strongest thing that Frank Ware has ever done. Her first work attracted wide attention when we tho't Frank Ware was a man, but now that we know she is a woman we are more than ever impressed by the strength and scope of her work. She has laid her

scenes this time on the East side in the wretched poverty of the tenement houses, and the marvel is that any woman could see and know so much and depict crime and degradation so boldly. Her great cry is for women—to make them better by making them freer. It is decidedly the most striking book of the year (Crothers, 1915, p. 12-13).

Through Frank's characters, Crothers not only shows the consequences of these social problems on the home, but she has moved a step further and introduced a determined and rebellious feminist character who makes the traditionally ignored and hidden issues subjects for public discussion. In addition, Crothers manages to avoid the stereotypical characterization of the early twentieth-century American woman and presents female characters who fight the unfairness of inequality. Frank's intellectual skills and her social activism not only protect her from compromising her feminist ideals, but also provide a constructive path that rejects violent physical responses as the answer to oppression. In the play, Frank even gives up her union with the man she loves because he opposes her challenges, confirming her sense that indeed this is "A Man's World".

3. Conclusion

When reviewing literature by Glaspell, Hansberry, and Crothers, their work must be considered in terms of the intrinsic meaning of the narratives, but it is also important to recognize how their work pertains to social, political, and cultural contexts. These authors from the early twentieth century reflect realities for women of that time, teaching us about their own lives as well as American feminism. Reading the works of these female playwrights as a group gives new understandings for the first-wave feminist movement in the US. Showalter (1991) confirms this by suggesting that when the works of American female writers are collectively addressed, we can diagnose a creative continuum seen through the repetition of patterns, problems, images and themes relevant to the early twentieth century American feminist movement. However, this study showed that feminism during this time period oscillated between what we call an instinctual unintellectual stage and a highly progressive and intellectual stage. In-between, there is an intellectual stage that offers a compromising type of resistance. Glaspell's work illustrates the instinctual, unintellectual response, more of a warning for its audiences than a solution. Hansberry shows the compromise position, one where the impediments of race complicate those of gender, leaving real success unavailable. This leaves Crothers to demonstrate the most constructive application of feminist ideals to actually alleviate inequality.

On the surface, the three dramatists studied in this article portray dissimilar issues; however, each forwards fresh ideas about contexts of gender inequality, and therefore each sheds light on the subject of the historical development of American feminism. Conflict between sexes is represented through physical and psychological means through Glaspell's plays. Minnie Wright, the female protagonist in Glaspell's *Trifles*, decided to take her husband's life when she felt that her life's potential was undermined by a man who constantly controlled her. This conflict between the two sexes is also seen in Glaspell's play, *Bernice*. Being conscious of what her partner expected from her, Bernice used her mind to develop a substitute for the harsh reality she found herself in. She created an illusion for her husband which in the long run prevented her from submitting to her psychological oppressor. In the end, she accomplished this without even alerting her oppressor to her machinations.

Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* highlights the transformation of the black female's self through Mama's character who eventually abandons her role as head of the household to pave the way for the younger generations to progress and reach their potential. Including Hansberry's dramaturgy in this study showed that African American feminist theatre could be integrated and allocated within the larger domain of American feminist drama. As Al-Jarrah (2018) asserted, black feminists are often not given their due because of the fervor of critics for addressing racial issues first and feminist problems second. This study shows that Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* portrays African American concerns within the wider American social context rather than distinctive African American concerns that are irrelevant to American social life. Mama transfigures her autonomous existence and consciously becomes a selfless opportunity provider, offering agency to her children in multiple ways. This act of productivity and self-denial presents a unique feminist pattern demonstrating how black American females figure in racial causes more than isolating their own struggle as something separate.

Finally, *A Man's World* portrayed a woman who did not compromise her values and beliefs and acted on impulse. Aware of social inequalities, Frank brings voice to private injustices, challenges them, and offers them to the public for judgment. She even gives up her union with the man she loves simply because he opposes her challenge. Even though the theme of subordination has been repeated in most of the plays, they take different forms with regard to the playwright's concern with social and cultural injustices.

Conflict of interest:

The authors declare that there is no conflict regarding the publication of this paper.

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