



Absurdity and Freedom in Contemporary American Drama: A Philosophical Study of *Clybourne Park* by Bruce Norris

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العبث والحرية في الدراما الأمريكية المعاصرة: دراسة فلسفية لمسرحية

"كلايبرن بارك" بقلم بروس نوريس

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المحتوى

تقدم هذه الدراسة تحليلاً فلسفياً لمسرحية بروس نوريس الأمريكية المعاصرة "كلايبرن بارك" (٢٠١٠)، مع التركيز على مواضيع العبثية والحرية الوجودية والمسؤولية الأخلاقية. تدور أحداث المسرحية في شيكاغو على مدى فترتين زمنيتين - ١٩٥٩ و ٢٠٠٩ - وتستكشف التوترات العرقية، والتحديث الحضري، والمعضلات الأخلاقية داخل المجتمع. وبينما ركزت الدراسات السابقة على الأبعاد الاجتماعية والتاريخية للمسرحية، يُبرز هذا البحث أهميتها الفلسفية من خلال تطبيق الأطر الوجودية والعبثية، إلى جانب النظرية الأخلاقية. ومن خلال دراسة متعمقة للشخصيات والحوارات والصراعات الاجتماعية، تبحث الدراسة في كيفية تعامل الأفراد مع الضغوط المجتمعية، واتخاذهم خيارات أخلاقية، ومواجهة عبثية البنى الاجتماعية المتأصلة. وتشير النتائج إلى أن "كلايبرن بارك" لا تنتقد المعايير الاجتماعية فحسب، بل تتفاعل بعمق أيضاً مع أسئلة جوهرية حول الوجود الإنساني والحرية والمسؤولية الأخلاقية، مقدمة تقاطعاً فريداً بين المسرح الأمريكي المعاصر والبحث الفلسفي.

Abstract

This paper is a philosophical examination of a modern American play Clybourne Park (2010) by Bruce Norris with such themes as absurdity, existential freedom, and moral duty. The play was written in Chicago and takes place in two time frames- 1959 and 2009- to show the issues of racial conflicts, gentrification and ethical dilemmas in a community. Although the main focus of the previous scholarship has been on the social and the historical aspects of the play, the current research emphasizes the philosophical importance of the play by referring to the existentialist and absurdist theories, and also to the ethical theory. By focusing on close reading characters, dialogues, and social conflict, the research explores how people find their way through the social pressure, make morally responsible decisions, and face the absurdity of the societal status quo. The results



indicate that not only the social norms are important in Clybourne Park, but the fundamental questions of human existence, freedom, and moral responsibility are also brought into the play, making it a unique nexus of modern American theatre and philosophy.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Theoretical Framework

1.1 Background and Rationale

The 21st century American theatre has been more subject to reflection on the intricate social, political, moral predicaments of the modern world. Racial tension, economic disparity, urban gentrification and identity warfare are among some major themes in the majority of recent plays. Such works do not only entertain, but they also give the opportunity to think about ethical responsibility, freedom and human existence in a changing social environment.

A good example of this trend is Bruce Norris's *Clybourne Park* (2010) [1]. The play is a study of racial and social interplay of the neighborhood in Chicago in two acts separated by fifty years of time, that is, 1959 and 2009. The first act shows the sale of a house to a black family and reveals just how racially biased the era was, whereas the second one revisits the same neighborhood in the modern times, and reveals the concept of gentrification, cultural conflicts, and social tensions. The play explores the existence of human prejudices as well as the development of social standards through its plot.

Although *Clybourne Park* [1] has been scrutinized in the light of its social, historical, and theatrical facets, it is still not explored philosophically. In particular, the play raises such serious questions as the meaning of human life, the sense of moral duty, and the wrongs in social order. Analyzing the play in terms of philosophy, this paper intends to find out the underlying ethical and existential issues that Norris brings up, how the modern theatre is a reflection of philosophy.

1.2 Research Objectives

The aims of the current study are designed in such a way that they combine literary criticism and philosophical study:

In order to examine philosophical aspects of *Clybourne Park* [1] to explore themes of absurdity, freedom and moral responsibility.

By targeting the aforementioned goals, the study will help understand that *Clybourne Park* is not just a critique of racial and social problems but a great work of philosophy that questions human condition.

1.3 Research Questions

In order to frame this question, the following research questions are designed:



What does *Clybourne Park* say about existential issues and the meaninglessness of human social life?

How are the characters in ethical dilemmas? How do their ethical dilemmas raise larger philosophical issues of freedom and responsibility?

What are some of the ways the play defies traditional conceptions of morality, social order, and agency of the individual in a community context?

These questions are meant to make the play not merely a theatre production but a philosophical work that is going to explore some of the most basic questions of human existence.

1.4 Philosophical Framework

In order to make a comprehensive philosophical examination of *Clybourne Park* [1], three major structures are used:

1.4.1 Existentialism

Existentialism as postulated by **Jean-Paul Sartre** [2] reflects on individual freedom, choice and personal responsibility. As per existentialist ideology, human beings are condemned to freedom meaning that all their actions are a choice and each choice is subject to accountability of the effects. When assessing the true aspects of existentialism in the reality of *Clybourne Park*, the characters are depicted as conflicted between their desires as individuals, and their expectations as members of society.

To illustrate, in the first act, the dialogue between Karl Lindner and the homeowners shows an obvious existential conflict: Karl indirectly discourages the sale of the house to the black family following the norms of the society, whereas the characters are confronted with the ethical dilemma, whether to act according to or to rebel against their forces. This conversation shows that Sartre believes in *bad faith*—the denial of true moral freedom in order to conform to social norms instead of doing what one believes is ethical in their view.

1.4.2 Absurdism

Albert Camus [3] defines absurdism as the struggle between human desire to find meaning and the indifferent universe. The characters in *Clybourne Park* reflect this absurd condition: they seek rationality within irrational social conventions. Their moral decisions highlight the futility and humor of human attempts to impose meaning on chaotic social realities.

1.4.3 Ethical Responsibility

The moral relations in *Clybourne Park* revolve around moral responsibility. Using the principles of **Kantian ethics** [4], people have moral responsibility to act on the basis of universal principles, without getting influenced by personal or



social pressures. Also, **Emmanuel Levinas** [5] focuses on relational ethics according to which responsibility towards the Other is central. The two frameworks shed light on ethical dilemmas that Norris raises.

In Act 1, the owners of the house are confronted with a decision to either conform to segregation standards or to do the right thing and sell the house to the black family. The decisions they make balance personal convenience and ethical standards, underlining the ambiguity of moral responsibility.

This is the example of Levinasian ethics: moral responsibility is not absolute but a relationship between individuals, and one should make decisions with others in mind instead of personal gain. Ethical responsibility is always presented as a compromise between individual morality, social demand, and history, which is why the play is an excellent piece to study in the context of philosophy.

1.5 Significance of the Study

Novelty of Perspective: Despite the extensive intellectual study of *Clybourne Park* [1] in terms of social and historical dimensions, limited research has been done on the philosophical aspects of this story and their relation to existentialism [2] and absurdism [3].

Synthesis of Disciplines: With the help of integrating literary analysis with philosophical inquiry, the paper shows that modern theatre can be used as a means of discussing the ethical, moral, and existential questions.

Cultural and Academic Significance: The study offers understanding of the representation and critique of contemporary societal constructs through the medium of theatre and contributes to the larger debate of American theatre, philosophy, and cultural studies.

Pedagogical Value: Philosophical criticism of modern plays may add to the teaching methods in literature and theater studies, and it may motivate students to look deeper than the surface storylines of the texts they read.

Chapter 2: Analysis of *Clybourne Park*

2.1 Plot Overview and Context

Clybourne Park [1] is designed in two acts, fifty years apart in one Chicago district, which emphasizes social change as well as continuity **1 (1959):** The play begins when the black family of Youngers buys the house of Karl Lindner and his wife Bev. The racial prejudices are expressed implicitly and explicitly by the neighbors, and, primarily, the white population. The issues of ownership, belonging and the fear of social change are the conflicts of ownership. This act explores the deeds of men in relation to the societal conventions and



racial compulsions and focuses more on ethical dilemmas, where moral decision collides with the expectation of the community.

Act 2 (2009):

The second act goes back to the same neighborhood, which is already gentrified, and new white residents have their plans to renovate the place. Characters are faced with clash of cultures, history and past unresolved tensions. The act shows how social relations continue, but the problems of human uncertainty and insignificance stay the same, exhibiting the existential conflict between personal and social agency.

This timeline is what enables Norris [1] to use continuity in human prejudice and moral ambiguity, in the sense that it points out the responsibility of morality and the absurdity of social conventions.

2.2 Character Analysis through a Philosophical Lens

2.2.1 Albert and Bev Lindner / Steve and Lindsey (Act 1 & 2)

Symbolize social standards and the conflict between individual ethics and the bias of the group.

Existential Analysis: They demonstrate Sartre's [2] concept of *bad faith*, in which people refuse to be truly responsible by acting according to the societal norms of morality.

Absurdism: They face a challenge of personal wishes toward harmony and societal prejudices that are irrational and show the futility of reaching actual ethical consistency.

2.2.2 Karl Lindner (Act 1)

The voice of social rationalization on the exclusion of races.

Ethical Responsibility: His courteous explanation of discrimination is Levinasian [5]; he ignores the responsibility to the Other and puts communal values above justice.

2.2.3 Bev and Lindsey (Act 2)

Inherit the changes in generation and culture, but nonetheless, face moral dilemma on property, race, and historical legacies.

Existential Freedom: They depict the absurd hero of Camus [3], striving to render meaningful action in the vaguely moralized world with no certain results.

2.3 Themes and Philosophical Interpretation

2.3.1 Absurdity and Social Conflict

Such patterns of social prejudice, miscommunication and moral contradiction are recurring, and Camusian [3] absurdity is illustrated in the play. Even after



decades of purported developments, there are still basic conflicts. This shows the struggle of the human desire to have justice and the irrationality of social life that always exists.

2.3.2 Freedom and Moral Choice

Freedom is one of the main philosophical contradictions of *Clybourne Park* [1], as the individuals who are bound by their past, society, and customs are free to make their own moral decisions. Existentialist philosophy in the writings of **Jean-Paul Sartre** [2] in particular underline that human beings are condemned to be free, that is, in the confining circumstances, even people have to make their own decisions.

Act I shows that the decision by Russ to sell his home to an African-American family was personal and moral. He is driven by sorrow and alienation following the death of his son, but the decision has extended to other aspects of his life into the society of the neighborhood. The existential conflict in this case is between personal mourning and civic penalty:

“Well, Bev, you see I do not care who is coming in. I just don't care anymore.”

This sentence shows how Russ has shirked his social responsibility. His liberation is real in one way but it is a cost to be blind to the racial segregation as a collective reality. Russ uses freedom in existentialist sense but does not bear the burden of responsibility of the consequences of his act on other people.

2.3.3 Ethical Responsibility and Justice

It is also a foreground of the ethical dilemmas associated with justice in the play, especially in Act II when the community members and the new residents are discussing the problem of gentrification and cultural erasure. The philosophy of **Emmanuel Levinas** [5] points out that ethics starts with the responsibility towards the Other. The Other in this case is the marginalized voices of the minority groups who have either been pushed out in 1959 (in the case of the African-Americans) or in 2009 (in the case of the long-standing residents).

A good example is when Lena, a black woman in 2009, speaks to the white couple about their plans to renovate the area, pointing out how it erases the history of the community:

"It's not just a house. It is the place our parents lived, and their parents lived. It is that history which is something to us."

Such insistence addresses the issue of justice not only in the light of law or economics but of memory, dignity and responsibility. Ethical responsibility, in this case, is not abstract but is based on the ability to recognize the lived



experiences of other people and overcome the desire to serve the self-interest or aesthetic taste at the expense of the well-being of the community.

With the help of this scene, Norris [1] provides a dramatization of the philosophical issue: is it possible to attain justice without the acknowledgment of the humanity of the Other? The play implies that tolerance is not enough to be ethically responsible; it entails being active with the past and being empathetic.

2.4 Dialogue, Symbolism, and Setting

2.4.1 Dialogue

Moral tension, social absurdity and moral negotiation can be traced in conversations in both acts. Humor and irony are used in order to reveal human contradictions, proving the language-constructed social reality and moral dilemmas.

2.4.2 Symbolism

The House: Reflects ownership, identity and social power. The house disputes are a metaphor of the war between moral duty and social discrimination.

Time Shift (1959–2009): Refers to the process of social change, as well as the continuation of ridiculous human patterns.

2.4.3 Setting

The Chicago neighborhood is the real and metaphorical place where moral and existential questions are posed. Its metamorphosis throughout the years not only captures the overall social development but also points to the permanency of the absurdity in human nature.

2.5 Summary of Philosophical Insights

To conclude, it can be stated that Act I and Act II of *Clybourne Park* [1] offer a continuous discussion of the concepts of freedom, moral choice, and ethical responsibility. Decisions of the characters help shed light on existential issues in which freedom may either strengthen genuine action or conceal avoidance of responsiveness. The discussion also reveals the futility of human rivalry, in which the question of property and culture hides the problem of sorrow, bigotry and unfairness.

In conclusion, the play has proved that philosophical terms like existential freedom [2], absurd conflict [3], and ethical responsibility [5] do not end up in abstract theory but are experienced and challenged realities in American society. Incorporating these concepts into the daily conflict, Norris [1] transforms a domestic play into a deep philosophical question concerning the principles of justice, duty, and the purpose of human coexistence.

3.1 Discussion



The discussion of the play *Clybourne Park* [1] by Bruce Norris shows how the interdependence of social structures, ethical responsibility and existential freedom is a complex concept. Through the characters, the dialogues and symbolic usage, a few philosophical insights can be made:

Persistence of Absurdity:

The basic human contradictions are still there even though the time period between 1959 and 2009 has passed. The repetitive forms of bigotry, lack of communication and immorality are **Camusian** [3] absurdity. The play shows that the development of society does not necessarily eliminate irrationality that exists in humans and the conflict between the pursuit of justice and the nature of social systems as unpredictable.

Existential Freedom and Moral Choice:

Characters are faced with choices that challenge their character and morals. The principles of existentialism by **Sartre** [2] are clear: in order to be truly free, one should recognize the responsibility of choice, even when the social pressures are put on him. This difference between the characters of the first and second acts depicts the development of consciousness and demonstrates that moral awareness can grow, while social absurdities still exist.

Ethical Responsibility:

The play questions the ethical duty of people to one another through a **Kantian** [4] and **Levinasian** [5] perspective. Kantian ethics focuses on following common moral law, whereas Levinas focuses on the necessity to take care of the Other. *Clybourne Park* [1] portrays characters who often do not live up to these ethical values, and as such, are often self-interested, conformist, or even society-approving. The given failure helps to highlight the multifacetedness of the problem of ethical decision-making in the actual social environment.

Symbolism and Dialogue as Philosophical Tools: The dialogue, irony and humor used in the play act as commentary of philosophy in exposing contradictions and moral tensions. The house also represents personal and collective identity, where ethical conflict and existential reflection take place. The context of change in time further accentuates the permanence of the absurd in man, the way that historical and social change comes into play with human moral conduct.

3.2 Conclusion

Clybourne Park [1] is performed in various dimensions: as a social commentary, a historical reflection and a philosophical investigation. The play provokes



viewers to accept unpleasant facts about human freedom, moral responsibility and the absurdity of societal norms.

Some of the major findings of this study are as follows:

- **The state of absurdity is widespread:** The social constructions, cultural norms, and racial tensions establish repetitive patterns of absurd human conduct which exist throughout decades.
- **There is responsibility in freedom:** Existential dilemmas of characters indicate the contradiction of personal action and social forces and prove the idea of Sartre [2] about true moral choice.
- **Ethics is an act of social discussion:** The failure of the moralities and the dilemmas portrayed in human societies show that ethical responsibility can be difficult to negotiate, both in terms of Kantian duty [4] and Levinasian responsibility [5].
- **Theatre as a philosophical instrument:** Norris's play [1] is a great example of how modern theatre may also serve to investigate deep philosophical issues, bringing abstract ideas to life with the help of narrative, dialogue, and acting.

Finally, the play makes one think about what kind of existence a human being has, about morality, and about social justice, and it supports the philosophical investigation as an appropriate way of interpreting modern literature and modern society.

References

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