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STEVE TESICH'S ON THE OPEN ROAD AND NAOMI WALLACE'S THINGS OF DRY HOURS AS DISCOURSES ON ART AND FREEDOM

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Abstract: Through the analysis of Steve Tesich's and Naomi Wallace's dramatic masterpieces On the Open Road (1992) and Things of Dry Hours (2007), respectively, the paper strives to examine the dramatists' insights into the role of art and theatre within the context of the contemporary artistic landscape and the societal ethos. Tesich and Wallace, both acclaimed as engaged and dissenting writers, envision theatre as a hallowed space for social and imaginative metamorphosis. They challenge the prevailing cultural norms and values, serving as beacons of resistance against dehumanizing practices that have taken root in modern society, often perpetuated by capitalist regimes. In this light, the paper underscores the seminal importance of their artistic contributions, which delve into the disintegration of art's societal significance, the pervasiveness of societal apathy, the absurdity of warfare, and the overarching influence of organized religion. Within the framework of On the Open Road, Steve Tesich poignantly underscores the dwindling influence of art in a dystopian world where it has been commodified. The characters Al and Angel grapple with a post-apocalyptic society fragmented into distinct factions under the dominion of potent entities. Art, once the source of profound inspiration, is relegated to the status of a mere bargaining chip. Tesich contemplates the devaluation of art appreciation, underscoring the dire need to fathom art, rather than merely rationalize it. He cogently argues that this transformative paradigm poses an existential threat to humanity and its moral underpinnings. However, amid the bleak future depicted, the play offers a glimmer of hope - the restoration of human nature through acts of love devoid of ulterior motives. In a parallel vein, Naomi Wallace's Things of Dry Hours is distinctly situated in the early 1930s Alabama, a locale that encapsulates myriad sociopolitical nuances. The play unfolds as an intricate tapestry of themes encompassing race, class, and political turmoil. The characters, notably Tice Hogan, his daughter Cali, and the enigmatic Corbin Teel, confront the divisive aspects of racial privilege and economic disparities. The dramatic narrative adroitly negotiates the interplay between Christian religiosity and the tenets of Communism. Concurrently, Wallace delves into the ineffable dimensions of spiritual desolation, perceptibly etched into the characters' existential identities. The characters undergo a transformative journey, awakening dormant desires and rekindling hope for social transformation and a more meaningful existence.

Keywords: Steve Tesich, Naomi Wallace, freedom, art, theatre, human nature, morality, love
Field: Humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between drama and intellectual ideas constitutes an intrinsic facet within the history of drama. George Bernard Shaw stands as a seminal figure who effected a paradigm shift in theater by laying the foundations for the emergence of the "theater of ideas," a concept he deemed superior to the preceding bourgeois entertainment theater. As delineated by Ronald Harwood, Shaw, both in his plays and critical analyses, directed his focus towards the "intellectual powers of characters." He ardently believed that through these characters, plays could effectuate transformative changes in morality, particularly in the societal order, thereby inducing a metamorphosis in human nature. This conviction parallels Ibsen's belief that drama possesses the capacity to alter not only human nature but also moral and societal constructs. Harwood concludes that for Shaw's intellectual successors, as for Shaw himself, the theater served as an indispensable "forum for the expression of political and social ideology" (Harwood, 1989, pp. 272-277).

Similarly, the theatrical and political synergy is an unmistakable leitmotif in the plays and artistic vision of two contemporary dramatists—Steve Tesich, a Serbian-American playwright, and Naomi Wallace, an American playwright fervently advocating for justice and human rights in both the United States and abroad. The influence of Bertolt Brecht's contention that all theater inherently harbors a political foundation is unmistakable in their plays. Both Tesich and Wallace cast their dramatic masterpieces as acts of transgression, staunchly refusing assimilation within a culture that prioritizes individualism over collective harmony, profits over peace, and property over the basic requisites of humanity. Their creative endeavors exist in contradistinction to a culture averse to any form of creativity or originality that deviates from the service of capitalist and imperial agendas, inadvertently perpetuating deleterious byproducts, including racism, homophobia, classism, and sexism. The thematic terrain traversed by Tesich and

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Wallace extends beyond the contemplative boundaries of morality, delving into the intricate intersections of materiality, embodied disparities, and economic inequalities on a global scale. This analysis advances the argument that their works are imbued with a utopian spirit, characterized by fervor and intensity, which transcends the mundane and the quotidian, culminating in climactic scenes of salvation. The narrative odysseys constructed by these dramatists illuminate the realms of political and social transformation, breathing life into the prospects of change.

Commencing our analysis, we are confronted with a series of fundamental inquiries that occupied the intellectual faculties of both Tesich and Wallace prior to embarking on their respective dramas subjected to our scrutiny. These inquiries delve into the prevailing state of the contemporary artistic culture, the role of art, with a particular focus on the theatrical domain, in the reconfiguration of perceptions or its function as a mechanism for heightened societal consciousness. Both Tesich's and Wallace's plays pervasively ask questions about the relation of art to society. Should art be simply a matter of skill and craftsmanship, independent of life? Should it reflect life? Should it mock the comfortable assumptions of bourgeois life? Should art be a political and social instrument to change the way humans live? If art is used for social purposes, will it get co-opted and destroyed by politics? If art does not have a social dimension, will it wither away into triviality? Additionally, we are prompted to contemplate whether art predominantly serves as an opulent embellishment for the privileged few or operates as a channel for unearthing underlying truths amidst a complex web of fallacies. Moreover, the playwrights compel us to examine whether art is complicit in perpetuating societal injustices, concealing disparities, and fostering a societal obliviousness to prevailing human suffering, or if its true essence lies in emancipating individuals by reminding them of a world where love exists devoid of ulterior motives, a quintessential aspect of our humanity.

In a more comprehensive context, these profound themes encapsulate the profound philosophical insights offered by the two playwrights concerning our cultural, moral, and political milieu. Both authors exhibit an unwavering commitment to addressing the inherent injustices within the capitalist system, concurring on the inherent relationship between modern drama and the freedom to challenge and critically examine established political paradigms. Drawing from Lionel Trilling, their approach postulates that the human spirit retains an enduring residue of quality beyond the grasp of cultural manipulation, a quality that implicitly subjects culture itself to critical scrutiny, precluding its absolute dominion. In the words of Trilling: "We may think of Freud's emphasis on biology as being a liberating idea. It is a resistance to and a modification of the cultural omnipotence. We reflect that somewhere in the child, somewhere in the adult, there is a hard, irreducible, stubborn core of biological urgency, and biological necessity, and biological reason, that culture cannot reach and that reserves the right, which sooner or later it will exercise, to judge the culture and resist and revise it" (Trilling, 1966, pp. 114-115).

The concept of social equality stands as one of humanity's most ancient and foundational ideals, divergent from the relatively recent introduction of capitalism—a system inherently foreign to our collective heritage. Capitalism, instead of fostering social equity, often perpetuates structures marked by discrimination and social inequality. In the perspective of Steve Tesich, the theater emerges as a sanctified realm in which the reawakening of the human psyche and spirituality transpires. This hallowed theatrical space serves as the crucible of freedom, where individuals, unburdened by dogma, engage in a profound interrogation and subversion of prevailing societal norms, particularly those marred by injustice.

2. THE HUMAN ODYSSEY: STEVE TESICH'S CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF ART, MORALITY AND FREEDOM IN ON THE OPEN ROAD

Tesich's late plays (Square One, The Speed of Darkness, On the Open Road, Arts and Leisure) revolve prominently around the foundational principles of art and ethics. In his seminal play On the Open Road (1992), which is, in the words of Milena Kostić, "a sort of post-apocalyptic Waiting for Godot" (Kostić, 2004, 132), art assumes a paramount position, transmuted into a commodity employed by the two main characters, Al and Angel, as a means to secure entry into the realm referred to as "the Land of the Free." Within the backdrop of a world fragmented into factions ruled by various criminal syndicates and military authorities, consequent to a cataclysmic event, Tesich confronts the disheartening trajectory of art's metamorphosis, with it being relegated to a mere extension of popular culture and an instrument of governance. While Al genuinely cherishes the paintings he collects, he is nevertheless willing to barter them for his liberty. Art has seemingly lost its ability to inspire, relegated to the status of currency or a symbol of intellectual worth. Tesich laments that the appreciation of art has devolved into a mere pursuit of comprehension, as expressed by Al's phrase in the play, "to 'get it' and carry on." According to Tesich, if one can merely "get it," they obliterate its essence, signaling that their perception is either distorted or that the object in question is beneath the classification of true art itself. This 'get-it-and-move-on' mindset

is indelibly entwined with the concepts of humanity and morality, both of which, in Tesich's view, are imperiled in the contemporary milieu. At a critical juncture in the play, when Angel rescues an injured girl from a heap of lifeless bodies, Al advises him to abandon her, arguing that the burden of caring for another life is an overwhelming responsibility. It becomes apparent that an epidemic of social apathy has permeated society to the extent that indifference pervades all aspects of life.

Raymond Williams' concept of a civilization reduced to a trap is evident in Tesich's discourse, explicitly expressed by Al when he becomes acutely aware of the metamorphosis undergone by his pragmatic intellect. Regarding the unfeeling nature of the pragmatic mind, the deity of rationalism that has banished love and compassion from it, turning it into an adherent of the culture of domination, he states:

"He has made a mousetrap out of my mind. The trap keeps tripping and snapping the spines of moments that could have lived on in my life, but I get them and they die and then I move on" (Tesich, 1992, pp. 89).

Tesich's concept of the contemporary pragmatic mind, transformed into a trap for humanity that cripples the integrity of human nature, aligns with Williams' idea in the study Drama from Ibsen to Brecht (1993) about a civilization that has become an anti-vital snare. Williams' analysis of modernist drama emphasizes that modern playwrights depict the living space provided by Western culture to humanity as (scenic) rooms. These rooms, however, have ceased to function as shelters and protective havens for human existence. Instead, they have transformed into an anti-life, civilizational trap ('room as a trap'), from which contemporary dramatic protagonists incessantly seek an escape. Williams outlines the critique of diverse phases of cultural dominance, theatrically manifested in contemporary drama through the portrayal of trap-like rooms. These are analogous to prison metaphors, whose emergence in literature, from the Romantic era onwards, was noted by Lionel Trilling in his studies. This convergence finds parallels with William Blake's evocative metaphor of "mind-forged manacles" in his poem "London" and also echoes critiques of culture by Edward Said. In his 2003 speech on Orientalism, Said concurs with Trilling's assessment of contemporary culture in the introduction to the collection of essays The Opposing Self. Trilling, within this collection, discusses a culture constructed from invisible, mental prisons that, despite their invisibility, artists manage to perceive and portray to the public. The metaphor of the prison, as Trilling contends, has been notably pertinent in literature since the end of the eighteenth century, when writers recognized that the proclaimed ideals of the French Revolution—freedom, equality, and brotherhood—were betrayed and twisted into their opposites, serving as an instrument of manipulation of the public.

It is worth underscoring that Tesich embarked on writing On the Open Road with a central query in mind, as articulated in his words: "I started out only to write a drama about the question, 'What would you do if you were confronted with the fact that you had to kill Jesus Christ?'" Tesich's motivation for this play came into focus in 1989 when he recognized the imminent prospect of global civil conflicts, culminating in worldwide civil wars. In a series of interviews conducted during this period, Steve Tesich consistently expressed his apprehensions concerning the erosion of humanity. He was notably perturbed by the involvement of the United States in regions such as the Persian Gulf and his native Balkans. Within the chronotop of On the Open Road, the setting encapsulates "A place of Civil War" existing within "A time of Civil War." According to Milena Kostić, "the Civil War in question is unspecified because the author wants to point out that the pattern of all wars is the same" (Kostić, 2004, 132). The protagonists, Al and Angel, come together and embark on a journey with the intent of amassing works of art, cherishing the hope of securing entry into the fabled "Land of the Free." However, they soon confront a daunting requirement, an onerous price for their "progress": the act of slaying Jesus Christ, symbolic of the sacrifice of their most humane and virtuous attributes, effectively relinquishing their burden of humanity. Even in the midst of this disheartening future, Tesich offers a glimmer of optimism for the human condition, embodied in the ethical dilemma faced by Al and Angel. At the outset of the play, Angel explicitly states that he is prepared to undertake any action to safeguard his life and attain freedom, and Al similarly displays a readiness to part with virtually every facet of his humanity in exchange for liberty. Yet, when confronted with the moral quandary of having to execute Jesus to secure their freedom, neither is willing to commit the heinous act.

In On the Open Road, morality emerges as a conscious choice, made despite the ominous repercussions that may ensue. As Tesich contended, "the saving grace is not just to love but to love without a motive. That's the creative process. It makes being a human being art. The same loving that makes an artwork possible can make a masterpiece of human life." The play stands as an unequivocally audacious and thematically ambitious work in Tesich's career. Through the tribulations of Al and Angel, Tesich offers poignant commentary on the waning significance of art in society, the pervasive malaise that

plagues social order, the irrationality of warfare, the obstructive role of organized religion in human-divine relations, and the moral erosion and absence of unwavering convictions inherent in the realm of politics.

Tesich lucidly underscores the profound significance of the concepts of love and freedom, which occupy a central place in the dramatic world of Naomi Wallace. By the conclusion of the play, Tesich's protagonists culminate their cognitive odyssey by realizing that love and art are the primary manifestations of human creativity, and freedom is the fundamental prerequisite for their development:

"Al: To love without a motive is Art. That's the free for what of freedom. To love without a motive. That's what defines a human being.

Angel: That's what hurts. To discover the definition only to find out that you don't qualify.

Al: But at least we know who we're supposed to be. And by clinging to that very definition which damn us and excludes us, but which we won't demean, we retain, if nothing else, the true worth of our purpose and claim the right to say that although we may be out of reach of salvation, we are not lost " (Tesich, 1992, pp. 92-93).

3. NAOMI WALLACE'S EXPLORATION OF DESIRE, DISSONANCE, AND HOPE IN THINGS OF DRY HOURS

Naomi Wallace employs a profoundly theatrical and historically informed dramaturgy characterized by a fiercely lyrical linguistic style, enabling her to excoriate and dissect issues of gender, class, race, and political and economic inequities prevalent in the contemporary world. Her distinctive dramatic style aligns with a Marxist and American feminist ethos. She underscores the primacy of the community and the collective good over the individual. Wallace's oeuvre is driven by an exploration of the citizen's place within the political realm, with a steadfast commitment to investigating interwoven relationships across diverse social and cultural boundaries.

For Naomi Wallace, the theatre serves as a crucible where the political dimension intersects with the emotional, purposefully aiming to elicit an emotional metamorphosis in the audience. This transformation transcends mere identification with the other and extends towards a more profound alteration — a transcendence that allows the individual to become the other. In the face of inevitable chaos and horror, Wallace's characters exude an unassailable capacity for desire, a desire that yearns for glimpses of a superior reality, where both characters and audience envision the contours of a better, more compassionate and just society. Wallace's elucidation of desire underscores the intrinsic human need for connection and the transformation of the solitary state, signifying a departure from isolation.

Wallace's play, Things of Dry Hours, penned in 2007, unfolds against the backdrop of Birmingham, Alabama, the historic heart of the old Confederacy, during the early 1930s. The narrative meticulously employs the milieu of the Great Depression as its setting, specifically within the modest wooden cabin inhabited by Tice Hogan, an African American, and his widowed daughter, Cali. Hogan, a recent layoff victim from the local steelworks factory, a subsidiary of the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company, is further distinguished as a member of the Alabama chapter of the Communist Party. Meanwhile, Cali toils as a laundress, catering to the affluent white families in the town.

The arrival of Corbin Teel, an uneducated white laborer from a lower social stratum, into the intimate realm of the Hogan family cabin serves as a pivotal juncture in the narrative. Teel, as it transpires, has been coerced into spying for those vested with economic and political authority, becoming a pawn in their machinations. The play meticulously documents the ensuing developments during Teel's stay with the Hogans, and Wallace astutely underscores the landscape of political tension underscored by undercurrents of sexuality and economic disparities.

Although Hogan and his daughter grapple with material poverty, they derive solace from certain rudimentary comforts, including reading materials such as the Bible and Engels and Marx's Communist Manifesto, as well as essential sustenance and firewood for warmth. Teel, in stark contrast, is bereft of even these meager provisions and has been thrust into a state of destitution, stripped of education and reduced to a mere survivor reliant on his meager instincts. However, beneath the prism of their diverse material circumstances, both the Hogans and Teel are afflicted by distinct forms of spiritual poverty. Tice and Cali not only find themselves alienated from the white community but also experience isolation from their fellow African Americans. Conversely, Teel's apparent white privilege, which would ordinarily confer an advantage in 1930s Alabama, is nullified by his lack of education and lower social class, relegating him to a marginalized space within the cabin.

The play navigates the turbulent waters of shifting social, racial, and sexual dynamics and privilege

throughout Teel's tenure with the Hogans. Wallace effectively scrutinizes how unemployment and the erosion of material wealth can culminate in debasing and dehumanizing actions and events. Teel, in a startling revelation, confesses to having killed a foreman at the Tennessee Coal and Iron factory, resulting in the loss of his job. Remarkably, rather than facing legal repercussions, the company has resorted to blackmail, coercing Teel into tracking down Hogan and extracting the identities of local Communist Party members. Fearing for his life, Teel recoils from the prospect of redemption proffered by Hogan.

Notably, Wallace's historical context, or 'historical sense,' permeates Things of Dry Hours as she delves into the history of the Communist Party in 1930s Alabama. Lionel Trilling, in his essay "The Sense of the Past" from the collection of essays The Liberal Imagination, addresses the significance of understanding history and the concept of the 'historical sense.' He criticizes the marginalization of history not only in literary studies, specifically targeting the then-prominent New Criticism, but also in the broader context of American life. Trilling invokes T. S. Eliot's notion of the historical sense from the essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (paraphrasing Eliot when highlighting that the presence of the past in the present can be discerned only with a thorough knowledge of the past), quoting Nietzsche and Marx. For Nietzsche, the historical sense represents a unique faculty of the human mind, a kind of sixth sense (Trilling, 1954, pp. 191), enabling the identification of the value system used by nations, communities, and individuals to discern meaning and interpret the course of historical events. The historical sense, Trilling concludes, is a critical faculty that we possess to continuously scrutinize and evaluate life. According to him, such a sense was more essential for America in the 1950s than ever before, and a lack of interest in history was a bad sign, indicating hidden desperation and the absence of intellectual courage. Advocating the idea of forsaking (alienation from) personal interests and conventional morality, Trilling thus aligns conceptually with Bertolt Brecht. Unlike Freud, he posits that art/literature does not constitute a form of escapism—an illusory and transitory escape from reality. Instead, it serves as a means to, through an imaginative departure from life, unfolding according to socially imposed scripts, use artistic works to arrive at the truth about culture and adopt an actively critical stance toward it. Wallace's historical narrative diverges markedly from the Party's Northern counterpart, characterized by its more rural than urban profile, a predominantly Christian rather than Jewish orientation, a pronounced working-class identity, heightened poverty, a more pronounced black demographic, lower educational levels, and the convergence of "poor" white individuals with African Americans—an alliance deemed taboo during that period. Tice's attraction to the Communist Party stems from its Marxist ideology, emphasizing the equitable redistribution of material wealth as a means of advancing the prospects of African Americans. He critiques the NAACP, deeming them excessively middle-class, asserting that "nice people aren't poor people" (Wallace, 2007, pp. 38-39).

Moreover, Wallace overtly examines the themes of religion and spirituality within Things of Dry Hours. The play subtly underscores the undercurrent of religious and spiritual discord that simmers between father and daughter. Historically, African Americans in America have often sought strength, moral fortitude, and solace for both personal and social justice endeavors in Christianity and the Bible. For Tice, however, both Communism and Christianity resonate with his pursuit of social justice. While he maintains his commitment to church attendance, participation in the choir, and teaching Sunday school, Tice fervently engages with both the Bible and the Communist Manifesto, drawing inspiration from both sources. In stark contrast, Cali espouses an utter lack of faith or conviction, epitomizing spiritual destitution. Described as "dry," she stands as a figure bereft of passion, imbued with bitterness, anger, and cynicism. Cali, having experienced an unhappy marriage following widowhood, personifies spiritual desolation. Cali rebels against her father who wants her to remarry. She shows her disillusionment with marriage when she says:

"My husband's eyes were not open in his grave. They were closed when he lived and closed when he died. He never could bear to look at me. I mean, really look at me. You ever have a hand touch you like it was touchin' a table, or reachin' for a bowl of soup? Then you'd know me" (Wallace, 2007, pp. 13).

Cali's life has been marked by a profound deficiency in the realm of marital affection and desire, leading to her unequivocal disinterest in embarking on another matrimonial union. Her aversion to marriage in the 1930s America, a time when women were conventionally expected to embrace wedlock, carries subversive undertones. Within the societal context of that era, women, especially those facing economic hardship, were often deemed dependent on a male counterpart for their financial sustenance.

Nevertheless, Teel's arrival inaugurates a transformative phase in Cali's life, awakening dormant desires within her. A notable aspect of this awakening is her burgeoning sexual attraction to Teel, an attraction that exerts a discernible influence on her. The encounter with Teel kindles a newfound yearning within Cali, prompting her to express her aspirations for a different, more fulfilling existence. As she

articulates to Teel, particularly during his final moments, "me, you, my father, the rest of us. We're not born to live broken lives" (Wallace, 2007, pp. 89). Ultimately, the trajectory of the narrative reveals that Cali, galvanized by the desire initially kindled by Teel, embarks on a mission to effectuate broader societal change through her association with the Communist Party. Cali rediscovers her desire, not for marriage or religion, or even for political and social action, but for a meaningful life itself, when she says:

"I'm not talking about that kind of desire, touching the body of someone you want for the first time, better even the second. I'm talking about the kind of desire that wakes you when it's still dark and you go outside and even the ground at your feet is asleep. But then you listen real hard and you hear the world waking up, leaves talking about things you forgot, insects making a quarrel, and then a little piece of morning comes to rest on your neck. That kind of desire. That everything out there's a gift. It's that simple" (Wallace, 2007, pp. 89).

Cali's most intimate and emotionally resonant moment transpires in an unconventional setting, devoid of direct human interaction. It unfolds within the realm of her laborious responsibilities, specifically, in her engagement with the laundry of the white families she serves. This poignant juncture can be characterized as a "labor love scene," where Cali's laughter and apparent sense of liberation manifest as she playfully scampers around the stage, earnestly pursuing the fluttering sheets. These sheets, paradoxically, are the very fabric of her oppression and confinement, yet they now assume a role as a source of amusement and freedom for her. Much like Cali's own aspirations, the sheets exhibit a desire for emancipation, a resistance to being neatly folded away, and instead, they ascend as ethereal, elusive avatars, akin to cloth birds in flight.

However, it is imperative to recognize that these same sheets concurrently symbolize the fetters that constrain not only Cali but humanity at large. Later in the narrative, they metamorphose into the constraining bonds of a dress that ensnares Teel. In this context, the act of "women's work," namely the laundry, emerges as the crucible of Cali's emancipation. Within this utopic interlude in Things of Dry Hours, Cali momentarily transcends the tedium and the stark physical exigencies of her existence. Instead, she enters a novel physical realm, one characterized by the unfettered expressions of desire and freedom, a space where hope momentarily gleams.

Analogous to Tesich's explorations in On the Open Road, Wallace orchestrates a utopian denouement in Things of Dry Hours. Just as Teel and the Hogans undergo transformative experiences through their interactions, the play offers an intimation of the potential for transformative change in the broader world, engendering a sense of hope and possibility. Tice fights for Teel's redemption as he teaches Teel how to read and, as he says late in the play as justification for why he allowed Teel into his home

"You'll never have a chance like this at your door again. Let him in. Go to work. Perform a miracle [...] If I could turn a snitch like you into a comrade, there wouldn't be a thing outside this house that could stop me. Not a thing. And I'd blow apart that noise inside my ear I fight every damn day that says, 'Human nature doesn't change.' 'You can't remake the world.' If I could change a man like you, hallelujah. What's next? (Beat.) This isn't about you. It never was about you. That's just yourself telling you lies" (Wallace, 2007, pp. 80-81).

At the denouement of the play, only Cali emerges as the sole survivor, now actively engaged as a member of the Communist Party. In stark contrast, Teel, who initially arrived with an aura of privilege, ultimately descends into a state of spiritual and material destitution. His losses encompass a potential for love and emotional connection, an opportunity for education, and ultimately, his very life. Nonetheless, Wallace astutely allocates the final notes of the narrative to the themes of hope and desire. Despite Tice's tragic demise at the hands of anti-Communist forces, he reemerges as a spectral figure to conclude the play, much as he commenced it, donning his distinctive "traveling" attire and clasping an apple. Within Wallace's thematic framework, this apple assumes the role of a romantic metaphor, signifying hope. It signifies the potential blossoming of racial harmony, reminiscent of Tice's contemplation of the "white meat with black seeds" within the apple, as poignantly evoked in the prologue. It is the seeds that carry the future of the tree and ensure the continuation of the species, as Tice tells us:

"Or hey, maybe, just maybe, an apple is a letter from another world. The world that walks behind us. The world that won't let us go. The world that whispers: 'We lived. We lived. Oh listen to our call.' And all you have to do [...] (neatly cuts the apple in two) is open it. Read what it says on the inside. And then, get to work" (Wallace, 2007, pp. 93).

4. CONCLUSION

In examining the works of Steve Tesich and Naomi Wallace, the paper delved into the intricate relationship between drama and intellectual ideas, traversing the realms of art, morality, and societal transformation. Both playwrights, echoing the legacy of George Bernard Shaw, utilize the theater as a forum for intellectual exploration, challenging prevailing ideologies. Tesich, in On the Open Road, navigates the degradation of art in a dystopian world, unraveling the intricate connections between morality, humanity, and freedom. The play serves as a philosophical journey, probing the transformative power of love, art, and freedom in the face of societal decay.

Similarly, Naomi Wallace's Things of Dry Hours unfolds a rich tapestry of desire, dissonance, and hope against the backdrop of the Great Depression. Interweaving history and Marxist feminism, Wallace's drama becomes a political crucible, where characters grapple with spiritual destitution and societal inequities. Through Cali's awakening desires and Tice's fervent commitment to change, the play encapsulates a utopian spirit, fostering hope and the potential for transformative societal shifts.

In essence, both Tesich and Wallace challenge their audiences to confront fundamental questions about the purpose of art, the complexities of morality, and the capacity for societal change. The juxtaposition of Tesich's dystopian visions with Wallace's historical tapestry underscores the enduring relevance of theater as a space for critical inquiry and the exploration of human potential. As Trilling aptly notes, these playwrights use drama not as an escape but as a means to confront and reshape cultural norms, leaving us with profound reflections on the essence of humanity and the perpetual pursuit of a better world. In the dramatic world of both Naomi Wallace and Steve Tesich, one discovers recurring motifs symbolized as "little black seeds" serving as potent metaphors for the potential of hope and transformation. Through a thematic lens centered on possibilities of hope, their plays vividly portray aspects of humanity, desire, and the prospect of change. While the pervasive dehumanization within modern American culture constitutes a central theme, these playwrights ingeniously introduce a vision of a more promising future.

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