Journal of English Language, Literature and Education ISSN: 2710 - 4923 (Online)
Vol. 8 Issue 2 (April - June 2026) PP. 73 - 86 ISSN: 2663 - 3485 (Print)

Bruce Norris's *Clybourne Park* as Dramedic Representation

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Abstract

The current study probes Bruce Norris's play, *Clybourne Park*, from the perspective of the genre of Dramedy. The study explores how the play combines both aspects of comedy and tragedy in the same situations and charcters. Aristotle's concept of tragedy is combined with Bergson's theorization of comedy for formulating the theoretical model of dramedy. Further, Terry Eagleton's conceptual framework of humour is incorporated into the formuation of this model. The analysis is based on this model of dramedy focusing on three aspects of the play; dramedic action, dramedic characters, and dramedic effect. The study suggests that humour in *Clybourne Park* is not merely an element of entertainment. Rather, humour foclizes the tragic narrative of race, communal anxieties and historical trans(formation) behind the comic mask of the play. This tragic background of the play and its absurdic mask of comedy create contradictory dramedic effect in the readers. Furthermore, the study follows a qualitative approach for the textual analysis of the play based on close reading strategy. The study concludes that the dramedic structure of the play strengthens its social critique and influences audience response in terms of disgust and laughter.

Key Words: Dramedy, humour and social critique, *Clybourne Park*

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.54692/jelle.2026.0802108

Introduction

Bruce Norris's *Clybourne Park* (2010) blends a futuristic temporal setting with the projection of past. The play represents a suburban community at Chicago, USA, at two distinct points in temporal history; in 1959 and 2010. The play is commonly associated to the social tension and anxieties about race, housing and internal migration and movement in the middle of the twentieth century America. Norris also loosely connects the play to the world of Lorraine Hansberry's A *Raisin in the Sun* (1959). Both, Norris and Lorraine, project similar setting and similar African-American family. Locating his play in such a setting, Norris creates a dramatic scenario wherein issues of race, property, and communal anxities are brought to the foreground. However, the play does not foreground these problems with a strictly tragic vision. Rather, most of its scences are socially provocative and are driven by humour, awkward conversations, and uncomfortable relations among characters. Thus, a complex tonal situation is created in which comic, absurd, and tragic elements coexist at the same time, mostly within the same scene. Moments of humour are immediately followed by discomfort and tension. This mixture of comic and tragic makes the emotional structure of the play unstable.

The play represents an absurdic humour with an underlying social tension. The play opens in a house where Russ is reading a magazine, lazily eating ice cream, and Bev packing up the household items (p. 3). Their discussion moves to the question of the word "Neapolitan" and its possible origin in the opening scene. The subject of "Neapolitan" triggers the expansion of their discussion to other cities and the names of the people living there (p. 4). Their discussion assumes an absurdic tone, making guesses about the connection of word "Neapolitan" with Naples, Brussels and Paris without coming to any conclusion. At the same time, this humorous and absurd conversation takes place in a context of grief, displacement, and social pressure, and it gives the scene a tragic undertone. Furthermore, the action of the play is set in the context of displacement and the feeling of social anxiety, as the family is about to leave the neighborhood under complex circumstances. Consequently, the humour of the situation is intertwined with an air of discomfort. Further. The absurdic and tragic tones of the play are reflected by the social attitudes of the characters. Norris couples laughter with moral uneasiness in the play. What seems to look like harmless household chat projects the problem of race and social contradictions prevalent in the community.

Problem Statement

Norris' *Clybourne Park* represents interplay of contrastive and contradictory feelings and emotions. The comic and absurdic are intertwined with serious and tragic in the same events, characters creating contradictory effect in the readers. This study analyzes Norris' *Clybourne Park* through the lens of dramedy for understanding these contraditory and pardoxical situation, characters and tone of the play. Special focus is given to humourous scenes and light-hearted exchanges highlighting social tensons and causing discomfort in the readers. The study examines the dramedic tone and effect of the play.

Research Objective

a. To examine the patterns of dramedic representation in Bruce Norris's play, *Clybourne Park*.

Research Question

a. How does Bruce Norris' play, *Clybourne Park,* represents the dominant trends of dramedy?

Literature Review

Bruce Norris' *Clybourne Park* has generated critical debate among critics and theorists of the modern American theatre since its premiership in 2010. A significant part of the early critical reaction focuses on the issues of racial politics, suburban space, and historical memory of the American society (Bigsby, 2019; Young, 2013). Lyn Gardner (2011) in the The Guardian review highlights the continued existence of racial anxieties in suburban regions represenetd by the play. Gardner writes that the play creates a unique theatrical effect where laughter has a strong association with social discomfort. In scholarly studies, the play is frequently placed in the context of the larger tradition of socially-minded American dramatic representation.

Young (2013) compares *Clybourne Park* with Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* focusig on the experiences of an African-American family in Chicago. According to Young, Norris returns to this historical context highlighting similar tensions replicated across various generations. Young writes that Clybourne Park was penned as a direct response to Hansberry's play providing opportunity to readers to revisit the question of race, housing and communal identity. Young writes

that the play projects these historical events to show how historical memory and consciousness shape social relations today.

Bigsby (2019) probes the play from the lens of the formal structure; the two-act design that divides the dramatic action by half a century. This structural design of the paly gives the viewers and readers an opportunity to see the difference and continuity of the question of race and gentrification in two historical epochs. According to Bigsby, the cyclic aspect of social conflict shows how the language of the racial tension evolves through time without significant difference in the underlying attitudes. Thus, the play's structural design becomes a dramatic technique revealing continuity as well as change in the American social life and attitudes. The production commentaries and study guides on the theatre also focus on the same point highlighting that the play intentionally exploits the reaction of audienc by introducing racially provocative statements (Studio 180 Theatre, 2013). In this regard, humour turns out to be a dramatic tool that reveals inconsistency in social attitudes instead of being used as a tool for entertainment.

Critics often admit the existence of humour and tonal variations in the writing of Norris. However, they are generally treated as supplementary aspects to the social commentary of the play. There has been relatively little examination of the tonal structure, particularly how comic dialogues are used in the interactive framework with serious dramatic tension in the play. The combination of humour, uneasiness, and ethical contemplation in *Clybourne Park* suggests that the play may be examined in terms of dramedy; a type of dramatic presentation in which comic and serious components act in tandem, rather than opposing each other. Using Dramedy as theoretical lens, the current study attempts to address the question of how the interplay between humour and dramatic tension creates unity out of contradictory effects and tones.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses an eclectic model of Aristotle's concept of tragedy, Bergson's theory of Comedy and Terry Eagleton's views of Humour to probe Borris Norris' play from the perspective of dramedy. Merriam-Webster defines dramedy as a genre that combines elements of comedy and drama. It refers to a narrative form in which comic and serious elements coexist within the same structure. In this form, jokes and comedic situations run alongside themes that have emotional or

social undertones. Consequently, laughter and seriousness are visible from the same events. Such forms are narrative modes that combine different emotional registers and address social issues (Mittell, 2015, p.256).

The theoretical model is based on a combination of perspectives regarding drama, comedy and humour theory. Aristotle's *Poetics* (1996) offers classical knowledge of serious drama as a genre that provokes pity and fear resulting in cathartic effect (p. 06). Whereas Aristotle focuses on the emotional weight of tragedy, Henri Bergson (1911) describes laughter as a social gesture. Begson writes that the comic is the product of rigidity or mechanical behaviour in character and human life bringing a corrective response from society through laughter (p. 10). Similarly Terry Eagleton (2019) writes that laughter can contain a diverse set of attitudes: nervousness, cynicism, or aggression as opposed to mere amusement (p. 3). In the framework of the theatre and performance studies, Jen Harvie (2013) underlines that the contemporary performance may engage the audience in the ethical contemplation exposing the social tensions and relations prevalent in common cultural environment (p. 5). Lastly, the interaction of genres suggested by Julie Sanders (2006) implies that various genres conventions tend to interact in the same text (p. 18). Collectively, these views offer a theoretical framework of seeing dramedy as a form of dramatic mode that is hybrid. This interaction of absurdic and tragic creates complex emotional and social effects in the readers/audience.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative and interpretative model. The primary source of the study is the published script of *Clybourne Park* by Bruce Norris. The textual analysis of the play is conducted through close reading technique applied to dialogue, characters and dramatic situation. The theoretical framework informs the analysis focusing on three aspects of the play: dramedic action, dramedic characters and dramedic effect. The study explains the interaction between humour, tension, and social conflict in the dramatic structure of the play. The secondary sources for this study are critical literature published in scholarly medium on Norris' play.

Analysis

Dramedic Action: Comic Mask and Tragic Reality

Bruce Norris' *Clybourne Park* presents a dramedic setting where comic dialogue and tragical historical facts exist within the same stage of theatricality. Dramedy does not divide comedy and tragedy into two different categories. Dramedy combines these tonal forces creating complicated emotional reactions that encompass amusement, discomfort, and reflections. The dramedic aspect of the play is evident from the common household dialogues which, though seemingly funny at first glance, eventually become the source of more serious conflicts regarding the issues of race, memory and social transformation. This combination of laughter and discomfort is one of the salient features of dramedy.

The term "Neapolitan" produces the tonal combination of comic and serious in the household discourse. The play starts with an apparently somewhat insignificant dialogue between Bev and Russ regarding the term "Neapolitan". Their discussion progresses like a game of amusing guesses over the names of cities and the principles of speech creating an effect of light humour. Bev insists, "I would think it had something to do with neo… something new" (p. 5). Russ dismissively replies, "Look it up" (p. 5), which reinforces the playful and indifferent tone of the exchange. Bev theorizes on the origin of the word "Neapolitan" and Russ responds with an ironic detachment. Bev asks, "I don't think *Neapolitan*. How would that become *Neapolitan*?" (p. 7). Russ responds, "Naples" (p. 7). Slowly the conversation turns into an absurdic mood as both men entangle in the poetics of naming in different cities (p. 7). Russ jokingly introduces the word "Muscovites" (p. 7) and both characters laugh at the accoustics of the term "Muscovites," as Russ repeats "Muss-covites" (p. 7). On the surface, this conversation seems to be mere light domestic chatter. The conversation goes on with exaggerated seriousnessa. Russ declares, "Parisians" (p. 6). Russ turns the discussion into a linguistic game rather than meaningful communication. But the context in which the conversation takes place undermines the humour of the conversation. The stage directions reveal that the house is nearly empty. "The house is in disarray. Cardboard boxes are stacked in corners… Pictures have been removed from the walls, and carpets have been rolled and stood on end" (p. 3). The couple is just heading out of their residence following the demise of their son and the house itself will shortly turn into the focal point of racial tension in the neighbourhood. The absurd discussion and the tragic

context of the family represent a dramedic situation creating contradictory feelings in the readers. The humour arising out of the dialogues therefore functions as a fragile surface covering a more painful emotional reality. Russ's behaviour indicates deep emotional fatigue. He responds casually, "Going to waste" (p. 3), which shows a detached attitude towards the ice cream and the situation around him. He sits quietly "reading a copy of *National Geographic*" (p. 3). His silence suggests unresolved grief.

The same combination of comic and tragic elements is seen in the remarks made by Bev on the topic of social heirarchy. Speaking about a mentally retarded boy employed at the grocery store, Bev tells that; "Like the Wheeler boy… Bags the groceries" (p. 8). "It is nice... to know we all have our place" (p. 8). These remarks are utterd in a casual manner and comic flow of the dialogue. However, one can discern a very disturbing perception of the social order and distinction in the play. The momenatry effect of these remarks about the wheeler boy is an awkward type of humour. Laughter is not the result of harmless wit but of attitudes that appear familiar and ethically disturbing. This dramedic situation is further developed by the entry of other characters. As Jim walks into the house remarking how messy the room has become due to packed boxes, he looks around and reacts, "Holy Toledo Jiminy Christmas" (p. 11). His joke that someone must have "made off with yer stuff" (p. 11) covers the tragic reality of the family. The comic effect is the result of the visual contrast between the disorder of the house and the playful attitude of Jim towards the situation. The family is moving out of the neighbourhood following the personal tragedy creating debates among *Clybourne Park* residents. The comic tone of the dialogue is coupled with the darker emotional backdrop of the family situation. This contrast is further highlighted when Jim casually adds, "Piece of advice. Watch out when you start lifting things" (p. 12) and continues his humour despite the emotional value of the situation.

Dramedic Characters: The Comic and the Tragic within the Same Personality

The idea of character has been central to classical and modern theories of tragedy and comedy. Aristotle points out the relationship between character and action. Aristotle interprets character in terms of making moral choice leading to moral consequences. He focuses on the co-existence of good and bad in tragic characters (p.06). These characters are characterized by their weakness and strength and the emotional reaction which they produce in the audience is termed

Catharsis. The audience understands that they all have human shortcomings and sympathize with tragic characters. On the contrary, comedy is associated with the anaesthesia of the heart by Bergon. The critical distance between the audience and characters does not generate feelings of empathy in comedy. Comic characters are identified with exaggeration, rigidity, and social incongruity. According to Henri Bergson, comedy occurs when human behaviour turns mechanical or inflexible (p. 6). Deviance from social standards, awkwardness and contradictions are thus revealed through comic characters. These behaviours appear comic since it deviates from the dynamism of life and societal standards. Similarly, Terry Eagleton is of the view that comic characters are not necessarily innocent figures of entertainment. They can also indicate some underlying social conflicts and ideological contradictions (p. 02). Laughter directed at such characters often carries a sense of discomfort, as it reveals attitudes or behaviours that are morally questionable. Comic figures, in this sense, can also become objects of critical reflection.

One aspect of the dramedy in *Clybourne Park* is manifested through the process of character building. The characters in the play can not be categorized either purely comic or tragic. On the contrary, both tragic and comic dimension are present in the same character defying the traditional binaries. These dramedic characters generate laughter as well as reveal underlying tensions. The vivid example of dramedic character is Russ in the play. Russ seems disconnected and ironic at various points in the first act. There is a dry sense of humour in his conversation. In one example, Bev enquires whether Russ changed the address on the *National Geographic* subscription. Russ replies, “I did it last week” only to confess a few seconds later, “Pulling your leg” (p. 9). His indifferent tone may be further observed when he casually says, “Hadn’t really thought about it” showing his emotional detachment (p.9). The dialogue creates a comic effect as Russ intentionally makes Bev anxious by playing around with her. However, the humour in this scene cannot be separeted from the emotional state of Russ. His sarcasm serves a defence mechanism for dealing with his painful memories associated with the death of his son. Such emotional numbness can also be noted in his brief and casual replies such as “Yup” (p. 9). It reduces meaningful communication to minimal response. The concept of tragic emotion by Aristotle is visible from tragic background of Russ. However, this tragic background of Russ is blended with his sense of humour covering his emotional fatigue and tension.

Another represenative of dramedic character is Bev. She carries herself energetically and in polite demeanor throughout the first act of the play. Her speech tends to be too jovial and this has a slight comedic effect. As an example, she addresses Francine when she gives her a household object as a gift with exaggerated excitement: “Because I do love to entertain… it does seem a shame to give it away” and “I was wondering if this might be the sort of thing that would be useful to you?” (p. 4). She further adds, “See how sad he looks?” (p. 4). Her polite insistence carries on with recurrent phrases such as “You think about it and let me know” (p. 4). But the jovial meekness of Bev also shows her social blindness. She attempts to sound generous and friendly but her actions unwillingly strengthen the barrier between the employer and the servant. Even when Francine resists, Bev continues politely, “Well, nonetheless, I’m offering” and “You think about it and let me know” (p. 4). She has an enthusiastic tone that the audience might smile upon, yet the humour grows uneasy. The pleasant manners adopted by Bev are in predictable patterns. She repeats the gestures of kindness without realizing the inherent inequalities in them. It turns her behaviour into a comic scenario in that it is over the top and predictable, but it also reveals the moral shortcomings of her world perception.

Karl Lindner represents simailar dramedic tendencies through his character. When Karl shows up, he tries to sound polite about the concerns of people in the neighbourhood regarding the introduction of a Black family. His wording is formal and reserved. Such politeness can be seen in controlled interactions such as “No no no, it’s just, we’re in a state of disarray” (p. 11). Courtesy is used to hide tension in the situation. But the courteous demeanor cannot conceal the discriminatory motive of his visit. The tone of his argument is very disturbing, which is contrasted with the calm presentation to develop a very complicated emotional reaction. The character of Karl gives uncomfortable laughs. His efforts to make sense are constantly sabotaged by the visible bias in his speech. The audience can laugh at his exaggerated careful wording or his stuttering efforts to explain his stand. But there is moral uneasiness connected with this laughter. The courtesy of Karl does not render his argument any less disturbing, but, on the contrary, demonstrates how discrimination could be concealed even in the vocabulary of civility. This effect may be explained from the perspective of Terry Eagleton’s concept of humour. Eagleton argues that there are numerous emotions which can be expressed through laughter such as anxiety, aggression, or

embarrassment. Humour is commonly used in *Clybourne Park* as a medium to channalize the difficult truths by the characters.

Another kind of dramedic characterization is projected through the minister Jim in the play. His behaviour seems to be at first vigorous and comic. As he enters the messy house, he makes jokes concerning the missing furniture and makes exaggerative suggestions on how to move heavy things. His exaggerated reaction, "Holy Toledo Jiminy Christmas" (p. 11), speaks his comic presence immediately. His vibrant speech contrasts with the reserved demeanor of Russ. This character of Jim is similar to that of the friendly visitor who tries to revive normal conversation. The light-hearted nature of Jim also reveals his strategy to deal with the grief of Russ. Despite being a religious figure, he has difficulties in finding significant words to console Russ. His hilarious jokes on ordinary problems show how he tries to evade the underlying emotional problems in the room.

Humour, Language and Social Discomfort

The relationship between humour and language has been explored particularly in terms of how speech produces both amusement and social meaning. Henri Bergson suggests that the comic often emerges in language when speech acts become rigid or automatic. He writes that humour results from repetition, exaggeration or mechanical pattern in speech (p. 05). Similarly,Terry Eagleton writes that humour is not necessarily neutral and harmless. According to Eagleton, laughter also higlight various emotional reactions such as embarrassment, aggression, and discomfort instead of mere amusement (p. 41). Language is at the core of the laughing process because jokes, irony, and casual statements may help to expose contradictions in social attitudes. What appears humorous on the surface may carry underlying tensions related to power, ideology and social relations.

Norris' play projects dramedic relation between the comic utterance and the moral uneasiness. Humour created out of the incongruity of behavior and context is one of the most peculiar aspects of *Clybourne Park*. Norris makes dialogues where the characters are trying to talk about delicate topics in a polite manner. However, their prejudice becomes apparent through their playful dialoguse. Instead of laighter, it creates a social tension that underlies normal dialogue. The

conversation during the first act seems to be informal and pleasant, where characters casually exchange remarks such as “Gee whiz, I’m just reading a magazine” (p. 11) and “Barely know the woman” (p. 11). One can see this tone in remarks like “Whaddya say?” which creates an informal conversational pattern (p.3). Characters address each other in a casual manner and often joke about each other. But when the question of race comes up, their attempts of being polite go awry very soon. This tragic turn takes place when the representative of the Neighborhood Association, Karl Lindner, gets involved in the conversation. The words of Karl are well measured, as reflected in controlled and polite exchanges such as “we’re in a state of disarray, Karl” (p. 11). He keeps on stressing the fact that the neighbors of the area have nothing to do with the new Black family. Even though his speech sounds respectful, the audience knows that his plea is an effort to avoid racial assimilation. Meanwhile, the viewers understand the grave consequences of his argument. The comedy does not thus relieve the tension of the situation. Rather, it makes it more intense by revealing the contradiction between the courteous manner in which the characters talk and the discriminatory intent of their speeches.

Karl and the rest of the characters further increase this uneasy humour. Russ’ anger and sarcasm intensifies in response to Karl’s arguments, as seen when he remarks, “Somehow I spurned her” (p. 11), with a tone that carries irony rather than sincerity. His emotional state is shown in his fragmented speech such as “That’s uhhh, you know, that’s—” (p. 7). Russ questions the latent assumptions of Karl’s proposal and the hypocrisy of the Neighbourhood Association. The discussion is strained, but it is interspersed with ironic statements causing laughter, such as Jim’s casual remark, “S’not the big day, is it?” (p. 11), which lightens the tone while the tension persists. The apparent courtesy of the discussion and the racial conflict creates a dramedic situation, where even polite exchanges like “No no, it’s just, we’re in a state of disarray, Karl” (p. 11) mask deeper unease. This creates humour, in Eagelton terms, connected not with amusement but with anxiety, embarrassment or even hostility.

The contradiction of social inequality and social formalities apparent from the dialogue between Bev and Francine produces dramedic effect. Before moving out of the house, Bev tries to be kind to Francine by gifting her household things, saying, “I was wondering if this might be the sort of thing that would be useful to you?” (p. 4). The gesture seems to be generous. However, the tone of Bev expects that Francine should be grateful and obedient in the future, as she continues, “Well,

nonetheless, I'm offering" (p. 4). Francine is very polite and she constantly calls Bev "Yes, ma'am" (p. 4) without ever hinting any form of disagreement (p. 4). Laughter results from the contradiction visible in social formalities of Bev's interaction with Francine. However, the social anxiety and power relation dispalyed by these social conventions and formalities create feelings of disgust and fatigue. The comic results from the apparent courtesy of the conversation of these two ladies, as seen when Bev adds, "You think about it and let me know" (p. 4). However, the humour can not be separated from social inequality.

Generic Hybridity and Dramedic Form

The blending of comic and tragic elements in *Clybourne Park* can also be understood through Julie Sanders' concept of genre interaction. Sanders argues that texts are rarely confined to a single form, and instead exist within "a network of existing texts and art forms" where meanings are shaped through interaction and transformation (p.1). She further suggests that literary texts are "built from systems, codes and traditions established by previous works" which highlights the way different forms and modes coexist within a single work (p.16). This perspective helps to understand the structure of Norris' play, in which comedy and tragedy do not seem to work as distinct modes but rather interact within the same theatrical space. Sanders also notes that adaptation and interaction of forms is based on "transformation" and "reworking" of forms (p.30). This is clear from Norris' *Clybourne Park* mixing tragic solemnity in a comic dialogue. This mixing of genres has a dramedic effect where laughter draws attention to tension. This interaction of genres produces a dramedic effect in which laughter does not resolve tension but exposes it. In this sense, *Clybourne Park* reflects Sanders' idea that literary forms are not isolated, but are shaped through combination and interaction, creating complex emotional and social responses in the audience.

Conclusions

This study concludes that Bruce Norris' Clybourne Park projects contradictory situations and characters. The study reveals that both comedy and tragedy combines in the same circumstances, characters and lines in the play. The absurdic and comic dialogues entail tragic touches in the play. Behind the comic mask of the play, there lies the tragic story of family migrations and movements. Characters like Russ, Bev, and Karl display humour, absurdity and comic spirit but they are also

caught in the larger social context of anxieteis and social tension. The common use of jokes, irony and sarcasm bring moments of laughter, yet the humour is usually uncomfortable and exposes underlying social problems. Humour and laughter serve as a form of critique instead of entertainment. On the whole, the play captures the important characteristics of dramedy by incorporating both comic and serious in the play. The resultant effect on the readers is the release of the comic and tragic energy, catharsis and laughter, absurdity and tragedy.

Recommendations

Although prliminary in its nature and lacking theorization, Dramedy serves as a useful model for future research. The genre of dramedy may be applied to other contemporary plays to probe dramedic patterns in different contemporary texts. This would contexualize the text of Clybourne Park in a larger dramatic context. Secondly, the audience-based research may be conducted to gaudge the reactions of the viewers and audience in terms of cathartic and comic effect and humour and discomfort created by the play. This may bring a practical aspect to the analysis of dramedic effect.

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