

Les Belles Soeurs with Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing

Social Issues Shown by Playwrights

Lindsay Henselwood

“Michel Tremblay and Tomson Highway, writing at similar points in the historical evolution of their society, and choosing a similar dramatic matrix, have created two totally dissimilar plays, each reflecting its own culture” (Usmiani n.p). Michel Tremblay (June 25 1942) was born on rue Fabre of East Montreal (“Michel Tremblay” n.p). He is considered one of the most important playwrights of French Canada, transforming “French Canadian” to “Québécois” theatre (“Michel Tremblay” n.p). Given its frequent comments on politics within Quebec, particularly the Quiet Revolution, Tremblay’s work is classified as “theatre of liberation” (“Michel Tremblay” n.p). According to Renate Usmiani, like Tremblay, Tomson Highway is “reflecting [his] own culture” in his play *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (n.p). In fact, the work of Michel Tremblay “has influenced Highway’s writing” (Morra n.p). Born on December 6, 1951 on an island in Maria Lake, Highway is “widely acclaimed as a Native Canadian playwright” (Morra n.p). His most popular plays are *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* which was written in 1989 as a counterpart to *The Rez Sisters* (Morra n.p).

Tremblay and Highway use various techniques to highlight the social issues within their underprivileged and minority communities. In *Les Belles Soeurs*, Tremblay focuses the play around working-class Germaine, who after winning one million stamps, invites all the women she knows to a stamp pasting party, as it will take her too long to fill the books by herself. The entire play consists of the women assisting Germaine in filling her books with stamps, which gives rise to conversation. While pasting the stamps, each of the women, at various times asks, “[d]o I look like somebody who’s ever won anything?” (Tremblay 41), stressing that these women have little sense of entitlement. As the women continue to paste, Germaine comments on how Rose cuts her grass with scissors and Rose replies, “...I can’t afford a lawn-mower. Even if

I could, that's the last thing I'd buy" (Tremblay 39). As a response, Germaine brags, "I'll be getting a lawn-mower with my stamps ..." (Tremblay 39).

Tremblay uses the central activity in which the characters participate to explore the effects of poverty. These women are struggling financially and believe that the stamps "ought to be for everyone!" (Tremblay 108). The stamps symbolize the materialistic wants of the women and "reinforces the consumerism which is being satirized throughout the play" (Usmiani n.p). The way in which the women react to the possibility of money demonstrates their lack of such. In fact, the only women who do not steal the stamps are Linda and Pierrette, who ironically are outcasts, deemed so by the group of women as they do not follow a traditional lifestyle. Germaine boasts about the nice material items she will buy with her stamps, while the other women complain about the hardships of their lives such as having to cut their grass with scissors. The activity of pasting stamps into books is a way for Tremblay to get the women to express their frustrations with society and reveal their hardships.

In *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Highway uses the activity of the hockey game as a technique to reveal a variety of social issues faced by the Aboriginal minority. Nanabush represents the "trickster" in both *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* and *The Rez Sisters* and also symbolizes a Native spirit, which "conveys a sense of magic" (Usmiani n.p). While the women on the reserve play a game of hockey, Nanabush appears: "[a]t this point, on the upper level, a giant luminescent hockey stick comes seemingly out of nowhere and, in very slow motion, shoots a giant luminescent puck. On the puck, looking like a radiant but damaged 'Madonna-with-child,' sits Nanabush, as the spirit of Black Lady Halked" (Highway 76-77). The presence of Nanabush reveals the horrifying birth of Dickie Bird, who suffers from fetal alcohol syndrome, highlighting the impact alcoholism on the Reserve has on children.

The fact that Nanabush is presented during the hockey game is significant because she represents "difference" (in this play she is a female among an almost all male cast) and the "suppressed spirituality, in the material lives of Native people" (Filewod n.p). The Aboriginal characters in the play lose their sense of spirituality (in some cases to Christianity) and the hockey game symbolizes this conflict of spirituality versus Christianity or native versus non-native. The hockey players turn on their own team mates and this symbolizes the way in which the characters turn on each other throughout the play. Just before Nanabush's appearance, Black Lady Halked "...shoots straight at her very own captain ..." (Highway 74). This is followed with the losing of the puck, which is identified with the Christian symbol of 'Madonna-and-child'. Literally, the puck is a material object over which both native teams fight, causing a conflict between them. With the ridding of the puck, which bares the religious symbol, Nanabush symbolically sheds light on spirituality opposed to Christianity and ends the hockey game and the conflict which is associated with it.

The underprivileged minority groups about which Tremblay and Highway write both have different values and lifestyles, which becomes evident through the activity in the plays. With the stamp pasting party, Tremblay creates a comedic, yet dramatic response regarding the situation in Francophone working class in Montreal during this time, revealing the disruptive impact of poverty. By examining the women's participation in the stamp-pasting activity, *Les Belles Soeurs* is also self-critical, showing that these women are materialistic and hold the belief that the value of life is measured by the amount of money one possesses. At the end of the play, when the stamp party ends, all Germaine has left is her country and singing 'O Canada' appears to assist her in dealing with the loss of wealth. Singing 'O Canada' is also a source of irony, which Tremblay uses to criticize the inequalities of Canadian society. Highway on the other

hand creates a tragedy, albeit humorous at times, which directly identifies the overpowering of natives by whites (colonization) and stresses the importance of spirituality and the preservation of one's identity over "the dominant culture's destructive forces" (Honegger n.p). Differing from the way in which Tremblay highlights the social issues in Canadian society, Highway focuses on a solution to the social issues by staying true to one's identity and spirituality.

Tremblay and Highway both explore cultural stereotypes through conflicts in the plays. *Les Belles Soeurs* depicts working class women of Quebec during the Quiet Revolution. During the stamp pasting party, it is revealed that Angeline goes to the clubs with Germaine's rebel sister, Pierrette. The women remark that the clubs are "[t]he road to hell, the road to hell! If you go there, you'll lose your soul! Cursed drink, cursed dancing! That's the place where our men go wrong and spend their money on women of sin!" (Tremblay 75). This comment is said by all of the women, except the younger girls, who instead say, "The devil? Come on! Get with the times! The clubs are not the end of the world! They're no worse than any place else. They're fun!" (Tremblay 76).). Tremblay's characters portray the stereotypical Quebec family, trying to cope with the changes brought about by the questioning of traditional values associated with the Quiet Revolution. The older women show a strong dedication to their religion and God, while the younger women want to adapt to the new Quebec.

In *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Highway also shows the conflicts that underlie the stereotypes associated with Aboriginal communities, by exploring for instance the issue of alcoholism through the flashbacks of the birth of Dickie Bird. After the audience is shown Nanabush as the spirit of Black Lady Halked, drinking beer and pouring it over her pregnant belly, "...Dickie Bird finally explodes and shrieks out towards the vision of Nanabush/Black Lady Halked...He crumples to the floor and freezes" (Highway 77-78). This lack of knowledge

of where he comes from and his difficulty with speaking, due to fetal alcohol syndrome, is a great source of anguish and conflict for Dickie Bird. He wants to call out to his mother on more than one occasion, but is burdened with lack of speech. Due to his mother's alcohol consumption during pregnancy he can only reach out and scream unintelligible remarks. Pierre St. Pierre is also an alcoholic and Spooky Lacroix has traded in alcohol for religion.

Later in the play, Highway explores another stereotype associated with aboriginals: violence. Possibly due to the first issue of alcoholism and the effects of fetal alcohol syndrome, "Dickie Bird grabs Nanabush/Patsy and throws her violently to the ground, he lifts her skirt and shoves the crucifix up against her" (Highway 99). This, according to Anne Nothof in an article quoted by Morra, also symbolizes the way in which Native spirituality has been "exploited by Western Culture" (Morra n.p). Alan Filewod observes that some critics remarked that "Highway abused his writing abilities and chose to disregard respect to create pleasures for the public which enjoys these stereotypes and images. It justifies their reluctance to see aboriginal peoples as equals" (Filewod, n.p). However Highway's aim, through the use of stereotypes, is to underline hope for the future. In *Les Belles Soeurs*, Tremblay uses the conflict between generations to show humour and attack the religious society of the mid twentieth century Quebec, while Highway uses conflict between natives to reveal the ways in which colonization effects them. Therefore, both playwrights show the conflicts caused by the stereotypes existing within their own societies in order to comment on the condition of that society.

In *Les Belles Soeurs*, Tremblay uses the 'voice' of the characters as a technique with which to reveal the context of gender oppression within the play. During the stamp pasting party, Rose reveals her frustrations with her marriage and says, "[w]hen I wake up in the morning he's lying there staring at me ... Waiting...Every night, I get into bed and there he is,

waiting! Goddamn sex!...Who cares about a woman who's gotta spend her life with a pig just 'cause she said yes to him once?" (Tremblay 101). She goes on to say that her daughter will not end up "with a stupid slob of a husband who can't understand a thing, who demands his 'rights' at least twice a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year...women...They get grabbed by the throat, and they stay that way, right to the end!" (Tremblay 102). Through dialogue and the 'voice' of Rose, Tremblay is able to emphasize the oppression which the women in the play face. As Catherine McQuaid states, "[t]he language itself is a form of revolt...against their suppressive ethical and financial environment" (McQuaid n.p). When *Les Belles Soeurs* was released, "the women revolt against their suppressive ethical and financial environment" was in motion, causing the roles of women to be re-evaluated (McQuaid n.p) and therefore in *Les Belles Soeurs*, Tremblay's women question their responsibilities: the women in the older generation believe "sexual relations [are] disgusting" (McQuaid n.p). McQuaid suggests that this is due to the strong religious beliefs and the fear of pregnancy as having a child "meant financial hardship" (n.p). The younger generation within the play, however, tries to free themselves from the life which the older women live. In *Les Belles Soeurs*, the 'voice' of the women speaks about their current oppression and also serves to warn the younger generation.

The oppression of women can also be seen in Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* through the 'voice' or even physical presence of a character. Since, as Highway states, the language of Cree does not differentiate between male or female, the character of Nanabush (the trickster) "... doesn't have to be exclusively male or female," but embodies a woman who is "the comic subversion of her colonized men's sexual fantasies" in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* in order to personify the oppression of women (Honegger n.p). As stated by Honegger, Nanabush embodies the "grotesquely exaggerated guises of femininity shaped by the

clichés of the dominant culture” (n.p). Nanabush is a representation of the men’s sexual fantasies and “ends up as the tragically brutalized victim of alcoholism and the delusions of an imposed religion,” (Honegger n.p). Gender oppression can also be seen through the ‘voice’ of other characters of the play such as Big Joey, who watches the rape of Patsy, but does not stop it. When asked why he does this, he replies, “Because I hate them ... I hate them fuckin' bitches. Because they — our own women — took the fuckin' power away from us faster than the FBI ever did” (Highway 119-120). When the women decide to start a hockey league, there are various comments from the men such as “Christ!”, “Cancel the game!”

This vocalized negativity towards women demonstrates the oppression they face in this society and although the subject matter is difficult for some to watch or read, Highway comments that “before the healing can take place, the poison must be exposed ...” (Honegger n.p). In fact, Filewod states that when *Dry Lips Ought Move to Kapuskasing* was first viewed, a Caucasian feminist from the Globe and Mail published a column arguing that the content of the play was “profoundly misogynistic” (n.p). Jay Scott, a respected film critic, quoted in Filewod’s article, argues that this is due to the fact that the author of the column did not understand the culture or the context of the play and it was therefore “misunderstood” (n.p). Scott also states that people “had received the play as a complex but unambiguous examination explanation of misogyny on an Indian reserve, never as a simplistic but ambiguous celebration/rationalization of it,” however the latter was the playwright’s intent (Filewod n.p).

In *Les Belles Soeurs*, the older generation of characters ‘voice’ their opinions and concerns regarding their relationships with men, which creates awareness within the younger characters. Since the men are never actually present during the play and due to the fact that “women’s roles were being re-evaluated” during this time, *Les Belles Soeurs* was tolerable to an audience as it was “far enough removed from the comfortable housewife/part-time career woman

of most English Canadian women who go to the theatre” (McQuaid n.p). As a result of the Quiet Revolution, the concerns the female characters expressed regarding women’s oppression could be were seen as part of a general movement. On the contrary, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* demonstrates the way in which women are oppressed through vulgar representations, language and violence. Highway renders this subject matter viewable to an audience by having the events on the reservation represented as a dream. Through their work, both playwrights attempt to push forth the women’s rights movement and relieve the oppression.

Both Tremblay’s *Les Belles Soeurs* and Highway’s *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* use techniques such as the main activity in the play, the conflicts in the play and the ‘voice’ of the characters to reveal the existing social issues within their respective communities. Both playwrights show and critique the stereotypes associated with an underprivileged group, by having their characters participate in an activity which highlights the causes of their oppression and the hardships they face. In addition, both playwrights derive from the society of which they write and therefore, there is a personal connection with regards to the outcome of the plays. As a result, both plays deal with controversial social issues in a way which attempts to awaken members of their own society as well as a more general public.

Works Cited

- Durocher, Rene. "Quiet Revolution." The Canadian Encyclopedia. 2011.
<<http://thecanadianencyclopedia.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0006619>>.
- Filewod, Alan. "Receiving aboriginality: Tomson Highway and the crisis of cultural authenticity." *Theatre Journal* 46.3 (1994): 363+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 25 Mar. 2011. <http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/ps/i.do?&id=GALE%7CA15851657&v=2.1&u=yorku_main&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.
- Honegger, Gitta. "Native Playwright: Tomson Highway." *Theater* 23.1 (Winter 1992): 88-92. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Brigham Narins and Debbie Stanley. Vol. 92. Detroit: Gale Research, 1996. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 25 Mar. 2011. <http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/ps/i.do?&id=GALE%7CH1100002973&v=2.1&u=yorku_main&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.
- McQuaid, Catherine. "Michel Tremblay's Seduction of the 'Other Solitude,'." *Canadian Drama, Fall* (1976): 217-223. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Deborah A. Schmitt. Vol. 102. Detroit: Gale Research, 1998. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 25 Mar. 2011. <http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/ps/i.do?&id=GALE%7CH1100001930&v=2.1&u=yorku_main&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.
- Morra, Linda. "Tomson Highway." *Twenty-First-Century Canadian Writers*. Ed. Christian Riegel. Detroit: Gale, 2007. Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol. 334. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 25 Mar. 2011. <http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/ps/i.do?&id=GALE%7CH1200013259&v=2.1&u=yorku_main&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.
- Usmiani, Renate. "The Biocentric Worlds of Michel Tremblay and Tomson Highway." Les Belles Soeurs vs. the Rez Sisters. <[http://cinema2.arts.ubc.ca/units/canlit/pdfs/articles/canlit144-Bingocentric\(Usmiani\).pdf](http://cinema2.arts.ubc.ca/units/canlit/pdfs/articles/canlit144-Bingocentric(Usmiani).pdf)>.